

VIENTIANE, LAOS

BACKGROUND ON LAOS

1. Characteristics of the Area

A. Geography

The landlocked Kingdom of Laos, the keystone nation of the Southeast Asian Peninsula, shares common borders with six other countries, two of them communist. The border runs 146 miles with Burma to the northwest, 263 with China to the north, 818 with North Viet Nam to the northeast, 301 with South Viet Nam to the southeast, 277 with Cambodia to the south, and 1090 (including over 500 along the Mekong River) with Thailand to the west. Its total area covers approximately 91,000 square miles, or slightly more than Idaho or Great Britain. A large part of the terrain of Laos, particularly in the north, is covered by dense jungle and rugged mountains, the latter sometimes rising over 9,000 feet. Vientiane is the administrative capital, and Luang Prabang the royal capital.

B. Climate

The climate of Laos is monsoonal, with three seasons. There are five months of heavy rainfall from May through September. When the rains start tapering off in October, a cool season begins that lasts through January. February through April is hot and humid. In April, the warmest month, the temperature in Vientiane normally ranges between 72 and 93 degrees Fahrenheit, and in January, the coolest month, between 57 and 83 degrees Fahrenheit. Temperatures of 103 have been recorded in April, and 39 in January, however.

C. Population

The population, composed of many ethnic groups, is estimated at 2,300,000, but no accurate census has ever been taken. This sparse population is unevenly spread, with the greatest concentration in the Mekong Valley. Perhaps half of them are ethnic Lao, a people of Tai stock who are believed to have migrated originally from southwestern China principally in the 13th century in the wake of Kublai Khan's conquering forces. North Laos contains mountain tribes of Sinitic, Tai, and Tibeto-Burman language families, plus some of Indonesian or proto-Malay background that are more abundantly found in south Laos. The lack of common origin, customs, traditions, and beliefs among the various minorities poses serious difficulties for the political unification of the Kingdom. There are also influential minorities of Vietnamese and Chinese, and smaller groups of Cambodians, Indians and Pakistani. In addition, there are over a thousand

Frenchmen and other Europeans in the country, of whom few are permanent residents.

D. Language

Lao is a tonal language like others of the Sino-Thai family. The Vientiane dialect has six tones, only three of which transfer directly to Bangkok Thai. Vientiane Lao and Bangkok Thai have areas of mutual comprehension only to educated speakers. As with English and French, abstract words tend to be cognate more frequently than everyday vocabulary.

Written Lao and Thai both use scripts of Indian origin, but Lao letters are rounded rather than angular, and Lao uses fewer consonants. The Lao spelling system is infinitely more representative of the spoken word than Thai, which tends to include unpronounced letters, particularly at the end of a word, that display the word's Sanskrit origin.

Since textbooks have been developed only through sixth grade in Lao, French remains the principal language of secondary education. French thus serves as the second official language, and is commonly used in government and commerce. Probably not over 15 per cent of the population is literate. Furthermore, the numerous ethnic groups possess their own languages or dialects, and the Vietnamese and Chinese retain their own school systems as well.

E. Religion

The predominant and, indeed state religion of the Kingdom is Theravada Buddhism, common also to Cambodia, Thailand, Burma and Ceylon. It is not unusual, however, to see spirit shrines at Buddhist temples. While the mountain tribes are principally animist, some of them have adopted Buddhism while retaining a measure of their old beliefs.

II Government Organization

Laos is a constitutional parliamentary monarchy. Under the December 1955 revision of the Constitution, originally promulgated by the King in May 1947, the hitherto exclusively male franchise was extended to women. In normal times, general elections are held every five years. Constitutional amendments passed in 1965 gave the King other options during times of crisis. The bicameral legislature is composed of a National Assembly of 59 members, which wields the real legislative power

of the country, and a less active King's Council of twelve elder statesmen, all of whom are appointed directly by the King, six upon the recommendation of the Assembly. An absolute majority of deputies present is required to uphold bills returned by the King's Council for Assembly reconsideration. This Council privilege has been rarely, if ever, exercised.

The Prime Minister is designated by the King in consultation with political leaders. The Prime Minister submits his proposed Cabinet to the National Assembly for approval, a favorable two-thirds majority of deputies present being required for investiture. Deputies who are candidates for ministerial posts may not participate in the vote of confidence for a new government. Members of the Cabinet need not be Assemblymen. The Lao Patriotic Front (Neo Lao Hak Sat), the communist faction, recognizes neither the present nor the previous two legislatures.

The Constitution provides that the judicial power shall be separate and independent of the executive and legislative powers. In practice, the judiciary is the least vigorous branch of the government.

Because of extreme factional strife and open fighting in Laos, the three principal Lao groupings -- Conservative, Neutralist, and Communist -- agreed in June 1962 to form a Government of National Union under the premiership of Prince Souvanna Phouma. The relationship of this government to the Constitution remains undefined. Although in 1963 Communist ministers withdrew from Vientiane and from active participation in the Government of National Union, and acting ministers have been appointed to carry on their work, the Communist ministers retain their portfolios in name, the door has been left open for their return, and the tripartite government remains undisturbed at least in form.

III. Historical Review

In the mid-fourteenth century, King Fa Ngoun united Laos, set up his capital at Luang Prabang, and ruled an area that would today encompass not only Laos but also much of northeast Thailand and the southernmost part of the Yunnan province of China. In the following century, the Vietnamese began their periodic incursions, which persist to this day. By the 18th century, Thailand and Viet Nam had begun their competition for Lao soil.

In the early 19th century, the Thai of Siam obtained ascendancy over much of what is now Laos and retained their hold for the most part until France made Laos a protectorate in 1893. The Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1907 defined the boundaries of Laos

as they exist today. Under the French, the three kingdoms of Laos - Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champasak - were unified in 1946 under the dynasty of Luang Prabang. The country gained independence within the French Union in 1949.

During World War II, Japan did not fully take over control of Laos until March 1945, and just prior to their defeat the Japanese persuaded the King of Luang Prabang to declare his Kingdom independent. In September 1945 the Prime Minister of the "independent" government proclaimed the creation of the Kingdom of Laos, including the areas of Vientiane and Champasak, under the King of Luang Prabang. In October, a provincial government formed by the "Lao Issara" (Free Lao) leaders, "dethroned" the King because of his alleged loyalty to the French. In May 1946 French troops occupied Laos and recognized the sovereignty of the King of Luang Prabang over the entire country.

France gradually accorded Laos its independence and, in October 1953, recognized the Kingdom as a fully sovereign state, although Laos reaffirmed its adherence to the French Union. This relationship was dissolved upon the conclusion of the Geneva Agreements of 1954, which terminated the Indo-China War. Laos became a member of the United Nations in 1955.

From 1954 to 1960 pro-Western or conservative government held power, except for the brief interval in 1957-58 of a coalition government which included communist ministers.

In August 1960 a young paratroop commander in Vientiane, Captain Kong Le, seized the capital in a coup. In an attempt to avert civil war among the non-communist elements, Prince Souvanna Phouma, a former Prime Minister, was again called upon to form a government. General Phoumi Nosavan, a leader of the conservative, anti-communist faction, at first agreed to serve in the government, but soon reversed his decision and established a military headquarters in southern Laos from which he mounted a campaign to retake Vientiane. He recaptured Vientiane in December 1960, and Kong Le retreated with his troops to the northeast.

Meanwhile, Souvanna had accepted a Soviet aid offer, and the Soviets started airlifting supplies from the Soviet Union via Hanoi. The Soviets used this airlift to bring in arms and ammunition not only for the Kong Le forces, but also for the communist military arm, then known as the Pathet Lao. Profiting by general political and military instability, the Pathet Lao returned to full insurgency. In early January 1961 Pathet Lao and Kong Le forces, supplied by the Soviets and advised and encadred by the North Vietnamese, seized the strategic Plain of

Jars, where they established headquarters. By the spring of 1961, the Pathet Lao insurgents, strongly reinforced by North Vietnamese units and cadres, had scored important military victories, and appeared to be in a position to take over the entire country.

The United States was faced with three alternatives: The total loss of Laos to the Communists; military intervention, involving U.S. troops and other outside forces; or settlement of the crisis through peaceful international and internal negotiations to achieve a neutrality that would permit the Kingdom to survive as a nation. Bipartisan Congressional leadership was consulted on the decision to transfer the struggle from the military to the political domain. It was thus that the United States accepted participation in the 14-nation conference convened at Geneva in May 1961. After long and difficult negotiations, the new Geneva agreements were signed July 23, 1962, providing certain international guarantees for the independence and neutrality of Laos. Internally, the Government of National Union was formed in June 1962.

Of immediate importance under the 1962 Geneva agreements was the requirement that all foreign military troops and advisors, except a small French training force, leave the country within 75 days of the signing. Under the supervision of the International Control Commission (ICC) consisting of political and military representatives of India, Canada, and Poland, all 666 U.S. military advisory personnel (no U.S. combat troops were in the country) departed Laos before the October 7, 1962 deadline. Only 40 Vietnamese troops were withdrawn through ICC checkpoints however. In his June 20, 1963 letter to the Co-Chairmen (Great Britain and the Soviet Union) of the Geneva Conference, Prime Minister Souvanna charged that substantial numbers of North Vietnamese cadres and combat troops remained in Laos, and the Prime Minister has repeated this charge on several occasions since.

Within a few months of the signing of the 1962 Geneva agreements, the Pathet Lao supported by the North Vietnamese, began maneuvering to subvert or eliminate Kong Le's neutralist military forces, which constituted Souvanna's principal military strength. Minor skirmishing broke into open hostilities in April 1963, just after a small group of Neutralists under Colonel Deuane Souvannarath broke away from Kong Le's forces and established what they called the "true Neutralist forces", but what the government prefers to term the dissident Neutralists. The Pathet Lao and the Deuanists attacked Kong Le's troops in the positions which they held jointly with the Pathet Lao in Xieng

Khouang province. With assistance from the troops under Deputy Prime Minister General Phoumi Nosavan, however, Kong Le was able to extricate most of his units from these areas as well as from other locations in central Laos, and to maintain his positions in the western part of the Plain of Jars. These Pathet Lao aggressive tactics not only failed to destroy the neutralist forces, but resulted in much closer political as well as military cooperation between the neutralists and the conservatives. The two Pathet Lao ministers withdrew from Vientiane, leaving Pathet Lao representation in the Cabinet in the hands of the two secretaries of state.

Following the failure of the tripartite negotiations of April 17 and 18, 1964, Prime Minister Souvanna announced in great discouragement that he was resigning. On April 19, troops of General Siho Lamphouthacoul, the Director General of the Department of National Coordination (DNC), a para-military organization which superseded the national police and some of its functions in 1960, arrested the Prime Minister and some high Neutralist civilian and military leaders. Elements of the conservative Army's Fifth Military Region under General Kouprasith Abhay soon joined the DNC forces. Due to the sentiments of the Lao people, as well as to the spirited intervention of foreign ambassadors, Souvanna was quickly returned to power; in fact, his military and financial power was increased at Phoumi's expense. Souvanna reorganized his government, discharging two of his left-leaning Neutralist cabinet members, who sought a relatively noisy refuge in Pathet Lao controlled territory where they still claim to be members of the Lao cabinet. In addition Souvanna replaced several ministers and secretaries of state who were considered either corrupt or ineffective.

In the meantime, the Neutralist forces in the Plain of Jars, confused by the kaleidoscopic events in Vientiane, began to engage in some open disputes among various factions. Taking advantage of the dissidence in Neutralist ranks (and militarily using the strategic heights which they had captured from Kong Le's units in February), the Pathet Lao forces, supported by North Vietnamese troops, attacked the Neutralists in May, and attempted to represent their aggression as an open clash among Neutralist units. The attacks culminated in the withdrawal of most of the Neutralist troops from the Plain of Jars. Further Neutralist units and some officers were broken off from the Kong Le forces and placed under Col. Deugne's nominal command but actually subjected to Pathet Lao control.

The Indian and the Canadian ICC team was evacuated from the

Plain just before the fall of Kong Le's headquarters. These military developments prompted Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma to call for military logistical assistance, and the United States responded within the framework of the Geneva Accords. On May 26, the British, also at the behest of the Prime Minister, invited the signatories of the Geneva Accords to begin consultations in Vientiane on means of restoring peace. The United States and several other signatories accepted the invitation, which the Communist states spurned. At the close of consultations in June, the representatives concluded that the Pathet Lao, with North Vietnamese support, had initiated the attacks against the Neutralists, and that the deteriorating military situation in Laos presented a grave threat to the peace of southeast Asia. They recommended that, conforming to the Prime Minister's views, all parties should cease fire and withdraw, under ICC control and verification, to positions held before the most recent fighting.

Periodically during 1964, the Government presented evidence of North Vietnamese military involvement in Laos in violation of the Geneva Accords. In addition to documents and personal letters obtained from North Vietnamese soldiers killed in engagements with government forces, North Vietnamese soldiers were captured beginning in September 1964, and were brought to Vientiane for ICC interrogation and exposure to the world press.

With world awareness of the serious threat to the peace posed by continued Communist aggression, there have been various proposals for a new Geneva-type meeting of the 14 nations that took part in the 1962 conference. The United States had indicated its willingness to join some form of discussion to restore peace, provided Souvanna's pre-conditions were met of a cease-fire and Pathet Lao withdrawal to positions held before May 16, 1964. The United States has also pointed out that there already have been two high-level conferences on Southeast Asia and two formal agreements in 1954 and 1962 - neither of which the Communists have carried out. Up to now, failure to achieve peace has not been due to lack of conferences, but to failure on the part of Communist states to honor agreements already made. Since Peiping and Hanoi refuse to end the conflicts by the simple act of leaving Laos and Viet Nam alone, the United States remains committed to help Laos and other Southeast Asian nations in their struggle for security and independence.

Efforts on the part of the three Lao factions to resolve their difficulties, in meetings in Paris during August and September 1964, likewise produced no basic concessions except a general agreement to continue talking. Talks have continued

sporadically in Vientiane since then. Their main topic has been to discuss a place for the eventual meeting of the leaders of the three factions - Souvanna for the Neutralists, Boun Oum for the conservatives, and Souphanouvong for the Communists.

In the meantime, in Vientiane, General Siho began to differ more and more from General Kouprasith. A particular reason for the split was Siho's revival of some of the monopolies and other corruption which Phoumi had practiced in order to have funds for maintaining political support. Colonel Bounleut Saycocie then led some forces in Vientiane in a January 31, 1965 "demonstration", allegedly against the general staff. Bounleut denied that he was acting on behalf of General Phoumi, and declared that he wished merely to show to the government and the general staff that many professional Army officers, who were not interested in politics, desired a truly unified general staff that would get rid of Siho as well as certain bad elements from the Army. The "demonstration" provoked sporadic clashes between Fifth Region and police forces which finally erupted into open battle in Vientiane on February 3. Phoumi, attempting to give the impression that he had the overwhelming support of the Lao Army, including the forces of Bounleut, Siho, and the Second Military Region to the northeast, stated that he had lost confidence in the general staff, in the government, and in Souvanna, and felt constrained to take charge of the situation. Second Military Region troops attacked Vientiane from the south. The Siho police, when faced with an ultimatum to disperse peacefully, fought back, resulting in considerable destruction in the city. The forces under Colonel Bounleut, somewhat belatedly, rallied to the government and played a not inconsiderable role in destroying the last police resistance.

The February 3 battle settled many military and political problems, but Constitutional problems remained. The National Assembly elected in 1960 was coming to the end of its five-year mandate, and the government concluded, somewhat reluctantly, that regular elections could not be held because of internal warfare. Accordingly, a National Congress amended the Constitution, giving the King three options during times of crisis. The King selected the option of popular consultations, and the Fifth Legislature entered into session August 18.

The Pathet Lao were invited to participate in the elections but they predictably refused and denounced them as a farce. They have also continued to claim that they, along with the dissident Neutralist minister and secretary of state, have been excluded from the government. From their so-called "liberated" areas they continue to affirm that they remain the true

representatives of the original coalition government, and continue to denounce the "Authorities of Vientiane" as American reactionaries. In the international sphere, they generally continue unqualified support of the Peiping and Hanoi line except for some of Peiping's more blatant attacks on the Russians.

On the military scene, the North Vietnamese, with decreasing assistance from the Pathet Lao, gave made strong attacks against government positions in Sam Neua province during each dry season for the last three years. In Savannakhet province in March 1965, the Vietnamese launched a daring attack against the Reserve Officers' training school at Dong Hene, along Route 9 some 50 kilometers east of Savannakhet city. About 60 students and some officers successfully withstood the Vietnamese assault, and together with the Lao Air Force, accounted for a locally unprecedented 200 enemy dead. In addition, the government forces captured nine North Vietnamese Army prisoners. In November 1965, the North Vietnamese unsuccessfully attempted to seize the Mekong River town of Thakhek, capital of Khammouane province. Several more Vietnamese soldiers were killed and captured in this venture.

To conform with other Communist-instigated insurgency movements in South-east Asia, the Pathet Lao was renamed the Lao People's Liberation Army in October 1965.

The ICC, which had been greatly hindered in its operations by Pathet Lao refusal to permit entry into its "liberated" territory, was asked to investigate these several communist attack Accounts of North Vietnamese captured in earlier operations in 1964, as well as during the Dong Hene attack, have been released as parts of majority reports signed only by India and Canada. The Poles refused to participate in the investigations.

On the government side, a significant area in northern Vientiane province was regained from communist control during Operation Triangle in the summer of 1964. Towns like Vang Vieng and Kassy, and villages like Nong Peta, Done and Muong Met were returned to the government fold. In August 1966 the rich Nam Bac valley in northern Luang Prabang province was recuperated after over six years under the communist yoke. In south Laos, a concerted social, economic, and security program got under way in mid-1965, and had cleared much of the Sedone Valley by the spring of 1967. Efforts to integrate Neutralist forces into the National Army made progress after Neutralist colonels ousted Kong Le from effective command in October 1966. A sorry example of the periodic bursts of violence that occasionally characterize the Lao scene was the bombing, during

the same month, of military targets in Vientiane by former Lao Air Force Commander General Ma and a few of his pilots, in a misguided attempt to annihilate certain military leaders.

In January and again in June 1966 the National Assembly mounted separate interpellations of the government, the second series continuing into September. Their sponsor introduced a motion of censure against the government at the end of August, and the Assembly rejected the government's budget September 16. Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma then asked the King to dissolve the Assembly. After consulting his Council, the King so ordered as of October 7. Elections for the Sixth Legislature were scheduled for January 1, 1967. One hundred and forty-two candidates ended up competing for the Assembly's 59 seats. The new Assembly, elected under normal constitutional provisions rather than the special ones that brought the Fifth Legislature into being, has a full five-year mandate. The Sixth Legislature held its first session January 30, 1967.