

New Mood in Laos: Leftists Promote

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In the last few days, Laos, which has embarked on her third attempt at a coalition government in less than two decades, has been basking in

a happy mood of homecoming and national reconciliation.

Prince Souphanouvong, the titular Pathet Lao leader, returned to the capital after 11 years of self-imposed exile in the rugged hills of eastern Laos; he and his half-brother, Prince Souvanna Phouma, emotionally reunited, traveled to Luang Prabang, the royal capital, where the King invested them as the pivotal figures of the new political arrangement; and then leftists, neutralists and rightists, attired in traditional sarongs and high-buttoned tunics, took their oaths of allegiance at Vientiane's most sacred pagoda.

Prince Souvanna Phouma, the indispensable neutralist Premier has always argued that the Pathet Lao was more Laotian than Communist. Once weaned from the influence of their North Vietnamese patrons, he has contended, the leaders would drift back into their

more, natural position as true Laotian nationalists.

Seeing the supposedly Communist Pathet Lao leaders going through the almost feudal royal and religious ceremonies of the last few days has tended to lend credence to the Premier's arguments.

But it can also be argued that the Pathet Lao leaders have nothing to lose, and much to gain, by performing reassuringly before Laos and the outside world.

Steady Gains for Pathet Lao

They can afford to behave generously. Two decades of intermittent war have been a steady gain in their influence throughout the country, and now they and their soldiers are legally installed in the heartland of their long-standing foes.

It remains to be seen whether the Cabinet members from the Vientiane side will be vigorous and resourceful enough to insist on adherence to the provisions of the peace agreements giving them access to the territory controlled by the Pathet Lao, which amounts to four-fifths of all Laos.

But in the meantime, it is likely that workin-level Pathet Lao political officials will try to make inroads—as they already have in Luang Prabang—into the sympathies of the two-

thirds of Laos's population that was nominally under the control of the now-defunct Vientiane Government.

In the eyes of informed Laotians, the most telltale clue to future Pathet Lao behavior was the decision to place the energetic Prince Souphanouvong at the head of the National Political Council, a potentially powerful advisory body that Vientiane rightists long ago dubbed the "politburo."

The 42-member council, which is officially "independent of" and "equal to" the Cabinet, has rather extensive powers in the organization of the elections that are expected ultimately to provide the basis for a new, representative Cabinet. The Pathet Lao side, which has done well in past elections, is expected to put its long-range hopes into winning over the people, which is also the professed intention of the less-organized rightist and on-Communist politicians.

The council, in which the Pathet Lao has a slight organization edge, will provide the 62-year-old Prince Souphanouvong with a sounding board for his views—and an excuse to travel around the country.

The Prince, who in the last few days has displayed what for low-keyed Laos is a charismatic streak, is expected to base himself at Luang Prabang, putting a distinct distance between himself and the rest of the Government. Having no governmental responsibilities, he will be able to dissociate himself from the coalition Cabinet if it becomes politically paralyzed or unable to improve the lives of ordinary Laotians.

While the Pathet Lao has not filled its allotted Cabinet positions with nonentities, it appears quite clear that key revolutionaries have remained out of the Cabinet—and out of the political council as well.

Though by far the best known and in a position of great leverage, Prince Souphanouvong is not thought to be the most powerful leader of the Neo Lao Hak Xat or Lao Patriotic front, the name of which the Pathet Lao is properly known.

"Hard" leaders of the Laotian revolutionary movement—men like Kaystone Phomvihan—are still in Sam Neua, the unofficial Pathet Lao capital in northeastern Laos, or in Hanoi, running the semi-secret People's party of Laos, which in turn controls the Neo Lao Hak Xat. Whatever decisions these men make will not necessarily be tempered by the mod of harmony and goodwill that has been evident in Vientiane in the last few days.

Both Sides Face Problems

In the short run, both sides will have their hands full just trying to take control of their respective ministries as well as trying to turn the political council into a political reality.

Some Laotians from the Vientiane side are pessimistic about the chances of making the clumsy coalition process work—all important decisions must be "unanimous." For example—but others argue that Laos being Laos, the Government will muddle on through.

Again, in the short run, few people expect the new Government to make any dramatic policy decisions, as one well-placed diplomat put it, Laos is in a "field of gravity"—North Vietnam, the United States, Thailand, China and the Soviet Union all have claims on the little kingdom that should keep her from lurching in any particular geopolitical direction.

One interesting straw in the wind is that the Pathet Lao has reportedly indicated that it will welcome continued United States financial assistance to

Conciliation

the Government, which would be broke without it.

Twice in the last two decades Laotian coalition governments foundered and collapsed largely because of cold war tensions and the spillover of the Vietnam war. Today the great powers, North Vietnam and perhaps even Thailand welcome this fresh start at reconciliation.

In addition to a more salutary international climate, Laos still has the hardy 72-year-old Prince Souvanna Phouma, a veteran of the past coalitions and a vital mediating presence between the Pathet Lao and its rightist opponents.

According to diplomats the bluff Premier remains in good health. This is so, it augurs well for the early months of the new Government. Without him, it is generally agreed, Laos would not have been able to come as far as she has—the only country in Indochina beginning to be at peace with itself.