

Lon Nol Gets Full Control in Cambodia

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PNOMPENH Cambodia

March 22—President Lon Nol has emerged from Cambodia's latest political crisis with virtually unchallenged power, diplomats here agree, having removed the last legal opposition to him and, in the process, the last semblance of democracy.

There had been some doubt in Pnompenh that he would be able to form an effective government after he abruptly dismissed the constituent assembly, canceled the constitution it was preparing and proclaimed himself president 12 days ago. But his official announcement last night that he had formed a 17-man Cabinet, including only one member known as an opponent, dispelled the lingering hopes of some who thought the President might be forced to back down.

The army, which is believed to be completely loyal to President Lon Nol and the basic source of his power, has two important representatives in the new Government, the Minister of Defense, Maj. Gen. Sak Suthsakhon, and the Minister of Interior, Maj. Gen. Thapana Nginn. Two other members of the Cabinet are temporary wartime officers.

With the removal of the constituent assembly, which had been the national assembly until Lon Nol, then marshal, changed its role by decree last October, only Pnompenh's students remain as a possible dissident voice.

But in a country that has known only monarchy and French colonial rule, and in which the people have been

raised in a tradition of reverence for a god-king, there has been little real protest over President Lon Nol's assumption of power.

"We do not look at things as categorically as you do in the West," said one former opposition member of the national assembly today. "We may not like what Lon Nol does, but he is our leader and most of the people believe in him."

"Besides," he explained with a deep sigh, "Cambodia is at war and we cannot afford the luxury of too much politics."

Musical Chairs

Most of the changes in the Cabinet appear to have been part of Cambodia's annual game of musical chairs in which members of the small political elite shuffle the important Government posts among themselves.

The new premier, Son Ngoc Thanh, a longtime guerrilla leader in the fight to oust Prince Sihanouk, represents a sharp change from the former Premier, Lieut. Gen. Sisowath Sirik Matak. The latter, a member of the royal family and a close associate of President Lon Nol, was widely regarded as Cambodia's most energetic and able administrator.

In one of the inexplicable actions that has made foreign diplomats here fond of saying Cambodia's politics sound like a story from Alice in Wonderland, thousands of students at Pnompenh University and the city's high school have been demonstrating for two weeks for the ouster of General Sirik Matak.

The students have accused him of corruption and of being undemocratic for denying them freedom of speech. They have

continued their protests against him and boycotted all classes even after he announced his withdrawal from political life last week and after President Lon Nol failed to reappoint him.

American officials here, who had developed great respect for General Sirik Matak, say that his loss to the Government will be a serious one.

One Opposition Minister

The only member of the new Government who has been associated with the opposition is the new Minister of Justice, Yem Sambaur, a former president of the national assembly. His presence in the Cabinet is regarded as token representation for the opposition bloc that had formed in the assembly before it was dismissed.

Mr. Thanh, who was first made Premier by the Japanese during their occupation of Cambodia during World War II has a reputation as an ardent nationalist and an eccentric. The guerrilla forces he led, which were reportedly financed by the American Central Intelligence Agency fought Prince Sihanouk's army for many years during the nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties, and many Cambodian generals are hostile to him as a result.

Despite Mr. Thanh's reputed close relations with Americans over the years, he is not believed to be as highly regarded as General Sirik Matak by the American Embassy. But the students have said they favor Mr. Thanh's appointment.

Many longtime observers of Cambodian politics say that there will probably be another political crisis within a few months and that the Cabinet is likely to change again.