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Laotians Make Third Try For Peace in 20 Years

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VIENTIANE, Aug. 4 — In striking contrast to its Indo-chinese neighbors, the kingdom of Laos is about to achieve a negotiated political settlement between the warring parties.

It will be the third Laotian peace agreement in 20 years and there is no guarantee that it will prove any more durable than the others. But most of the shoot-

ing has stopped as both sides honor the cease-fire agreement of February and analysts say the forthcoming political settlement represents a genuine attempt by both sides to find an acceptable way to achieve a long-term solution.

It is far from clear what the domestic and international policies of the new government will be—how far the pro-Communist Pathet Lao rebels, who seem

to hold the strong hand, will push Laos down their own ideological road.

"There are Pathet Lao who are Communists before they are nationalists," one analyst said, "and they are the ones in the top of the tree right now . . . I think eventual Pathet Lao domination of the country is certain. But that could mean a loosely socialist, leftist neu-

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tral state. It depends on their ties to Hanoi."

North Vietnam, which provided most of the firepower and political guidance on the rebel side, is said to be prepared to accept a settlement that results in a coalition government because, as one official put it:

"They have achieved everything they wanted here. They have the Americans out so they have free use of the Ho Chi Minh trail without being bombed; they have a buffer between themselves and the Thais; and they have a government that does not threaten them in any way." A North Vietnamese diplomat acknowledged that assessment to be accurate.

The installation of a new coalition government — known as the Provisional Government of National Union — is expected in the next few weeks.

Stories circulating here a week ago that signing of the final text of the proposed agreement was imminent were clearly premature. According to informed diplomats, what happened was that the Pathet Lao conceded to the government two ministries they had hoped to hold in the new coalition, interior and education, and then let it be known that they considered the negotiations to be all but completed.

In fact, according to government officials and to diplomatic sources who have talked with the negotiators, several potentially sticky points remain to be settled. But it is accepted that an agreement in principle has been reached and remaining issues will be worked out soon. Estimates of the timing vary, as do opinions on the seriousness of the remaining issues, but no prediction goes beyond the end of September.

Informed officials say the agreement will provide for a government headed by Souvanna Phouma as premier, with two deputy premiers, one from each side. The Pathet Lao deputy is thought certain to be Prince Souphanouvong, Souvanna's half-brother, who left Vientiane

after the collapse of the previous coalition in 1962.

Below these three, there will be 10 other ministers, five from each side. Supporters of the current government — which is what remains of the earlier coalition, minus its Pathet Lao members — are expected to run the ministries of defense, interior, finance, education and health. The Pathet Lao are to have foreign affairs, public works, religious affairs, information and economy.

Two other ministries — justice and post and telecommunications — are to be held by neutralists not clearly identified with either side.

The agreement also provides for the creation of a political consultative council, which is to plan for future elections and to guide the government in carrying out the February cease-fire agreement. Informed sources say this body will be dominated by the Pathet Lao and some observers regard it as the main instrument of Communist policy in the forthcoming government.

The agreement is also said to provide for the withdrawal of Thai mercenaries fighting on the government side and for the withdrawal of all foreign forces within 60 days—without mentioning North Vietnam. Vientiane, the administrative capital, and Luang Prabang are to be neutralized, but the details of that arrangement, including the stationing of Pathet Lao troops in the two cities, are among the matters on which agreement has not yet been reached, informed sources say.

The February agreement specified that both sides would retain military control over the areas they now hold until a permanent nationwide solution is worked out by the government that is about to be formed. That gives the Pathet Lao more than two thirds of the country's territory, but only about a third of the population. It is taken for granted that the authority of the Vientiane government will not extend into the Pathet Lao zone. The Pathet Lao will

share in the administration of the government zone, but not the other way around, informed officials say.

The new agreement is said to call for some form of movement between the two zones, both by government ministers and by the general population. The delineation of the zones and the provisions for traffic between them are reportedly still under discussion. So is the fate of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who left the Pathet Lao territory and are now in the government zone. The Pathet Lao reportedly are insisting that they be moved back, and Souvan-

na's negotiators are balking.

Nonetheless, government sources and diplomats of all shades of opinion, including the North Vietnamese, agree that the two sides are continuing to make progress and that the basic decision to achieve a settlement was made some time ago.

The question now occupying the minds of analysts here is what will happen after the government is formed. It was clear at the time of the February cease-fire accord that the country's once-powerful right wing had been effectively frozen out, and that the Pathet Lao had achieved many

of their most important objectives. The reported provisions of the new political agreement do little to change that. But, as one American said, "considering the government went into these talks holding two nines against four kings, they've done very well."

"The Pathet Lao won the war," an experienced European diplomat said, "and they aren't going to agree to any elections unless they can win them, too. The question is how they will use the intervening time to bring that about."

Under the existing constitution, no elections are

scheduled until 1976. The premier is empowered to call new National Assembly elections before then, but they would be meaningless if the Pathet Lao objected, since they could not take place in a large part of the country. Decisions of the new government are supposed to be unanimous.

Some sources believe the Pathet Lao view the Political Consultative Council as a "politburo" that will exercise strong policy-making influence over the government and be the chief instrument in a gradual Communization of Laos.

In this view, the Pathet

Lao function as an instrument of Hanoi ideologically, as they did militarily, have little if any freedom to make their own decisions and are determined to impose a Communist political reorganization on the country.

The Pathet Lao "have revolutionary goals that have not yet been achieved," one analyst said. "This is just a new phase for them. The reason they were willing to concede those ministries and allow that right-wing National Assembly to stay in is that the political council is going to be running the country."

In common with the government, the Pathet Lao say that they respect Buddhism and the monarchy.

American officials, who maintain a dogged optimism about the prospects for a non-Communist Laos, tend to dismiss the political council as "window dressing" and to emphasize that the Pathet Lao did not get the ministries they wanted nor eliminate the National Assembly. But they seem to be almost alone in believing that the Pathet Lao will settle for anything less than left-wing neutralism sympathetic to North Vietnam.