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The Pathet Lao and The Politics of
Reconciliation in Laos

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A Note on Sources

This study draws principally upon interviews undertaken by the authors during the summer of 1974 in Vientiane and Luang Prabang with Pathet Lao and Vientiane-side officials in the new coalition government, as well as with foreign embassy officials, academic analysts, journalists, experts in international agencies, and others with knowledge of Lao politics. The authors also made field trips to Long Tieng, Ban Sone, Savannakhet, Pakse and Champassak, meeting with Lao Government civilian and military personnel, and others including students, merchants, peasants, refugees, and U.S. and foreign government officials.

In addition, the authors examined translations of the Lao press and radio broadcasts from Vientiane, Sam Neua and Hanoi, as well as U.S. and foreign newspaper and periodical accounts of Laos. Interviews conducted in Saigon and Pnom Penh, focusing upon Laos, supplemented these sources.

The authors have limited their footnotes largely to direct quotations.
List of Abbreviations

DRV - Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)

FBIS - Foreign Broadcast Information Service

GRUNK - Government Royale Unifié Nationale Khmer (Cambodia)

ICC - International Control Commission

JCIA - Joint Commission on Implementing the Agreement

LPF - Lao Patriotic Front (also referred to in Lao as Neo Lao Hak Sat, NLHS)

NPCC - National Political Consultative Council

NVA - North Vietnamese Army

PGNU - Provisional Government of National Union

PL - Pathet Lao (Land of the Lao; by extension, various components or the totality of the Lao revolutionary movement.)

PPL - Phak Pasason Lao (Peoples' Party of Laos)

PRG - Provisional Revolutionary Government (South Vietnam)

RLG - Royal Lao Government

SEATO - Southeast Asia Treaty Organization

VS - Vientiane-Side
I INTRODUCTION

Negotiation of the cease-fire in Vientiane in February 1973 is a natural opening to an analysis of the postwar politics of the Pathet Lao, but so many shadows are cast by recent history that a proper focus requires some mention of significant background factors. It is worth remembering that many of the Pathet Lao (PL) leaders were together with their current Royal Lao political opponents in the Lao Issara, the Lao nationalist movement formed in 1946 to demand independence from France. In 1949, a decisive split in the Lao Issara was symbolized by Prince Souvanna Phouma's return from exile in Thailand, with the majority faction, to residual French tutelage in Vientiane, while Prince Souphanouvong, with the faction that came to be known as the Pathet Lao, chose to fight for full independence through armed resistance with the Viet Minh. The Communist ideology and revolutionary commitment which has emerged among the Pathet Lao has eroded much, but not necessarily all, of the common experiences of family, education and youth that once helped bring together the Lao Issara.

In addition, it should be remembered that coalition government, uniting elements of the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao political groupings, has been tried on two previous occasions, 1957-59 and 1962-63. Two PL ministers joined the Cabinet on the first occasion and four on the second, but each time the experiment foundered on what the PL have considered treachery and outside interference. Notwithstanding their claims of foul play, however, the PL did not attempt to establish a separate state and even maintained a permanent mission in Vientiane throughout the war.
Finally, the war in Laos has been, unfortunately for the Lao, an extension of the war in Vietnam, and the protagonists of the latter struggle have launched themselves into the internal affairs of Laos. The North Vietnamese have given critical guidance and support to the Pathet Lao, while the U.S. has intervened, massively, on the side of the Royal Lao Government. The Pathet Lao, along with their North Vietnamese allies, no doubt sincerely believe that the war began with American intervention following the Geneva settlement of 1954. The staggering U.S. bombing mounted against the Ho Chi Minh Trail system in southern Laos, as well as against northern towns and villages, pushed the PL leadership in Sam Neua into caves in late 1964, where they lived and worked for the next ten years. The tenacity, the dedication to the movement, the sense of rectitude, and the spartan, puritanical outlook of life which these uncertain years have imprinted upon the PL cadres are not likely to fade away in the first exposure to peace or city-life.

Although the policies of external powers are still crucial to the future of Laos, internal politics during this transition to peace appear to have greater weight than at anytime in recent history. This study will examine the politics of reconciliation within Laos, focusing upon the Pathet Lao.
II NEGOTIATING THE CEASE-FIRE AND PROTOCOL:
THE PL STRATEGY

The Cease Fire

The war in Laos ended in 1973 with negotiations in Vientiane, conducted in tandem with the final stage of the Kissinger-Le Duc Tho negotiations on Vietnam. While the timing of the Vientiane talks reflected the progress being made in Paris, the issues were drawn directly from Lao past experience with aborted coalition governments, zones of separate administration and the dominating influence of outside powers. The issues in dispute in 1972, therefore, retained a certain consistency with previous negotiations between the Lao parties, but the PL entered these talks in a military position far superior to 1956, 1961, or 1964, and the ultimate agreement reflected their advantage, as well as the greater organization and skill of their negotiating team.

The LPF Central Committee, in its statement of Five Points on March 6, 1970, called for the complete cessation of American bombing as a pre-condition for negotiation of a "political settlement." There were rumors in July 1972 that Prince Souphanouvong's correspondence with Souvanna Phouma was moving towards a modification of that stand, but General Vang Pao's offensive against the Plain of Jars soon cooled such talk. Yet suddenly on September 22, 1972, the permanent PL emissary in Vientiane, Sot Phetrasay, informed the Prime Minister that full-scale talks should begin immediately, without pre-conditions, in the RLG capital. With the American presidential election pending, the North Vietnamese had privately made their crucial concession to the U.S. in Paris 10 days
earlier and were within two weeks of presenting Kissinger with their
draft peace agreement for Vietnam.* The PL's concession to Souvanna made
possible a parallel negotiating process toward an all-Indochina cease-
fire, and it also helped the durable neutralist prime minister to extri-
cate himself from an ominous constitutional confrontation with his oppo-
nents in the National Assembly. It caught his government in Vientiane
not at all prepared for serious negotiations, and even the U.S. Embassy
did not apply itself thoroughly to the process until after Kissinger's
"peace is at hand" statement on October 26.

The PL moved fast and effectively in the early stages with the
delivery of its ten-man delegation list on October 5,**their arrival in
Vientiane six days later, and the opening of formal talks on October 17
(after one day's protest over certain arrangements in the hall). The
chief PL delegate, General Phoun Sipraseuth, distributed a printed opening
statement which seized the initiative by explicating the Five Points,

* Tad Szulc, "Behind the Vietnam Cease-fire Agreement," Foreign
Policy, Summer 1974, pp. 48-52.

** The PL delegation consisted of:
General Phoun Sipraseuth (1961- Chairman of LPF cease-fire
degregation.)
Tiao Souk Vongsak (1974-Minister of Information)
Naha Kou Souvannamethi (1974-Minister of Religion)
Sot Phetrasay (1974-Minister of Economy and Planning)
Pradith Thiengtham
Cheng Sayavong
Bousbong Souvannavong (1974-Secretary of State for Finance)
Somsak Soukhavong
Phao Bounmaphol
Khamone Vannavongsa

Unlike the previous negotiations toward reunification, Souphanouvong
did not participate directly, nor did Souvanna. The RLG delegation was
chaired by Pheng Phonsayon (Minister of the Interior), and filled out
by Ngon Sananikone (Minister of Public Works), four generals, two intel-
lectuals (PhD's) and one other minister—with two observer deputies
from the National Assembly.
which Souvanna had agreed to accept on July 24 as a basis of discussion. The main thrust of the PL position, which emerged with greater clarity at subsequent weekly sessions, was: 1) the American imperialists and their lackeys must cease all military interventions in Laos, 2) a new national provisional coalition government and political council must be established pending definitive national elections.

Instrumental to the achievement of these two major objectives were a number of subsidiary points which were hammered at in successive weekly meetings as the negotiations stuttered along with an eye to the main show in Paris. The PL statements repeatedly branded the war as a brutal, illegal aggression waged and directed by the United States imperialists. The Government ("Vientiane party") was denied any presumption of having legally descended from the Tripartite Government of National Union established in 1962, since this had been destroyed by assassination and coup d'état. (The Geneva agreements of 1962 were the proper basis for a new settlement, "taking into account current realities"). Therefore, the two negotiating delegations were meeting on a basis of equality rather than as a constitutional Government delegation and a penitent splinter group returning to its previously allotted seats in the cabinet, as the RLG would have it. By the same token the National Assembly, elected since the 1963 breakdown, was illegitimate.* The provisional coalition government should resume the tri-partite pattern of 1962, with the PL

* The most explicit formal expression of this idea, which became politically critical in July 1974, is found in the PL draft agreement presented December 12, 1972, which states: "In the period when the National Assembly and the official government of national union do not yet exist," (i.e., during the period of the proposed provisional government and political council) "each side will manage the zone under its control."
contributing one third, the rightists of Vientiane one third, and the "patriotic neutralists" (PL) and personalities approving of peace, inde­pendence and neutrality making up the other third.

To support this well-established bargaining position, a ruthless attack by North Vietnamese troops hit previously sacrosanct areas (Kheng Khoc) in the south one week after the opening session in October 1972. Within two weeks, Phoumi Vongvichit, the most sophisticated PL leader next to Prince Souphanouvong, was dispatched to Vientiane to deal directly with the willing Souvanna Phouma. With an October 31 Paris Agreement apparently in the offing, the North Vietnamese were in a position to en­courage their friends in Laos to mount the maximum pressure for a cease­fire, which would spare their combined forces escalated punishment from American power redirected from Vietnam. Unlike North Vietnam, the U.S. government and the Laotian rightists, the PL had greater interest in a political settlement than a simple cease-fire. In this respect they agreed with Souvanna's main goal.

When the October 31 agreement in Paris did not materialize because of President Thieu's resistance, the weekly Vientiane talks settled down to rhetorical salvoes covering the nature of the war and constitutional situation, with the PL insisting upon their Five Points. Nonetheless, on December 12, after an 8-day visit by their three top leaders to Sam Neua via Hanoi, the PL delegation presented a draft Agreement. The Vientiane Government responded the following week with one of their own. By then the Vietnam situation had degenerated into the Christmas bombings of Hanoi. Nonetheless, the two drafts were more alike than dissimilar, and once the Paris talks resumed in January (concluding on the 23rd), Kissinger obtained a private assurance from Le Duc Tho that a cease-fire
would follow in Laos within 20 days.* Kissinger publicly declared that it was "clearly understood that North Vietnamese troops are considered foreign with respect to Laos and Cambodia."

In pursuance of the promised cease-fire Phoumi Vongvichit returned on February 3, 1973 to Vientiane for daily private negotiations. Henry Kissinger passed through en route to Hanoi a week later, and American "strategic power" rained evermore heavily in support of Government forces attempting to expand the ribbon of territory along the Mekong and the bulge toward the Plain of Jars which constituted the 20% of Laos that they still controlled. North Vietnamese regulars were apparently not moved in from Vietnam, as many feared would happen, and Vientiane hard-liners were discretely dissuaded by the Americans on February 15 from expecting air power to better their position in coming months. Souphanouvong was apparently pressured, in turn, by Hanoi to propose on February 18 an immediate cease-fire, without prejudice to the peace talks. Within three days the combined political and military agreement, which both he and his half-brother preferred, was worked out and signed in Vientiane. Notwithstanding the external pressures exerted, the Laotion parties had this time, unlike 1954 and 1962, agreed bilaterally, and at home, to a framework of settlement.

The major stumbling blocks to reaching the Vientiane Agreement were political, not military issues. The PL gave ground when they accepted a provisional government composed of equal numbers from the Vientiane and PL sides, plus only two personalities chosen by common agreement. The PL early stopped pressing for any obligatory return of refugees to their villages of origin. Explicit reference to American

* T. Szulc, op. cit., p. 63.
bombing were jettisoned in the final text, at RLG insistence, but Phong Phongsavan was obliged to sign as the plenipotentiary of the "Government of Vientiane" (or, as he explained it, the "Government at Vientiane"), while Phoumi Vongvichit signed for the "Patriotic Forces."

The PL further conceded that all paramilitary organizations must be withdrawn or disbanded and that all foreign military personnel and bases (not simply those associated with American military activity) be required to withdraw. In addition, they agreed that these provisions be fulfilled within 60 days after the establishment of a provisional government rather than simply following within 90 days of the signing of the agreement. They summarily refused the RLG proposals to return to the cease-fire positions of 1962. The PL gained very grudging agreement to a Coalition Political Council to assist the provisional government and prepare for "general elections to set up the National Assembly," even though some diplomatic observers had predicted that it was a "throw-away" bargaining point for the PL. The fate of the existing National Assembly, which the Government had offered to enlarge, was left in limbo, since the text of the Agreement does not mention it. The PL proposal of a joint commission to control and supervise the cease-fire, with the aid of the existing International Control Commission (ICC), was accepted by the Government, but the Government failed in trying to include the withdrawal of foreign troops under the ICC jurisdiction. The neutralization of Vientiane to assure the security of the coalition government was proposed by the PL and when the Government countered by proposing the same for the royal capital at Luang Prabang, the PL insisted upon both, and won. Two other critical provisions won by the PL were the principle of the unanimity of the two sides in the functioning of the provisional
government and political council, and the maintenance of two separate areas of administration pending general elections. Remaining issues were left for further negotiations.

The timetable stipulated by the Agreement was not adhered to by the PL in either the military or political provisions. The town of Pak Song on the Bolovens Plateau, west of the lower Ho Chi Minh Trail, was seized by North Vietnamese troops within hours of the signing, and B-52's were brought to bear in response. Within a week, however, serious seizures of territory had petered out, and American air power was unleashed only once more, in April, to help stabilize the lines south of the Plain of Jars.

The Protocol

The PL delegation in Vientiane stalled for a month on the formation of a government, then announced that a Protocol to the Agreement must first be negotiated. The PL finally brought its serious negotiator Phoumi Vongvichit back from Sam Neua on April 26, after the Vientiane side (with American help) had drafted a proposal. Souvanna Phouma accepted Phoumi's own draft as the basis for discussion in his zeal to maintain the momentum of reconciliation.

The equal allocation of ministerial posts between the two sides was complicated by the political importance attached to Defense, Finance, Interior, and Foreign Affairs, and the desire of the PL to hold the Vice-Premiership. They eventually conceded all but Foreign Affairs to the Vientiane side, however, and accepted two equal vice-premiers, one from each side, in addition to the already stipulated neutral prime minister. The other ministries which they were allocated were Public Works and Transportation, Economy and Planning, Information and Tourism, and
Religion, in addition to six secretaries of state in the other ministries of the provisional government.

The neutralization of the two capital cities, the demarcation of a cease-fire line, and the differences over the political council were not so easily resolved. Souvanna Phouma was far more pliable than the right-wing generals and financial families in these matters but his Government was not ready to sign the Protocol until September 14, after a coup, jumping off from Thailand, had been suppressed with American diplomatic help, and the Russian Embassy had brought the former rival generals together socially. The PL made concessions in the middle and late stages of the negotiations, by scaling down the number of troops to be stationed by each side to neutralize the capital cities,* and accepting ambiguous language concerning the possible legislative role of the National Political Consultative Council. They insisted, however, upon the right to take part in the control of immigration, emigration and airport protection in the two capitals, and refused to fix a date for general elections. The cease-fire line was to be demarcated only in disputed areas, by 27 temporary markers, generally located by the Protocol, but to be fixed exactly by the Joint Commission on Implementation of the Agreement (JCIA).

Thus the PL achieved, after initially dilatory negotiation, contractual establishment of equal participation in the provisional government in two physically neutralized cities, and the maintenance of two zones of control for an indefinite period. The actual formation of the Provisional Government of National Union was delayed another half year, during which the two sides jostled over the conditions of entry of Pathet Lao police and military forces into the seats of the royal government.

* In Vientiane, each side may station 1000 police and one battalion (1200) of troops; in Luang Prabang, 500 police and 2 companies (600) of troops. The PL had not filled this allowance in Luang Prabang, as of July 1974.
III THE NEW COALITION: PATHET LAO ROLE

The PGNU

Pathet Lao Assumption of Duties

With the signature of the Protocol in September 1973, the basis was established for new political institutions and conversion from a military struggle to a political one. On April 5, 1974, the new Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) was promulgated by Royal Decree.* A

* Prime Minister and President of the Council of Ministers
Prince Souvanna Phouma

From the PL Side

Vice President of Council of Ministers
Phagna Phoumi Vongvichit

Foreign Affairs
Minister Phagna Phoumi Vongvichit

Education, Sports, Youth and Fine Arts
Secretary of State Oun Neua Phimmasone

Interior
Secretary of State Deuane Sounnarath

Finance
Secretary of State Bousbong Souvannavong

Information and Tourism
Minister Tiao Souk Vongsak

National Defense and Veterans Affairs
Secretary of State Kham Ouane Boupha

Public Works and Transport
Minister Singkapo Sikotchounamaly

Economy and Plan
Minister Sot Phetrasy

From the Vientiane Side

Vice President of Council of Ministers and Minister of Education
Phagna Leum Insisiengmay

Secretary of State Tianethone Chantharasy

Minister Phagna Leum Insisiengmay

Minister Phagna Pheng Phongsavan

Minister Ngon Sananikone

Secretary of State Phagna Ouday Souvannavong

Minister Chao Sisouk na Champassak

Secretary of State Noumphanh Saignasith

Secretary of State Somphou Oudomvilay
comparison between the 1974 coalition government and its predecessor in 1962 shows that many of the major personalities on both sides remain the same (although Souphanouvong is pre-occupied in a new political institution, the National Political Consultative Council). All of the posts nominated by the Pathet Lao have gone to lowland Lao (Lao Loum), and all but one of the nominees of the Vientiane side, (Toub Lyfoung, a Meo leader) are also lowland Lao.

The PL membership in each ministry is generally no more than four persons—the minister or secretary of state, a chef de cabinet, an aide, and perhaps a private secretary. (The total PL personnel in the PGNU would not number much more than 50.) The PL members of the PGNU—indeed all the PL personnel who have come to Vientiane and Luang Prabang—are without their wives and children, except for the few whose wives have official appointments. The PL members point out that time is not propitious for them to bring families. They must devote their energies to their new jobs and get installed into living quarters. Security conditions for them in Vientiane were unknown at the outset, and even today a few regard security as an uncertainty. (Right-wing critics of the PL

* (continued)

Religion
Minister Maha Kou Souvannamethi
Secretary of State Souken Vilaysarn

Public Health
Secretary of State Khamlieng Pholsena
Minister Phagna Khamphay Abhay

Justice
Secretary of State Sansathit
Minister Phagna Khamking Souvanlasy
(Qualified neutral nominated by Vientiane side)

Posts and Telecommunications
Minister Phagna Khampheng Boupha
(Qualified neutral nominated by PL side)
Secretary of State Touby Lyfoung
claim that families of the PL personnel are kept in the Sam Neua zone as hostages, to discourage those who might be inclined to swerve from the party line, or even to defect.)

Offices and living quarters, suitable to rank, have been allocated to PL members of the PGNU, and formation of the PGNU was held up until satisfactory agreement could be reached on such matters. PL authorities have been insisting upon their perquisites. As their opponents note maliciously, they have been demanding air-conditioned offices, handsome villas and Mercedes cars. PL spokesmen insist that it is not their desire for luxury which motivates them—they have clearly demonstrated their ability to lead a Spartan life—but simply the dignity of equality with their right-wing counterparts.

Political Initiatives

The formation of a new coalition government in Laos has provided a distinct advantage to the Pathet Lao. Under the Agreement, which recognizes the existence of "two zones and two separate administrations", the PL maintain strict control of what they call their "liberated zone", administering it from their headquarters in Sam Neua and permitting no access to members of the Vientiane side. Nevertheless, they have brought their personnel into Vientiane and Luang Prabang, whose neutralization they participate in overseeing. Furthermore, within the PGNU, which has replaced the RLG as the sole governmental instrument of the Vientiane side, they influence the administration of the Vientiane side. One hears often the wry observation in Vientiane, particularly among the right-wing, that the PL now say "what is ours is ours, and what is yours is half ours." Although it may be an unkind exaggeration, the observation encapsules an essential truth. It must be added that the settlement
reflects the outcome of the war. If the PL were not totally "victorious", they were winning, and the peace arrangement reflects their ascendancy.

As they assumed their posts in the PGNU, the PL Ministers and Secretaries of State have moved with moderation and caution. The PL Vice Premier, Phoumi Vongvichit, set the tone of cooperation and concord at the inaugural PGNU session in laying out ten workmanlike tasks for the future with which the Vientiane side could have little fundamental disagreement. "As for the routine functioning of each ministry", he added,"that will proceed as usual".* And it has, to a great extent. The addition of an average of four PL persons to each Ministry, even though at top-level positions, has not seemed to affect the day-to-day work and planning of the administration, and it is not yet evident that the Vientiane-side civil servants have altered their basic operating assumptions.

The tone of moderation and continuity has been expressed by PL leaders on matters of policy as well as administration. Anxious Vientiane-side members had been worried that the PL might wish to rupture, or at least reduce drastically, the economic dependence of Laos on the U.S. and other Western donors. However, shortly after assuming his functions, Phoumi Vongvichit announced his support for continuation of FEOF, the institution through which the U.S., and other donor countries (including Great Britain, France, Japan and Australia) provide support for the stability of the Lao currency.

At the Ministry of Plan, the new PL Minister, Sot Phetrasay, has continued business as usual. Several high level delegations of Vientiane-side

officials in the Plan, who had been preparing to go on missions to recruit resources from the U.S. and Canada, and from international agencies, were sent out with the encouragement of the new Minister. (The PL have not presented plans to direct foreign aid resources to their own zone, no doubt tied to their reluctance to permit outsiders access to the zone.)

The new Minister of Public Works, General Singkapo, has impressed his Vientiane-side counterparts, as well as foreign embassy donors, by his pragmatic approach. As an example, when an agreement for U.S. technical assistance at the Luang Prabang airport expired, and the Americans were preparing to terminate their assistance, Singkapo prudently requested a prolongation. He has shown interest, too, in continuation of U.S. assistance in such tasks as road-building.

There is, perhaps, a greater sense of change in the Ministry of Information, now headed by PL Minister Prince Souk Vongsak. Although the official spokesman for the PGNU continues to be a Vientiane-side official in the ministry, the press releases and radio output are now stated more blandly. An amusing example was the press statement concerning a letter to the International Red Cross written by North Vietnamese prisoners appealing for release. Although the evidence is ample to convince independent observers that these prisoners were members of the North Vietnamese Army, the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese publicly deny this, maintaining, along with the prisoners themselves, that they are ethnic Vietnamese of Lao nationality fighting with the Lao liberation forces. To maintain "neutrality", the government spokesman from the Vientiane side announced simply that an appeal for release had been received, written in Quoc ngu (Vietnamese script), from soldiers claiming to be members of the Lao Liberation Army.
In foreign affairs, under the leadership of PL minister Phoumi Vongvichit, routine administration continues, as Phoumi had promised. Each time new ambassadorial appointments have come due, Vientiane-side officials have been appointed, as might have been expected prior to formation of the coalition.* Without opposition from the Vientiane side, a personality from the PL side, Khampay Boupha (of the "genuine patriotic neutralists") was named as Ambassador to the DRV. While both sides profess a commitment to "neutrality", as enshrined in the Agreement, there are differences in their orientation. Most of these have produced moderate internal debate within the ministry. For example, the PL, as a high foreign ministry official (Vientiane-side) explained, insist that neutrality means that Laos should not participate in any regional organizations, while Vientiane-side officials believe that, although they must avoid involvement with military organizations such as SEATO, Laos should look positively toward regional economic organizations.

A more serious divergence on foreign policy emerged with the PL proposal for recognition of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in South Vietnam and its counterpart (GRUNK) in Cambodia. True neutrality, claimed the PL, would require Laos to recognize both sides in neighboring countries, rather than only the regimes in Saigon and Pnom Penh. PL members advanced this proposal zealously at Cabinet meetings, and were met with equally zealous resistance from the Vientiane side. Some Vientiane-side members charged that the PL were revealing their subservience to the North Vietnamese while the PL accused their opponents

* For example, Khampan Panya, former RLG Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the Soviet Union, has been named as the new Ambassador to the U.S.; Souk Oupravan, a former secretary of state in the Royal Lao Government, has been named Ambassador to India.
of being American lackeys. In view of the requirement for unanimity in
the Cabinet, and his own predisposition against recognition, Prime Minis­
ter Souvanna accepted a tabling of the issue. (There is no doubt that this
intense debate, along with a severe altercation over the future of the
National Assembly, contributed to Souvanna's heart attack, which occurred
the day following the bitter exchanges on these two issues.)

There is the least evidence of cooperation—indeed there is sharp
hostility—between the two sides within the Ministry of Defense. The PL
Secretary of State for Defense, Kham Ouane Boupha, had charged that the
right-wing Minister of Defense, Sisouk na Champassak, had, in violation
of the accords, denied him access to data concerning the Royal Lao Army,
which is being supported by the national budget. Sisouk acknowledges
this refusal but ripostes that there must be reciprocal exchange of
information. The PL do not permit access to their zone, nor do they pro­
vide information about their army. (Indeed, Sisouk notes, the PL forces
in Vientiane and Luang Prabang are well-lodged and fed from the national
budget, without the PL adding any resources to it.) Until there is
reciprocal exchange, Sisouk maintains, he will continue to withhold infor­
mation about FAR military affairs from PL representatives. The PL have
made Sisouk a major target of denunciation in their radio broadcasts,
charging him with plotting with Americans and Thai to subvert the Agree­
ment, and Sisouk, in turn, publicly and privately flays the Pathet Lao
as agents of North Vietnamese aggression.

PL Relationship with Souvanna

The Protocol and Agreement require that the PGNU (and NPCC) function
in all important matters on "the principle of unanimity of the two sides".
Despite apprehension that this provision would rapidly produce stalemate in the decision-making processes (a continuing possibility, of course), the coalition Cabinet has proceeded at a reasonable Lao pace, even though several controversial issues have strained the harmony. Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma has played a critical role in maintaining a suitable working relationship with the Cabinet. Souvanna has transformed his position from that of chief of the Vientiane side to that of a national leader "above" the partisan conflict of each faction, a role frequently labelled, in French, arbitre. In the case of hotly contested issues Souvanna has wielded his influence to bring about a resolution of the impasse. He has judged that it is important to keep the momentum of cooperation within the coalition, even if it means conceding certain arguments to the PL. This will inspire their confidence and bring them more rapidly into the national fold. In the disputes over the status of the National Assembly, for example, Souvanna adopted the position (with modifications) of the PL side, and persuaded his former Vientiane-side colleagues to accede. As right-wing Ngon Sananikone (brother of National Assembly President Phoui Sananikone) remained obdurate, Souvanna interpreted "unanimity of the two sides" as meaning substantial agreement within each side, rather than agreement from every minister on both sides. Such moves as these brought heavy criticism upon Souvanna from his former followers. Not only has Souvanna's shift deprived the Vientiane side of its most effective leader, Souvanna's critics complain, but he has been working against them. A number of right-wing officials in Vientiane protested, in interviews, that Souvanna "is not really un arbitre—he has been kicking the ball into our goal!".*

* Interviews by authors in Vientiane, July 10 and 11, 1974.
Souvanna has not resolved every impasse so clearly in favor of the PL as his critics contend. At times he has deployed his skills at political maneuver to achieve compromise, and, on issues he deems critical, he has challenged the PL position. In handling the PL-inspired 18-Point manifesto, for example, he countered its controversial call for support of all national liberation movements, by suggesting that this refers only to anti-colonial struggles, a position acceptable to the Vientiane side. Souvanna squarely opposed the PL resolution calling for recognition of the PRG and GRUNK, and the matter was tabled.

The PL, understandably, are silent about Souvanna’s role, but they seem to see him as a valuable, if not indispensable, leader of the PGNU at the current stage. The PL seemed genuinely concerned at Souvanna’s heart attack, and Prince Souphanouvong ordered a plane from Hanoi to fly him to Vientiane to be close to his half-brother. PL spokesmen in Vientiane muted their criticisms, during a time of national crisis. Their delegation requested medical assistance from socialist allies, and the U.S.S.R. responded with two doctors and China with three, to demonstrate symbolically their support for Souvanna Phouma and the coalition. (The total number of doctors looking after Souvanna Phouma peaked at seventeen: 7 Lao, 3 Thai, 1 U.S., 1 French, 2 Soviet, 3 Chinese.)

During Souvanna’s convalescence in France, expected to last at least from August 26 to late October, it has been announced that Phoumi Vongvichit will assume the role of Acting Prime Minister. One press account* reports that Souvanna made a secret agreement, during negotiations, to pass the post of Prime Minister to the PL in case of his own incapacitation, assuming at the time that his half-brother would be the Prime Minister.

Minister. The more likely explanation of Souvanna's choice is that, in Lao tradition, age gives preference in matters of succession, and Phoumi is older than Leum Insiengmay, his fellow Vice Premier on the Vientiane side. In any case, Leum retains some control since he must sign-off on all decisions and, of course, the principle of unanimity continues as a requirement. Even though Phoumi does not gain significant power by this appointment, he is clearly a source of prestige. The PL will be able to claim, in the likely probability that Phoumi serves responsibly, that their side has already demonstrated its talent for leading the nation.

The NPCC

Organizational Framework

To the astonishment of everyone outside Sam Neua, Prince Souphanouvong presented himself for the presidency of the National Political Consultative Council (NPCC), rather than for a post as minister and vice-premier in the Government. He had served as Vice Premier in the Tripartite Government of 1962, and he was expected in 1974 to position himself to succeed Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister. Only after his emotional welcome at the airport by his half-brother and wildly-cheered entry into Vientiane on April 3, 1974 was the decision publicly revealed.* Within two days the King formally invested a new Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU), the third and hopefully last coalition attempt, and a 42-man NPCC, after consulting the two princes in Luang Prabang.

* In our interview with him, Souphanouvong seemed amused by this unanimity of error in predicting his choice. "I would have known," he said. Since the Protocol provides for "two independent and equal organs", the PGNU and the NPCC, it was only normal that he should lead one, he observed. Interview with the author, July 23, 1974, Vientiane.
Here his political impact was extraordinary and full of surprises to the Vientiane side.

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, with advice from ministers on the Vientiane side, designated sixteen members of the Council, utilizing nine who were members of the National Assembly, which created a potential conflict of loyalties. Three-quarters of the sixteen council members designated by the PL* were lowland Lao, notwithstanding the customary PL emphasis on ethnic equality.** Only one member beside Souphanouvong was important enough to have served on the Central Committee of the Neo Lao

* Members chosen on the PL side include:

Prince Souphanouvong, President
Phagna Khamsouk Keola, Vice President and Secretary General
Maha Khamphan Virachit
Phao Phimpachang
Pao Vanthanouvong
Sanane Southichak
Visit Southivong
Lo Foung Pablia
Thammasing
Y Bottaphanith
Mrs. Phaiboung Pholsena
Thiep Litthideth
La Soukan
Souvandy
Mrs. Khamsouk Vongvichit
Maha Boutdi Soulingnasak

** Although four of the sixteen PL members are from ethnic minorities (Lo foung Pablia, who is Meo; Visit Southivong, Thiep Litthideth and La Soukan, who are Lao Theung), this number is considerably smaller, proportionally, than the minority population in the PL zone, which is probably well over 70% ethnic minorities. Two PL NECC members, in an interview, explained that the reason for the low highland minority representation within the PL delegation was their relative lack of education. Few of the Lao Theung and Lao Sung are sufficiently "évolués", they maintained, to serve as representatives in the Council in Luang Prabang. Interview with authors, July 16, 1974, Vientiane.

Prince Souphanouvong has explained this distribution as being due to the need for ethnic leaders to handle administrative tasks in the PL zone.

Interview with the authors, July 23, 1974, Vientiane.
Hak Xat in 1964. Others included members of the Patriotic Neutralists and the old Santiphab party of Quinim Pholsena. The "ten personalities approving peace, independence, neutrality and democracy to be chosen by the two sides" were selected by the PL from a list of candidates submitted by the Vientiane side, which had been chosen from an original list of 300 volunteers. One additional National Assembly member joined the NPCC through this route. The "qualified personalities" appear to be the least articulate and most feeble of the members.

The powerful Standing Committee of the NPCC is composed of ten members, five designated by each side. Souphanouvong and the "patriotic neutralist" Khamsouk Keola head the well-disciplined PL component. On the Vientiane side only four persons volunteered for this important post in addition to the designated Vice President, Prince Sisoumang Sisaleumsak. Three of these five committee members are native to Luang Prabang, and a fourth originated from a neighboring northern province. One Vientiane-side Member has ruefully opined that "No one from Luang Prabang will ever oppose his Highness" (Souphanouvong).

The Council is further organized, in accordance with the Protocol, into six committees, with the chairmen, who also serve on the Standing Committee, equally divided between the two sides. The six committees cover: 1) secretariat, 2) politics, laws and general elections, 3) economy and finance, 4) security and defense, 5) foreign affairs and foreign assistance, and 6) education and culture. The Protocol specifies that the NPCC shall meet for not more than a month, every six months (with the possibility of extraordinary sessions).

* Interview by authors, July 17, 1974, Vientiane.
The NPCC is designated by the Protocol as independent of and equal to the PGNU, and obligated to collaborate closely and regularly with it in the management of national affairs. The Vientiane Agreement gives the NPCC the responsibility "to discuss and present its views concerning the major questions of domestic and foreign policy to the PGNU," to promote and help them in the implementation of the Agreement. It will also "examine and adopt together the laws and regulations for the elections," and "join the PGNU in organizing general elections to set up the National Assembly and a definitive National Union Government." If the PGNU should object to any recommendations made by the NPCC, they must inform the Council and give "clear, sufficient and valid explanations." Concerning the general line and orientation of foreign and domestic policy there must be discussion with the Government and unanimous approval by the NPCC or its Standing Committee. The NPCC is guaranteed its own budget and traditional parliamentary immunities for its members.

PL Initiatives

With this amount of constitutional clay Prince Souphanouvong set to work in Luang Prabang to mount a quasi-legislative forum and convert the disorganized Vientiane members into prophets of a new political doctrine and era. Capitalizing on the princely vanity and social isolation of the Vientiane-side's Vice President* and the incohesiveness and even

* Prince Sisamong Sisaleumsak seems to have associated himself, at various times since 1945, with almost every political faction, and in 1974 could speak the most potent anti-colonialist (U.S.A.) rhetoric in an interview for Radio Sam Neua (May 27), while supporting Souvanna Phouma's position in another interview with the authors.
intellectual lassitude of its delegation,* the PL leader readily dominated the first month's session of the consultative Council, three weeks after the launching of the provisional government. After seeming ready to acquiesce to the re-opening of the National Assembly, in May, the PL element in the Government suddenly seized an opportunity to block it, and in July engineered a Government recommendation to the King that it be dissolved. The road to further development of Souphanouvong's NPCC into a national legislature was then barred only by constitutional discrepancies and the need for the King's consent.

The first step in this remarkable exploitation of the NPCC was the adoption of an organization and rules of procedure. In the first week, the PL delegation, which, unlike the others, regularly met before each day's work and never showed disagreements, took the initiative in securing the adoption of Souphanouvong's proposed rules. Souphanouvong also instituted non-partisan seating, which created a more collegial atmosphere. With the principle of unanimous decisions already specified by the Agreement and Protocol, the non-PL members of the Council did not much ponder the implication of procedures and did not want to appear as "reactionaries" at the very outset. The result has been a sort of "democratic centralism" on the banks of the Mekong.

At the third plenary session on May 10, 1974, Souphanouvong, with the way prepared, then launched his 18-point program "for the current construction of the fatherland" in a long address, garnished with anti-imperialist rhetoric. Within two weeks the various committees of the Council had discussed the points until unanimous approval was achieved,

* One active Councilor from the Vientiane side estimates that only ten of the non-PL members understand the issues with any thoroughness. Interview, July 17, 1974, Vientiane.
and the fourth plenary session unanimously adopted them after two hours, with one speech from each committee. Even the hard-bitten former FAR Chief-of-Staff, General Ouan Ratikon, expressed extravagant praise for what he termed a coherent program, unlike the past. In addition, before the NFCC adjourned, the Prince had pushed through in one session his "provisional regulations on guaranteeing the democratic freedoms of the Lao people" which were transmitted on June 1 for Government consideration. This move was authorized by Article 9 (B.) of the Protocol calling for amendment of the Law of 1957 to adapt it to "current realities", as a prelude to general elections.

Prince Souphanouvong, as President of the Council, has dominated its proceedings by force of his royal presence, his reformist reputation, his intellect, his organization and initiative, and his use of the rules. He is authorized to attend committee sessions to assist in the understanding of proposals. The discussions in committee have been described by a Vientiane-side member as uninhibited and intense, "even with severe criticisms,"* but if a committee member is "stubborn" the others repeat and explain until he understands what is correct. The substantive suggestions of a committee are submitted to the Standing Committee which seeks unanimous decisions in the Council. Questions may be re-submitted to a committee for re-consideration, and Souphanouvong himself may chair such sessions. He may also meet with committee members in his home, as he did concerning his proposed "Regulations of Democratic Freedoms."

The princely presence and his mastery of the subject matter are more than a little overwhelming, and even a modern, well-educated Council

* Interview, July 16, 1974, Vientiane.
member with the temerity to pose questions has allowed that the Prince "replied calmly, and was not at all annoyed."* The Prince himself attributes the achievement of unanimity on the "18 Points" to his own convincing explanations. In addition, dissenters have been more easily targeted because of Vientiane-side Vice President (Prince) Sisoumang's practice of reporting to the President on committee discussions in terms of specific individuals, rather than groups or parties, holding dissenting views. Sisoumang has also avoided the establishment of any staff or office for Vientiane-side members. Finally, even when Souvanna privately consulted with Councilors on weekends at his house in Luang Prabang his inclination was not to counsel a stand on issues in dispute.

Opinions differ on the actual substance of the 18 Points and the Democratic Freedoms, but no one pretends that any serious mischief has been done.** There is little for the right-wing to quarrel with in the 18 Points which Souphanouvong considered to be the necessary first step, an engineer's blueprint, in the politics of peace and national concord. They became controversial only in respect to the foreign policy section, calling for support to struggle movements for "peace, national independence, democracy and social progress" in Indochina and throughout the world, and to the extent that the NPCC propaganda teams began "explaining" the program in Luang Prabang and Vientiane before the Cabinet had approved or published it. The Foreign Minister was instructed

* Interview, July 17, 1974, Vientiane. The same source indicates that one PL Councilor, Sanane Soutichak, occasionally cues the Prince when he is straying from the proper subject.

** Defense Minister, Sisouk na Champassak dismisses them as "nothing," mere propaganda, but other Vientiane Government officials have found them quite acceptable. Interview, July 11, 1974, Vientiane.
to consider the NPCC edition of the program, which he had already sent to the overseas missions, as a study document only. Meanwhile a Cabinet committee undertook a 'systematic' review of the 18 Points with a few amendments or changes expected, such as excising references to "U.S. neo-colonialism" and "ultra-rightist reactionaries."

The twelve points outside the foreign policy area speak to the economic development and national unification of a poor agricultural society, and show scarcely a hint of socialism, aside from the rather conventional areas of state responsibility for infra-structure. The 18 Points, in their emphasis on equality of nationalities and the sexes, while promoting Lao nationhood and language, respecting and maintaining Buddhism, attacking vice, and supporting the kingdom, could easily have sprung from the pen of a western liberal. Technicians in the Ministry of Plan were eagerly awaiting official approval so that they could incorporate them in their work. The Democratic Freedoms are equally uplifting in tone, with the exception of a prior-censorship provision for newspapers and potential restrictions on political meetings and associations. The right of citizens to own private property is guaranteed, and freedom of enterprise "must be" guaranteed.

* Souphanouvong himself scoffs at the notion of socialism for his country, which he says is not ripe for such a system. Indeed, he labelled himself an eclectic in matters of economics, and the socialists, he contends, cannot tell him when Laos would be ripe. Interview, July 23, 1974, Vientiane.

In a 1967 interview with a Czech journalist, Prince Souphanouvong, responding to a question as to how he "became a member of the progressive movement," answered: "To begin with, there was a love for my country and a love for the people, and then it was quite easy. The struggle had begun for our national independence—the struggle against the Japanese and French occupation: the struggle for a better life for our people—and in the end this took me to Marxism, to communism."

The major controversy surrounding the NPCC, however, has not been the substance of its first month's plenary session so much as its place in the constitutional firmament. No sooner had it adjourned than seven joint four-man propaganda teams of its members set out to begin educating the people and state and organizational officials concerning the 18 Points in whatever meetings they could organize in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. They were seconded at times by Pathet Lao members of the Joint Police, or JCIA, but occasionally these unsolicited visits to homes, schools or organizations provoked resentment, and increasingly the visitors were asked about the presence of North Vietnamese troops in Laos after the June 4 deadline for withdrawal. As mentioned above, the Government, meanwhile, had not even completed its review or approval of the Program.

A related question is whether the NPCC will totally supplant the National Assembly, as the PL have desired from the start. When National Assembly President Phou Si Sananikone imprudently sent a letter to the Cabinet for transmittal to the King in early May, requesting his traditional presence at the reopening of the National Assembly, the PL seized the opportunity to block any forwarding of the request under the unanimity rule. Faced with strident opposition, the Prime Minister acquiesced, and the National Assembly remained in recess. Prior to the Cabinet's receipt of the request, the PL in Vientiane and Luang Prabang seemed to have had no interference in mind, which prompts some observers to see the latent hand of Sam Neua coming into play.

Subsequently, a second "false move" by the dormant National Assembly prompted Souvanna and the PL to initiate its actual dissolution. When a group of seven Assemblymen in July 1974 offered a petition against
the continuing presence of North Vietnamese troops in Laos, to be signed by all comers in the National Assembly building, the Prime Minister sought to abort controversy by cordoning off the grounds at dawn with patrols of Joint Police. The blockade did not wholly succeed, however, and after one day of smoldering vocal confrontation between a few Assemblymen and youthful critics, Souvanna obtained Cabinet agreement to ask the King to dissolve the National Assembly. This avoided an issue looming down the road on whether to budget salaries for the Assembly. Ngon Sananikone, the Minister of Finance, reportedly considered the decision less than unanimous, however, and the King and his Council are still pondering the request. Since the Constitution calls for new elections of a National Assembly within 90 days of dissolution, and since the PL is unwilling to have elections at this time, a serious constitutional tangle presents itself, which has been skirted since negotiations began in 1972, but which has finally reached the royal palace.

Meanwhile the NPCC's Standing Committee is charged by its President with translating the broad lines of the "18 Point Program into specific policies for each ministry. The National Assembly was not in a position to approve a budget at the outset of the fiscal year, beginning July 1, which put the Government in an ambiguous constitutional situation. Off in Luang Prabang, Prince Souphanouvong argues that one should first lay down the grand lines of policy, and budgetary questions follow naturally as matters of detail. The PL ministers in Vientiane are probably acquiring a somewhat different perspective, however, as they confront the fiscal constraints and limited resources of departmental planning. The Prince rather testily asserted, "It is I who decides,"* when asked how soon

* Interview with authors, July 23, 1974, Vientiane.