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Short-Term Prospects for Laos

Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

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SHORT-TERM PROSPECTS FOR LAOS

SCOPE NOTE

Laos continues to lie as a secondary theater in the shadow of Vietnam. This estimate surveys the local Lao scene and evaluates the prospects for serious trouble arising from local political or military developments during the next few months. Extension of major ground operations of the Vietnam conflict into Lao territory would, of course, create a fundamentally new situation.

SUMMARY

A. During the next month or so, the formation of a new government will create a period of some tension in Vientiane and will present problems in relations with the Pathet Lao (PL). Although the PL will launch propaganda attacks on any new arrangements made as a result of the recent elections, we believe the chances are better than even that they will not set up a rival government. Considering the characteristic volatility of Lao politics, a coup is an ever-present possibility, but we see no major threat at this time to Souvanna's continuance in office.

B. Whereas we are fairly confident in our judgment that the Communists probably do not intend to *initiate* any major military action in Laos in the next few months, we are certain that they would *react* vigorously to any offensive in Laos which they felt seriously threatened the infiltration route to the Viet Cong or moved into the territories bordering on the DRV and Communist China. Despite some improvement in the Lao army in the past year or so, we believe that any major Lao offensive into these sensitive areas would be repulsed with great damage and a severe setback to general military morale.

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I. POLITICAL SITUATION AND PROSPECTS

1. In 1962, the neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma was made premier of the tripartite regime established as a result of the 14-nation conference at Geneva. Two deputy premiers, Prince Souphanouvong and Phoumi Nosavan, represented the pro-Communist and rightist factions respectively. Pro-Communist participation in the government practically ended in the spring of 1963 when Prince Souphanouvong and one of the PL ministers left Vientiane for Communist territory. Although some cabinet posts are still held open for the pro-Communists, the government has since been in effect a neutralist-rightist coalition, with rightist influence growing. Souvanna himself has become increasingly anti-Communist.

2. The flight of Phoumi Nosavan from Laos after his attempted coup last February eliminated one important source of political instability and strengthened Souvanna Phouma's position. Souvanna has some degree of backing from most of the non-Communist political factions in Laos. The King has supported him increasingly, and even such powerful conservatives as the Sananikone family, whose position was also strengthened by Phoumi's departure, have been generally content to work with him as premier. Most Lao politicians consider it useful to continue him in office because he symbolizes the Geneva legitimacy of the Lao Government (RLG). Nevertheless, dissensions among military leaders, although more related to rivalries between the general staff and the field officers than to Souvanna's role, could erupt in a manner that would threaten or destroy stability.

3. Although Souvanna keeps tight control of foreign affairs and has increased his command of the sources of power in the government (patronage and money), he has tended to leave a large part of the everyday management of government affairs to others. A number of relatively young civil servants and junior cabinet officers have recently come into prominence, of whom the most important is Sisouk na Champassak. By Lao standards they are a hard-working and generally honest group. A few have already been accused of lining their pockets, however, and we cannot be confident that increased authority or frustration will not incline them toward the corrupt ways of their elders. Souvanna has been promoting the cause of Sisouk in a way that indicates he sees him as a possible successor to the premiership, but, as Sisouk himself recognizes, he has not yet acquired the necessary maturity and prestige for that difficult job.

4. The approach of the National Assembly elections of 15 July stimulated some uncertainty and considerable activity, including threats and bribery, among the various factions, for whom seats in this largely rubber-stamp body represent at least accretions of prestige and political influence. The electorate, restricted to about 20,000 military officers, government functionaries, and teachers returned an Assembly generally younger and more energetic and capable than its predecessor and one accordingly that is likely to seek a more active role in the government.

5. The outcome of the election was favorable for the preservation of stability. No group won such complete dominance that others would feel driven to overthrow it, and no group was so badly defeated that it would feel a coup was required for self-preservation. On the whole, the chief gainers were the "Young Nationalists," who line up with Sisouk na Champassak. Since the election enough of the successful candidates have gravitated to Sisouk to give him a majority, which he can be expected to use in support of Souvanna. The chief losers were the Sananikone family, but even they won about 10 of the 59 seats. The leading Sananikones, former Premier Phoui, and his nephew, General Kouprasith, commander of the military region which includes Vientiane, have both expressed satisfaction with the outcome.

6. During the election campaign, rumors of coups were rife in Vientiane. Advance knowledge of what was perhaps the most serious coup threat—arising from rivalries and antagonisms within the armed forces—enabled US officials to persuade the leaders that such a move would be unwise. There will always be a threat to stability, however, as long as command relationships remain in contention and distrust persists among the military leaders, particularly between Vientiane and the field commanders. However, we believe the chances are better than even that the legal government will survive these dangers and that Souvanna will continue as premier.

7. The ambitious General Phoumi, now in exile in Thailand, poses little present threat. Although he still retains some following, particularly among middle ranks in the military, he has little chance of recouping his position as long as the present balance prevails in Laos. His diminished standing with the Thai was further lowered by his ill advised play for power early this year; the Thai leaders are willing to let him remain in Thailand as a refugee, but they almost certainly have no intention of backing Phoumi in an attempt to return to power. Although the Thai leaders do not much care for some of the present Lao leaders, they are willing to accept them or any other non-leftist group that appears able to provide a modicum of stability in a non-Communist Laos. Phoumi would remain available for the Thai to back should the situation in Vientiane collapse into chaos.

II. MILITARY SITUATION AND PROSPECTS

8. At present the Lao Government forces (FAR) have about 54,000 men (including about 1,000 in the Air Force and 450 in the River Flotilla). The Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF), under the leadership of General Ma, has available about 45 propeller-driven fighter-bombers (T-28s), and its pilots have shown commendable courage and skill in close air support action and in harassing enemy movements and supply. Last summer's successful clearing operation around the junction of routes 7 and 13, this spring's successful defense of Dong Hene against an attack by North Vietnamese troops, the absence of a Communist offensive before this year's monsoon, and, perhaps most important, the increased ground attack capability of the RLAF (plus US air action in Laos)

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have combined to give the FAR improved morale and confidence. FAR capabilities are probably the best they have been, but this still leaves it as a third-rate fighting force with little capability against determined opposition.

9. A significant element on the anti-Communist side is the large number of tribal irregulars who continue to put up vigorous defense of their mountain-top home areas and have provided some effective harassment of enemy supply lines. The neutralist forces commanded by General Kong Le should also be counted on the anti-Communist side, but these largely demoralized 8,000 or so men have a very limited military capability.

10. The Communist forces in Laos are estimated to include about 22,000-25,000 Pathet Lao (PL) and about 9,000 North Vietnamese troops (PAVN), of which about 2,000 are encadred in PL forces.¹ There are also about 2,600 rather ineffectual dissident neutralists under the commands of Colonel Deuane and General Khamouane Boupha. The Denanists, like their counterparts under Kong Le, are of wavering loyalty, even though encadred with PL. It is unlikely that there are any organized Chinese military units in Laos, although detachments of armed guards have probably at times accompanied Chinese road-building crews and supply convoys in Phong Saly and Nam Tha provinces.

11. The Communist forces—particularly the PAVN—are generally more effective than the non-Communist Lao forces and retain the capability of rapidly seizing such exposed places as Thakhek or Luang Prabang. The interior southern towns of Saravane and Attopen are especially vulnerable to Communist attack and could be seized by small forces. They could not overrun FAR-held territory quite so swiftly and easily as they might have in the past, however, because of the improvement of the FAR and especially because of the effect of air attacks on their forces and supply lines. Seizure of Vientiane, Pakse, or Savannakhet would almost certainly require the introduction of substantial additional PAVN forces.

12. The Communists give no sign of wanting to stir up the military situation in Laos. They already control those parts of Laos which are most important to them: the areas adjacent to China and North Vietnam and the part of the panhandle used as a supply and infiltration route into South Vietnam. Not since 1962 have they moved to take an important town from the FAR, and this year they have even passed up the usual pre-monsoon offensive against the neutralists. They have conducted some fairly vigorous clearing actions against the anti-Communist irregulars along their supply lines in Sam Neua province, and they are currently increasing pressure on the anti-Communist irregulars in the region where Luang Prabang, Phong Saly, and Nam Tha provinces come together. These efforts have resulted in some improvement of the security of

¹ In past summers, Hanoi has substantially reduced PAVN forces in Laos to lessen the monsoon supply problem, and it may have done so this year. The 9,000 figure does not take into account this possible reduction; neither does it take into account PAVN troops in transit through Laos into Vietnam.

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their supply lines, but much of the rugged country outside the roads and strong points remains in the hands of the tribal irregulars. The results have shown that Communists also find it difficult and costly to suppress guerrillas. In addition, air action has complicated their supply problem and lowered morale.

13. Whereas we are fairly confident in our judgment that the Communists probably do not intend to *initiate* any major military action in Laos in the next few months, we are certain that they would *react* vigorously to any offensive in Laos which they felt seriously threatened the infiltration route to the Viet Cong or moved into the territories bordering on the DRV and Communist China. Any FAR offensive into these sensitive areas would be repulsed with great damage to the FAR forces involved and a severe setback to general FAR morale.

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