

Writing of the civil war in Cambodia, this author points out that "sound documentation of public response to Sihanouk's deposition and the subsequent political conflict between Lon Nol's military regime and Sihanouk's government-in-exile is difficult to find, but some important documents have surfaced which provide specific evidence of the deliberate distortions of the coup regime, further insight into Pnompenh's refusal to acknowledge civil war . . . , and intriguing glimpses of peasant concerns, loyalties and organizational potential."

The Cambodian Civil War

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DURING THE PAST YEAR it has become evident that the Khmer Republic government of Marshal Lon Nol in Pnompenh is on the losing side of the Cambodian war. In the two and one half years since the coup d'état deposing Chief of State Norodom Sihanouk, there has been a steady decline in the territory administered by Pnompenh matched by a steady increase in the size and military capacity of the Khmer revolutionary forces. Estimates of guerrilla strength before the 1970 coup rarely exceeded 3,000 men, while current estimates of the strength of the Khmer people's liberation army range from 30,000–50,000 men exclusive of Vietnamese advisers. In a current military offensive, the Cambodian guerrillas have demonstrated their ability to attack and to hold positions up to the defense perimeters of the city of Pnompenh. The resulting isolation of Pnompenh from the countryside has created serious

food shortages and food riots. At the present time, the city is being saved from starvation and military collapse by a daily United States airlift of 120 tons of rice rationed in lots of 5 kilos, but it is unknown how long food supplies will last, as refugees fleeing from intensified American B-52 bombing in heavily populated, guerrilla-controlled areas of Kampong Cham, Svay Rieng and Prey Veng provinces continue to stream into the city.¹

Under the dual pressures of military assault and urban social tension, Lon Nol's army appears to have disintegrated. In theory a force of approximately 200,000 men, this army has not, in fact, successfully fielded a division since the catastrophic collapse of the Tchenla II operation on December 4, 1971. From a military perspective, the survival of the Khmer Republic is, at best, problematic. From a political point of view, prospects for the consolidation of a republic as presently constituted are equally grim. Tchenla II marked the turning point in the Cambodian war because it was a political as well as a military defeat for Lon Nol; it signaled the beginning of widespread public recognition of civil war.

Since the time of the coup against Sihanouk, the Pnompenh regime has dismissed all pro-Sihanouk activities and Khmer revolutionary insurgency as acts of aggression by North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces.² These accusations grew out of a pre-coup propaganda campaign to aggravate racial tensions between Khmers and Vietnamese for the dual objectives of mobilizing support for the coup and soliciting military aid from the United States under the umbrella of the Nixon Doctrine.³ The conspirators realized that the removal of Sihanouk would not, in and of itself, resolve Cambodia's economic difficulties. For this reason, the army attempted to provoke Vietnamese revolutionary forces in the hope of creating a crisis situation which would

¹ For summaries of the current military situation see *The New York Times*, June 6, 1972; September 10, 1972, and October 23, 1972; *Newsweek*, August 14, 1972; and *Le Monde*, 28 septembre, 1972, and 8–9 octobre, 1972.

² See in particular "Vietcong-North Vietnamese Aggression Against Cambodia," "Documents on Vietcong and North Vietnamese Aggression against Cambodia (1970)," "Livre Blanc sur l'Aggression Vietcong et Nord-Vietnamienne contre la République Khmère (1970–71)," "Vietcong and North Vietnamese Aggression Against the Khmer Republic (New Documents)" all published by the Ministry of Information in Pnompenh between June, 1970, and October, 1971. See also "Message Radiodiffusé à la Nation de Monsieur le Général Lon Nol (15 août 1970)," "Address by Cambodian Ambassador Nong Kimmy to the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, on 25th May 1970," and "Speech Made by the Chief of State and Delegation of the Khmer Republic to the XXVth General Assembly of the U.N.O."

³ The fact that the Vietnamese issue was a lever and a pretext for the coup rather than its cause has been well-documented. One of the conspirators confided to T. D. Allman, "Frankly, Sihanouk was as anti-Communist as we were." Another said, "He had power too long. We wanted it. The only way to get at him was by attacking the Vietcong." See *Manchester Guardian*, September 6, 1971.

force the United States to the rescue with economic and military aid.⁴ After the coup, as the army put down pro-Sihanouk revolts and retreated in front of Vietnamese forces moving out of its northeastern Cambodian bases, Lon Nol attempted to define the impending war as a religious war, imploring the Khmer people to rise up to defend the Buddha against "atheist Vietnamese Communist aggressors."

Even after Vietnamese forces had withdrawn to southern Laos in May, 1970, thousands of idealistic, nationalist young people enlisted in the army in response to these racial and religious pleas. The army grew from 20,000 to 220,000 men in less than one year, but even in the best of armies such rapid, universal recruitment generates serious problems in com-

⁴ The Cambodian army began concerted harassment of Vietnamese base camps in northeastern Cambodia on January 2, 1970, in violation of treaty arrangements with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam. By March 12, six days before the coup, the high command announced there had been 164 skirmishes between the Cambodian and Vietnamese armies in the previous 15 months, most of them between January and March, 1970. These provocations culminated in army-organized anti-Vietnamese demonstrations in the provinces and the sacking of the North Vietnamese and . . . PRG embassies in Phnompenh. Lon Nol's entourage contacted Son Ngoc Thanh in Saigon on two separate occasions in February and March seeking assurances of assistance if the Vietnamese should retaliate against Phnompenh when Sihanouk was deposed! Thanh says he relayed assurances of support to Lon Nol after seeking the approval of CIA agents who promised to do "everything possible" if the attacks materialized. Other (apparently) informal assurances of American support were received throughout late 1969 (private information). See also *U.S. Congressional Record*, October 13, 1971, pp. S16252-4. Charles Meyer writes that the military and business elite of Phnompenh was envious of the \$200 million which the United States gave to the Vietiane regime in Laos every year. (Cambodia's total national budget expenditures for 1968, financed with special loans and other mysterious funds, were somewhat less than \$200 million.) See Meyer's *Derrière le Sourire Khmer* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1971), pp. 286-7.

⁵ *Le Monde*, 19 février, 1972. For Sim Var, Phnompenh's ambassador to Japan, and Son Ngoc Thanh, who became Prime Minister in the course of this period, the struggle against "anarchy" became an accepted euphemistic phrase for civil conflict. See Thanh's interview in *Realités Cambodgiennes*, 29 avril, 1972.

⁶ American aid to Cambodia was justified at that time as insurance against the success of Vietnamization in South Vietnam under the (false) assumption that Vietnamese Communist forces would be tied down in Cambodia and prohibited from moving into the Mekong Delta to threaten Saigon. Any shift in Phnompenh's public posture would have undermined President Richard Nixon's rationale for aid to Cambodia. Ironically, President Nixon declared Cambodia the purest form of the successful working of the Nixon Doctrine eight days after Tchenla II.

⁷ *The New York Times*, July 6, 1972.

⁸ *Le Monde*, 8 août, 1972. Interestingly enough, this letter was an attempt to refute a series of articles on Khmer liberation front activities in the liberated zones which *Le Monde* published last April, articles which were subsequently translated and circulated in the United States in June and July. See *Indochina Chronicle*, July 1, 1972.

⁹ *Le Monde*, 23 mai, 1972. In the absence of election lists, civil servants and military men voted two, even three times, casting ballots in all precincts where they worked or resided. Voters were given two ballots, a white one indicating "yes" or support for the constitution and a green one indicating "no" or disapproval. One ballot was to be discarded: the other was to be placed into a nearly transparent envelope. Thus, poll watchers, usually military police,

mand. In this case, command problems were aggravated alternately by the lack of any ideological preparation for civil war and a total preoccupation with a foreign enemy defined in racial and religious terms. Soldiers fleeing to Phompenh during the collapse of Tchenla II in December, 1971, reported they had been fighting other Khmers and these, they said, they could not kill. Recruited to defend Khmer culture, they could not in turn contribute to its destruction. An unknown number of soldiers defected to the liberation front army, acknowledging in a decisive way the depth of their emotion upon recognition of betrayal.

From that moment, the Lon Nol regime has been in serious political difficulty, difficulty which its elaborately contrived attempts at constitutionalism and party government can barely conceal. In early 1972, efforts by prominent civilian leaders in the Phnompenh government to reorder the regime's priorities in anticipation of a long civil war were apparently unsuccessful.⁷ Lon Nol's entourage believed that American aid was essential for the survival of the regime, and great concern was evinced over the perceived reluctance of the United States to get involved in another prolonged Vietnamese-type conflict. The dilemma created by propaganda extravagances was made even greater by the presence of "true believers," whose racialism and radical nationalism prevented any recognition of an intra-national threat.

In the final analysis, it appears that the possible military advantages to be gained by a frank admission of and belated ideological preparation for civil war were outweighed by the more attractive prospects of increased American aid and military support.⁸ In a letter to *The New York Times*, Lon Nol's Ambassador to Washington reiterated the charge of North Vietnamese and Vietcong aggression, denying the existence of civil war.⁷ In a letter to *Le Monde*, Phnompenh's Minister of Information (now Minister of Foreign Affairs) insisted that Khmer Republic forces fought "always and uniquely" North Vietnamese and Vietcong invaders. The Minister went on to deny in equally emphatic terms that Sihanouk had any Khmer partisans. Sihanouk's regime was a dictatorship, he wrote, and the Khmer people have turned away from Sihanouk by voting in favor of a new constitution.⁸

These "official" views notwithstanding, the opinions and sympathies of the Khmer people have not been allowed to surface in Phnompenh. Over the summer, several private newspapers were closed by the government. The constitutional referendum cited above, executed under military supervision and surveillance, was a mockery of free democratic expression.⁹ Sound documentation of public response to Sihanouk's deposition and the subsequent political conflict between Lon Nol's military regime and Sihanouk's govern-

ment-in-exile is difficult to find, but some important documents have surfaced which provide specific evidence of the deliberate distortions of the coup regime, further insight into Pnompenh's refusal to acknowledge civil war even after it had become militarily obvious, and intriguing glimpses of peasant concerns, loyalties and organizational potential.

AFTER THE COUP

Immediately following the coup on March 18, 1970, a number of revolts and demonstrations took place in both rural and urban areas of Cambodia. The foreign press characterized them as pro-Sihanouk. In Pnompenh, officials explained that Sihanouk had a few partisans who had been temporarily duped by Vietnamese agitators. An official Ministry of Information document describing some demonstrations in Kampong Cham (in which two National Assembly deputies were assassinated and peasants organized a march on Pnompenh) passes over the incidents in a deceptively cursory manner.

March 26: In Kompong Cham, demonstrators pillaged the law-courts, sacked the Governor's mansion, and organized a march on Pnompenh. They were intercepted by the armed forces.

March 27: Demonstrators again entered Kompong Cham; the army was forced to open fire, and there were some killed.

A second wave tried to reach the capital by two different routes; the defence forces dispersed them without difficulty. Other demonstrations organized in Takeo province were also quelled by the Army.

On the 26th, two deputies, Mr. Kim Phon and Mr. Sos Saoun, who were trying to bring the rioters to reason, were massacred.

The authorities announced the arrest of the Vietnamese nationals who controlled the demonstrations and said that they were in possession of all the proofs of the participation of Vietcong agents in the organization of the riots.¹⁰

The language used here very conspicuously converts an apparently large number of Cambodian citizens into a mass of depersonalized "demonstrators" or "rioters" who were "dispersed" and "quelled" by the army, and immediately calls attention to the omission or obfuscation of (1) the number and nationality of these people, and (2) the reasons behind the demon-

could easily see the green ballot if it were being deposited in the ballot box. In one precinct, those who had voted "no" were asked to give their name, profession and address before leaving. Many people indicated their fear of voting "no." Many younger citizens refused to participate because the army had just ended a long student strike by attacking the Law Faculty and killing several students.

¹⁰ *Cambodia: March 1970* (Pnompenh: Ministry of Information, n.d.), pp 22-3 (in English).

¹¹ Communiqué N* 65. Salakhet de Kompong Cham, 25 mars, 1970.

¹² In fact, there is no reference to Vietnamese organization of or participation in these demonstrations in the documents in my possession.

¹³ Communiqué N* 66. Salakhet de Kompong Cham, 26 mars, 1970.

strations, assassinations and aborted march on Pnompenh. Was there any organization or reason involved in this chaotic, seemingly inhuman behavior? If so, was it really Vietnamese-inspired? Internal government communiqués describing the same incidents suggest another scenario.

On March 25, 1970, the Provincial Governor of Kampong Cham sent an urgent message to General Sirik Matak, then Minister of Interior, reporting that *residents* of the commune of Kampong Reap had mobilized 1,500 people for a demonstration in front of district headquarters. He wrote:

They are armed, some of them, with knives, machetes and swords.

- (1) They are requesting the authorities (or the government) to rehang the portraits of Prince Sihanouk.
- (2) They demand that Prince Sihanouk be allowed to return to Cambodia to have it out with the government.
- (3) They are asking for the dissolution of the National Assembly.¹¹

After recording these specific requests and testifying to the peaceful departure of the petitioners when they had been assured that their requests would be transmitted to higher authorities, the governor writes with undisguised incredulity: "I will multiply our efforts in the investigation of the real motive of this demonstration." He mentions plans to explain the coup situation in Pnompenh to the people on April 6, days later.

ANOTHER DEMONSTRATION

The following day another urgent message was dispatched to the Minister of Interior, reporting the resumption of the demonstration. The governor spoke with his constituents for an hour and a half and identified their leaders as being the same individuals responsible for the confrontation on the previous day. He did not identify these spokesmen as Vietnamese or Vietnamese nationals. Consequently, and especially in the anti-Vietnamese context of the period, it is safe to assume that the leaders of and most of the participants in this movement were local Khmer residents.¹² This is also implicit in the initial, reasonably gentle military handling of the situation by local administrators. The governor wrote:

... At the end of an hour and a half of negotiations, we were completely outflanked by the demonstrators who were moving toward the center of town. We should have taken measures before then to prevent their movement toward the town, but I had noticed old people, above all women, and children among the demonstrators. For that reason I insisted the armed forces not use guns. In another context, we only had a force of 200 to 250 army, police and provincial guardsmen. Very much aware of the seriousness of any action on our part, we simply followed the demonstration across town in order to avoid disorders.¹³

Once again, the demonstration ended peacefully, but while the governor was telephoning this news to Pnompenh, other groups of demonstrators from Tonlebet, Chamcar Loeu and Choeng-Prey were sacking the provincial courthouse and the governor's mansion.¹⁴

On the same afternoon, an official delegation from Pnompenh, including General In Tam, President of the National Assembly and deputy from Kampong Cham province, arrived (at 2:15 P.M.) to negotiate with the demonstrators. Groups of demonstrators were standing around the local textile factory and at the town gate. Seeing the extent of the damage to the provincial courthouse and capitol buildings, the delegation returned at once to Pnompenh, deciding that the situation had passed the point of discussion. During this time, crowds were spreading all across the town. The governor's mansion was sacked a second time.

The arrival of the two National Assembly deputies, Sos Saoun and Kim Phon, at about 6 P.M. was unexpected, indicating that they were not part of any official delegation sent by the government. They arrived by taxi just as the demonstrators were about to board trucks taking them to Pnompenh. The demonstrators took the deputies to the textile factory and killed them "for a reason which I have not yet been able to obtain," the governor wrote. Without any reference to arrests for either the assassinations or inciting to riot, the communiqué ends abruptly with the following postscript:

Permit me to inform your highness that this morning while we were occupied in the town of Kampong Cham, another group of about 1,500 demonstrators came to sack the administrative post of Tuol-Trach (Oraeng-Auv). The results were fear and anxiety for our personnel. Only two venetian blinds were broken; the demonstrators were content to hang a portrait of Samdech Sihanouk in the post.¹⁵

An estimated 8,000–10,000 peasants and villagers from several provinces joined the march to Pnompenh. They carried Sihanouk's portrait on the highways. The army, moving out from Pnompenh, fired on the demonstrators and on villages along two demonstration routes. According to French observers, there were scores of dead.¹⁶ The governor of Kampong Cham was abruptly dismissed, and In Tam took over his provincial administration. Immediately thereafter, Vietnamese nationals were accused of having organized the demonstrations; mass arrests and deten-

tion of Vietnamese nationals began. Several days after the aborted march, Vietcong forces in Svay Rieng province initiated a series of raids against the Cambodian army partly to secure their border sanctuaries from encroaching American and South Vietnamese army attacks from Vietnam but also to signal their support for the movement behind Sihanouk. The Cambodian army faded back to Pnompenh, abandoning a series of district towns without a major battle.

There are several striking elements in the demands and behavior of the Khmer demonstrations, especially in the early stages of the uprising. Above all, one is struck by a certain discipline and unity of purpose manifested by the relatively peaceful conduct of large numbers of individuals in a crowd situation, their ability to articulate precise demands and the presence of recognizable spokesmen. The fact that the peasants sought to negotiate with the authority structure in place distinguishes this movement from more traditional messianic uprisings. In this regard, it is significant that only some 10,000 people marched. (Cambodia's total population is about 8 million.) It appears that the rural Cambodians cannot be mobilized in Sihanouk's name only, that their mobilization depends, in addition, upon appeals to real socio-economic needs.

The requests of the demonstrators, viewed as an attempt to respond to and cope with the changing situation in Pnompenh, reflect some degree of sophistication. Their request that the authorities rehang Sihanouk's portrait in conjunction with their insistence upon his right to "have it out with" the government embodies the subtle but real suggestion that things were not exactly all right under Sihanouk but that things would certainly be wrong without him. The intriguing element here, in sharp opposition to the frequent view of Khmer peasants as passive and traditionbound, is their tacit acknowledgement of the government's right to negotiate with Sihanouk; this suggests their awareness of the differences between legitimate sacred-organic authority and secular-temporal administration. This is even more striking in view of Sihanouk's own position broadcast over radio Peking two days before the initial demonstration. In this declaration, Sihanouk called for the dissolution of both the government and the National Assembly.

The National Assembly appears to have been a particularly volatile object of hostility for the peasants. In their initial demands, they called for its dissolution. A general riot situation did not appear to have existed until the official delegation from Pnompenh arrived, a delegation containing one or more well-known parlia-

(Continued on page 278)

¹⁴ According to one witness, the court entrance marked "Maison de Justice" was altered to read "Maison de l'injustice."

¹⁵ Communiqué N° 66, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ The efficiency with which the army acted on March 27, 1970, is remarkable. French and Cambodian witnesses testify that American-trained Khmer Krom mercenaries (KKK troops) who had been infiltrated into the army before the coup and who had led the demonstrations against and sackings of the two Vietnamese embassies in Pnompenh were the decisive units in putting down this revolt.

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THE CAMBODIAN CIVIL WAR

(Continued from page 262)

mentarians. Several hours later, two other deputies arrived on the scene and were promptly executed. The governor's reports did not indicate any other deaths, injuries or attempted assaults against government officials. Thus, it is possible to infer that the National Assembly touched an organic nerve in Khmer society in attempting to usurp the essentially sacred authority of Sihanouk by turning over his office of Chief of State to one of their own, Cheng Heng. In any case, the Assembly was not highly respected by the general public. It was derogatorily referred to as a businessman's club, and it was widely believed, whether true or false, that the high cost of internal trucking and agricultural credit was the fault of certain deputies engaged in monopolistic enterprises.

Next to what appear to be carefully considered peasant demands, the provincial governor's attitude that there was nothing to discuss was startling. His suspicions about "real motives" and his patronizing decision to explain everything much later betray his assumption that peasant-citizens are told what to do in political life instead of having the right to participate on their own behalf. The attitude of the "negotiating" delegation was apparently similar. Subsequent events confirmed, however, that the coup group in Pnompenh was in no mood to discuss anything.

In retrospect, the events of March, 1970, in Kampong Cham assume great significance in terms of understanding peasant response to the contending pleas of Lon Nol in Pnompenh, Khieu Samphan and other revolutionary leaders in the *maquis*, and Prince Sihanouk in Peking. The loss of Sihanouk seems to have been a cultural, not a political, shock to many Khmers. For these people, the initial experience with the advancing Vietnamese revolutionary forces was probably positive, in that these Vietnamese supported them in supporting Sihanouk. The limited numbers of Vietnamese committed to the Cambodian battlefield at that time (between 8,000 and 12,000 according to American intelligence reports¹⁷) were not the threat to Khmer culture or civilian life which Lon Nol claimed. Peasants acknowledged this by not responding to the army-instigated massacres of Vietnamese. It would appear that racism, an essentially defensive phenomenon in Asian cultures, was more likely brought into play in reaction to the 50,000 American and South Vietnamese troops invading Cambodia on April 30, 1970. South Vietnamese forces numbering between 20,000 and 30,000 occupied eastern Cambodia until September, 1971, and their presence with its consequent looting, raping and property destruction was

¹⁷ T. D. Allman, *Far East Economic Review*, September 4, 1971.

perceived as threatening the survival of Kmer society, as is intensive American bombing.

In the countryside, Lon Nol's explanations of the war make little sense. This fact, coupled with the unresponsive, authoritarian disposition of the Pnompenh regime towards its citizenry, suggests the slow but certain demise of the Khmer Republic in the presence of a compelling Khmer alternative—the liberation front in alliance with Prince Sihanouk.

LAOS

(Continued from page 270)

law of the jungle is not a pleasant prospect. Such concepts as neutrality would become quickly obsolete.

The latest chapter in this long story is being written by the Lao themselves as I write these words. Preliminary contacts between the opposing sides in Laos have been going on since 1970, when the Neo Lao Hak Sat proposed a five-point plan as a basis for negotiations. These contacts, carried on by Tiao Souk Vongsak, Secretary of State for Public Works in the coalition government, were never completely broken off even by the force of such events as the South Vietnamese invasion of southern Laos in February, 1971, and the resumption of the American bombing of North Vietnam in the spring of 1972. The main obstacles to more rapid progress had been the choice of a site for a higher-level meeting and the status to be enjoyed by each side, since the NLHS has not accepted the competence of the Vientiane government since 1964.

On October 14, 1972, a delegation representing the Lao Patriotic Forces, including both the NLHS and the left-wing faction of the centrists in Laos' tripartite scheme of things, arrived in Vientiane from Sam Neua aboard the regular Aeroflot flight from Hanoi. The leader of the delegation, General Phoune Siprasouth, deputy commander-in-chief of the Lao People's Liberation Army (the Pathet Lao army) made a statement upon arrival which included notably the following: "If the Nixon Administration is willing to cease its policy of aggression and intervention in Laos and the Vientiane side regards the national interest as the most important thing, it is certain that the Laos question will be conveniently solved in the forthcoming talks between the two sides."³ The government delegation to the talks, which began shortly afterwards, is led by Pheng Phongsavan, Minister of Interior.

Prince Souphanouvong, the NLHS leader, is believed to have made a visit to Peking sometime at the end of September, 1972. There is no question but that the Chinese strongly support the Lao talks. Furthermore, North Vietnam has recently reaffirmed her continued acceptance of the 1962 Geneva Accord as the basis for restoring peace in Laos. The position

³ Radio Pathet Lao, October 15, 1972.