

Lon Nol's Brother Using Crisis to Build Power

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Phnom Penh

"Our country, like a melon that was once whole, is splitting into more and more pieces," one of Cambodia's most respected politicians said last week, referring to the wave of arrests and the suspension of civil liberties that has followed the March 17 attempt on President Lon Nol's life.

Besides the further deterioration of the regime's popularity, the most notable result of the state of emergency so far is that the president's younger brother, General Lon Non, has used it to increase his already considerable power, to silence voices of dissent and opposition and to isolate his rival, Sirik Matk.

RIVAL

Sirik Matah, the president's old friend and fellow plotter who helped overthrow Prince Norodom Sihanouk three years ago, was seen by most observers as Lon Non's only serious rival for succession.

On March 17, a Cambodian air force pilot named So Patra stole a T-28 jet from Phnom Penh airport and bombed Chamcar Mon palace. There was considerable loss of life, but Lon Nol escaped unscathed.

A state of emergency was promptly declared and the assassination attempt was described officially as a royalist plot. Sixteen members of the royal family were put under house arrest and in the ensuing days more than 100 other arrests were made. Included in the roundup were teachers, opposition leaders, newspaper editors and students. On Wednesday, the National Assembly rubber-stamped the government's request to suspend civil liberties for six months.

THEORY

The royal family provides a convenient whipping post and although there are some Cambodians who believe in the royal plot theory, no real evidence has been submitted to support it.

The Americans, who had been pressing Lon Nol to

broaden his political base to stop the rot of popular disaffection, are embarrassed by the younger brother's power play.

For better or worse, the Americans feel wedded to the regime. As the Lon Nol government declines, the American commitment grows strong. The windows of the capital shudder every night from the B-52 raids which are heavier now than they have ever been before over Cambodia, according to well informed sources.

GROUNDS

The royalist plot theory was put forward on the grounds that the pilot who bombed the palace on the eve of the third anniversary of Sihanouk's downfall was Sihanouk's son-in-law.

It was subsequently learned that So Patra had indeed been living with one of Sihanouk's daughters, the Princess Botum Bopha, and that she was visibly pregnant with his child.

That they were not officially married means little in the East with its system of minor wives and concubines. But for all of that, ac-

ording to most foreign and many Cambodian observers, So Patra's deed seems to have been an isolated incident — an individual act rather than a plot.

Lon Non's crackdown on anti-government dissent actually began a few hours before the bombing of the palace. On the morning of March 17 about 40 or 50 men in civilian clothes, later identified as members of Lon Non's brigade, broke a month-long teachers' strike by attacking a rally with hand grenades. Two were killed and a score injured.

IRONY

Many of the striking teachers and the students who supported them are now under arrest and the irony is that such a crackdown might not have been possible had it not been for So Patra's attack.

What made the strike by 25,000 teachers different from previous demonstrations, and worthy of such extreme acts of governmental repression, was that more and more Lon Nol and Lon Non were being singled out for personal attack.

The teachers began their strike against inflation and low wages in February. It soon turned on the whole issue of inept and corrupt leadership and soon attacks against Lon Nol himself began appearing in newspapers.

In the end, Lon Non decided that the situation had gone too far and that a crackdown was necessary.