

Ousted Cambodian Premier Speaks Out

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PNOM PENH, March 23 — Lieut. Gen. Sisowath Sirik Matak, who is living under heavy military guard in his luxurious villa, said last night that there was "only a slight margin of difference between the protection they are giving me and house arrest."

Reflecting on the republican regime that he helped to create three years ago after the overthrow of his cousin, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the former Premier said in an interview:

"I believe that this regime must not survive and will not last. It is not supported by the people."

But General Sirik Matak said he still believed in the republic. In fact, he said, he first told President Lon Nol, his former friend, in 1962 that Cambodia should abolish the monarchy. He said so although he was a prince of one of the two royal lines, the Norodom and the Sisowaths.

Ends His Silence

The interview marked General Sirik Matak's open break with the regime headed by his old associate, Marshal Lon Nol, and dominated by the Marshal's younger brother, Brig. Gen. Lon Non.

It ended a period of silence that he imposed on himself after General Lon Non succeeded a year ago in bringing him down as Premier and virtually eliminating him from the councils of government.

Although General Sirik Matak did not say so, it was evident that he chose to speak because of the measures taken against him and other critics of the regime after the abortive raid by a dissident air force pilot on the President's residence last Saturday.

Many members of the royal family have been put under house arrest. Striking teachers have been arrested, newspapers closed and some of their editors put in prison and critics of the Government frightened into furtive silence.

The Sound of Guns

The 60-year-old, soft-spoken aristocrat sat in a deep armchair, wearing maroon silk pyjamas he said he had brought back from Peking some years ago. Soldiers assigned to guard or protect him were bedding down for the night on the street in front, and occasionally guns boomed in the distance.

Throughout the hour-long conversation ran a note of puzzlement at the irony that has made General Sirik Matak the American favorite for the leading role in rehabilitating the faltering Government, while the United States pleads inability to prevent the Government that it underwrites from thwarting such a role for him.

He said that the time had passed when the regime of



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Sisowath Sirik Matak

Marshal Lon Nol could regain popular acceptance, and that the United States should realize it.

The general said, sadly, that if a free and honest election were held now, with Prince Sihanouk and Marshal Lon Nol as candidates, the Prince would win easily.

"I understand America's attitude of not wanting to interfere in our internal affairs," he said. "But if the United States continues to support such a regime we will fall to the Communists."

"You give help to a people that wants to live freely," he continued. "But when you support a regime not supported by the people you help the Communists."

Telephone Cut Off

Photographs with warm dedications from President Nixon and Vice President Agnew occupy places of honor in the spacious living room.

The general said he had not seen the American Ambassador, Emory C. Swank, or other American diplomats for some time. He said he would very much like to talk with one.

"I have wanted to call Mr. Swank since Saturday," he said, "but I can't. They cut off my telephones right after the raid on the palace."

Presumably the general, as well as many Cambodians who sympathize with him, believes that a visit by a United States Embassy official might confer on him a measure of protection.

He said that the Government's policy was not leading toward an end of the fighting because its overtures to the in-

surgers were "bluff." He said the regime was calling for the rebels to surrender before holding new elections.

"The important thing is to open a dialogue," he said.

To do so, he continued, the Government should tell the rebels that the door was open for all groups to participate in a negotiation of equals, in which no demands for changes should be barred.

'I Will Not Move'

Asked whether there would be room for Prince Sihanouk, too, the general replied:

"That is a question that we are asking ourselves. Contact should be made with him, through third parties. He counts for something in this country. He is a Cambodian, too. If the people wanted him, I would accept. I am the people."

"They will accuse me again of being a royalist, just because of the accident of my birth. But I think Sihanouk should not lead this country again. Sihanouk has committed errors, just as Marshal Lon Nol has committed errors."

At this point, General Sirik Matak recalled that he had urged a republic for many years. Until Prince Sihanouk's overthrow, in which he participated actively, he was known as the Prince's strongest opponent and Marshal Lon Nol as one of the Prince's most devoted courtiers.

"Present circumstances indicate," the general said in his soft Indochinese French, "that I should wait here until the storm passes. Man is born to die. I will not move. I shall stay here and face anything that happens. They can arrest me. If they kill me, what of it? I stay for my country."