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Agreement May Be Nearing in Laotian Peace Talks

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Peace negotiations in Laos seem to have reached a higher plateau since the recent talks in Vientiane between Phoumi Vongvachit of the Communist Pathet Lao and Prince Souvanna Phouma, the Laotian prime minister.

Phoumi and Prince Souphanouong, Prince Souvanna's half-brother who is titular leader of the Pathet Lao, served in the first Laotian coalition government in 1957.

Negotiations had shown steady improvement since Souvanna's acceptance earlier this year of a five-point Pathet Lao plan as a basis for negotiations. The talks between Phoumi, the real power in the Pathet Lao, and Souvanna may indicate that the Communists now are willing to compromise on these five points instead of insisting on them as the final settlement.

If substantive discussions should move forward, stumbling blocks still exist. Only the second of Souphanouong's five points poses no problem. This calls for Laos to observe the principles of peaceful coexistence in the 1962 Geneva agreement, principles to which nearly everyone in Laotian politics pays at least lip service.

The other four points are less simple. The first proposes that the United States must totally withdraw from Laos and halt all bombing of Laotian territory. The United States has agreed—in presidential adviser Henry Kissinger's nine-point peace plan—to withdraw its forces when North Vietnam withdraws its troops. That pact is still unsigned. Since the Pathet Lao lists this point first, it may insist that this be a condition for further negotiations.

The third point calls for establishment of a democratic coalition government. Vientiane and the Pathet Lao, however, disagree on what happened to the coalition government established by the Geneva agreement of 1962.

The Pathet Lao claims that it was dissolved by a military putsch in 1964. Souvanna and the United States maintain that the putsch was unsuccessful, and that the government of 1962 remains in power in Vientiane. Pathet Lao cabinet seats, says Souvanna, are still empty for them to reoccupy.

This difference pits the concept of a new, reconstituted coalition government against the idea that the old tripartite (leftist, neutralist, rightist) coalition can be restored. Souvanna's legitimacy is thus called into question—the Pathet Lao no longer refers to him as the prime minister—as well as the rightist's privilege of participation in the coalition.

The Pathet Lao has long regarded the rightists as unacceptable in a new coalition. The rightists are, in general, members of the military and of the rich and powerful Champassak and Sananikone families.

Although the Pathet Lao does not question Souvanna's participation in a new coalition, it probably would not accept him as a neutral leader of a tripartite agreement, since the current government is heavily dominated by rightists.

The fourth Pathet Lao point proposes a provisional coalition government pending elections. The Pathet Lao is likely to oppose participation of the rightists and press for representation for the Patriotic neutralist faction, a splinter neutralist group which is considered friendly to the Pathet Lao.

The fifth point calls for pro-American forces — for example, the CIA-backed mercenaries and Thai troops —to withdraw from illegally occupied territory. It also demands that refugees be compensated and returned to their native areas pending unification through consultations.

Redrawing the old Geneva cease-fire lines will be easy, but deciding who is to control what territory and what population will be a knotty problem. The Pathet Lao, with North Vietnamese help, has taken considerable territory, and U.S. bombing has forced large numbers of refugees into camps that are under Vientiane's control.

The speed with which negotiations in Laos are begun in earnest will be influenced by military developments there and by agreements reached between Washington and Hanoi.

Laos is still a sovereign state—but barely so.