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OBITUARY: PHOUMI VONGVICHIT (1909-1994)

by

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Phoumi Vongvichit died on 7 January 1994, from coronary heart disease, just short of his eighty-fifth birthday. In the revolutionary movement in Laos (the Pathet Lao), Phoumi's stature was comparable with its other leading personalities - Kaysone Phomvihane, Nouhak Phoumsavanh, and Souphanouvong, behind whom he consistently ranked in the Politburo of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP).

Tall, patrician, intellectual, Phoumi had none of the air of a veteran revolutionary. To those who met him after 1975, he seemed courteous, rather aloof, yet he had been a tough negotiator for the Pathet Lao, and even his political enemies recognized his qualities. He was, above all, a Lao nationalist. His deep interest in and knowledge of Lao history made him acutely aware of the tenuous nature of Lao independence, and of the need to strengthen Lao national culture and identity. Despite the political alliance of the Pathet Lao with the Vietnamese communist movement, Phoumi believed that neither Thai nor Vietnamese should be permitted to exercise too much influence in Lao affairs.

Phoumi Vongvichit was born on 6 April 1909 at Xieng Khouang, the son of a civil servant in the French administration. He was educated in Vientiane, after which he too joined the colonial civil service. After postings in Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang, he was promoted to the grade of *chao lili lallig* and served in Xieng Khouang (1939) and Vientiane (1940-1945). In January 1945 he was appointed *Chao KJ1011eng* of Houaphan province where he remained until the Japanese surrender in August 1945. The following month, Phoumi cooperated with Free French forces when they briefly seized Sam Neua town, but subsequently he joined the Lao Issara (Free Laos) movement and worked closely with the Viet Minh to oppose the return of the French.

In 1946, after French forces had re-occupied Laos, Phoumi made his way to northern Thailand where for the next three years he was active in the Lao Issara. At the end of 1949, having refused to accept the offer of amnesty upon dissolution of the Lao Issara government-in-exile in Thailand, Phoumi was one of the handful of Lao who joined Souphanouvong in northern Vietnam. There he attended the founding congress of the Neo Lao Issara (the Free Laos Front). Phoumi was nominated both Secretary-General of the Front, and Minister of the Interior and Deputy Prime Minister in the Pathet Lao Resistance government that the Front established in opposition to the Royal Lao government in Vientiane. The Resistance government gained no international recognition, but Phoumi nominally retained both positions until the Geneva Agreements of 1954 brought the First Indochina War to an end.

In 1954 and 1955, Phoumi led Pathet Lao delegations in negotiations with the Royal Lao government over reintegration of the provinces of Phong Saly and Houaphan. In March 1955, Phoumi was one of the founding members of the Lao People's Party and was elected to its Political Bureau. The following January he was elected to the Central Committee of the Lao Patriotic Front (Neo Lao Hak Xat). In 1956, Phoumi continued to be involved in negotiations over integration which eventuated in the signing of a series of agreements, known as the Vientiane Agreements, the following year. These opened the way for formation of the First Coalition government in which Phoumi served as Minister of Religion and Fine Arts. (The other Pathet Lao minister was Souphanouvong at the Ministry of Economy and Plan.) From this time, Phoumi took a lively interest in the Buddhist *Sangha* (the monastic order), recognizing its potential as a propaganda organ for opposition to the Americanization of Lao society, but also as a vehicle for the propagation of Lao cultural values.

In the supplementary elections of May 1958, Phoumi was elected Deputy from Luang Prabang in the National Assembly. In the political crisis that followed the electoral success of the left, Phoumi lost his ministry. In July 1959 he was arrested along with other Pathet Lao deputies, and imprisoned without ever being brought to trial. In May 1960 he escaped with other leading Pathet Lao prisoners and their guards, and made the long march to the Pathet Lao zone in Xieng Khouang.

After the Battle of Vientiane in December 1960 and the subsequent retreat of Neutralist forces to the Plain of Jars, Phoumi was instrumental in arranging for Pathet Lao-Neutralist collaboration. He led the Pathet Lao delegation to the Geneva Conference on the neutrality of Laos in 1962, and served as Minister of Information, Propaganda and Tourism in the Second Coalition government. In 1964, after a series of political assassinations, Phoumi left Vientiane with other Pathet Lao ministers.

By this time Laos had been dragged into the Second Indochina War between the United States and North Vietnam. For the next ten years, Phoumi alternated between living in the limestone caverns of Vieng Xai and leading various Pathet Lao delegations to international communist gatherings. He retained his positions in both the Politburo and the Lao Patriotic Front, and took a leading role in negotiations leading to formation of the Third Coalition government in 1974, in which he served as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

After formation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in December 1975, Phoumi was named Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education, Sport and Religious Affairs. In the reorganization that followed the Third Congress of the LPRP in 1982, Phoumi became a member of the Inner Cabinet with overall responsibility for education, information and culture. In 1986, when Souphanouvong was forced to step down from the Presidency for reasons of health, Phoumi was named Acting President of the LPDR and Chairman of the Lao Front for National Construction. He retired from the Acting Presidency and the Politburo at the Fifth Party Congress in March 1991.

In December last year, just a month before Phoumi's death, I was in Vientiane for the First International Colloquium on Lao Studies, and asked Dr. Mayoury Ngoosyvothn to arrange on interview with Phoumi Vongvichit. I had first met him as a young journalist at Khong Khay on the Plain of Jars in 1964. I again met him in 1985 and 1990. The interview took place in his residence on the road to Chinaimo. Phoumi welcomed us to his specious, formally arranged living room where we sat before the obligatory soft drinks. He was a little more stooped than I remembered him, a little greyer,

and spoke a little more slowly, but he was still mentally alert and interested in what we had to say.

We began by talking about history, which has always been one of Phoumi's great interests. He told us that he had just completed a history of the Lao communist movement, and was about to begin a new project close to his heart - a history of the Phuan kingdom of Xieng Khouang. The history of the communist movement will be an important contribution to Lao historiography, by someone who was close to the centre of the movement from its inception. But we will have to wait to see if Phoumi reveals any detailed inside information.

. As the member of the Politburo charged with overseeing education, information and culture, Phoumi was responsible for bringing together a group of Lao historians to write an official three volume history of Laos. Although all three volumes have been written, at least in draft, only the third has as yet been published. This covers the modern history of Laos from the arrival of the French in 1893 to the present. The first and second volumes cover respectively the period before and after the founding of the Kingdom of Lan Xang by Fa Ngum in the mid-fourteenth century.

So why have the first two volumes not been published? The answer says much about Phoumi Vongvichit and the exercise of power in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The first two volumes have not been published because Phoumi was not satisfied with them, and refused to give them his stamp of approval. He apparently had his own ideas about the vexed question of the origin of the Lao people, where they had come from and when, and wanted more research done. Also there were problems about how to deal with the history of the Kingdom of Lan Xang from a Marxist perspective, and about the historic relations between Laos and neighbouring states.

History in Laos today is a highly political endeavour, which requires the approval of the Party. No history could be published during the 1980s without the agreement of Phoumi himself. Still no debate is possible between Lao historians. Much of what happened in the past, especially relations between the Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese during the "thirty-years struggle" from 1945 to 1975, is still considered too sensitive to reveal, even though the Vietnamese themselves have revealed the extent to which the Pathet Lao were dependent on

Vietnamese advice and support. Recently published memoirs by both Phoumi himself and by Singkapo Sikhotchounamaly have been criticized for this reason. They reveal too much that the regime still believes should be kept secret.

The other subject that Phoumi was eager to discuss with Dr Mayoury and myself was the future of Lao culture and the moral state of Lao youth today, which caused him much concern. I asked him how he felt about the new Mitthaphap bridge across the Mekong. It was not the bridge *per se* he was worried about, however, but the influence of Thailand in a much broader sense. The Thai economic stake in Laos is large and growing, and so is Thai cultural influence in general.

Phoumi expressed concern over the transmission over Thai television of values that were harmful to Lao youth. He was particularly worried about the effect the culture of consumption and sexual permissiveness was having on young Lao, whom he saw as lacking in discipline and commitment to the country. Time and again in our discussion Phoumi referred to the alternative values taught by Buddhism, stressing the need for young Lao to take to heart the Buddha's message of self-control and mental discipline.

These were themes Phoumi had sounded before. On a couple of occasions in the year before he died, Phoumi spoke out on the need to instil a revolutionary morality in Lao youth, especially in the sons of the Party elite. I was told when I was in Vientiane that the Party had provided funds for certain Buddhist monasteries to teach courses in Buddhist ethics for members of the Lao People's Revolutionary Youth.

For some it may seem ironical that a veteran revolutionary Marxist like Phoumi should have come to realize the importance of Buddhism. But Marxism has never been so deeply rooted in Laos, even among senior cadres of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. There have been no Lao Marxist intellectuals. Nationalism was always a stronger motivating force than Marxism.

It was as a Lao nationalist that Phoumi Vongvichit turned to Buddhism as a source of Lao cultural values - just as Kaysone turned to Buddhism for personal consolation in the last year of his life. He was the first member of the Politburo regularly

to attend Buddhist ceremonies in the early years of the regime, and he would have pleased to hear himself praised in the eulogy in his honour for having "made an important contribution to the preservation of the faith in Buddhism".

So how will history judge Phoumi Vongvichit, he who was so fascinated by history? His own writings, including his autobiography, provide better sources for an evaluation than are available for any other leading figure in the present regime. However he is judged, as patriot or villain, his place in Lao history is assured. Committed to the end, Phoumi Vongvichit served as a model for Party cadres. His wisdom and loyalty will be missed by the Party and movement to which he dedicated his life.

BOOK REVIEWS:

Back Fire: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the War in Vietnam, Warner, R. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995)

The author, Roger Warner, has lived and worked as a reporter in Southeast Asia for many years. Warner's first attempt to go to Laos was in the early 1980's as a journalist but was denied permission to travel outside Vientiane, the capital city. This was not surprising because during that time, Laos was not yet open to Western visitors, let alone an American journalist. For this book, he has relied on closed CIA files, but most of his information comes from about 150 interviews with retired CIA officers, USAID and State Department veterans, US Air Force pilots and scholars, American civilian pilots and Laotian refugees. The book covers the period extending from 1960 to 1975 when the Indochina war officially ended.

Warner's writing style makes the book interesting to read: semi-documentary and semi-dramatic. He achieves this by highlighting the chronological and significant events and linking them with "key players" or "key characters" of the so-called "American secret war". Warner has also attempted to bring the culture of Laos into the whole picture, which is appropriate and obviously adds flavour to the story. However, "culture" is an extremely sensitive subject and open to much debate. I will comment later on some of the issues involved in "Lao culture" as seen by Americans who used to live and work in Laos during the Vietnam war.

Briefly, the book depicts the US involvement in the war in Laos which, due to the Geneva Accords, was kept as a secret war but gradually came into the open. When the war in Laos became known to the outside world in the early 1970's, Laos had already been bombed for five and a half years by US Air Force - 440,000 tonnes of munitions were dropped in one particular year which was nearly twice the amount dropped on South Vietnam and twenty five times the power of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. "It was impossible to imagine" was Warner's own words. A Lao was quoted asking "who was bombing us? and why?". And perhaps, a more pervasive question that ran across the mind the majority of Laotian people would be "whose war? and why?". Was it a war for America with its military involvement in South Vietnam or was it for Laos?

The book provides significant jigsaw pieces of the war in Laos - the secret war, the CIA, the invasion of Laos by North Vietnam, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the internal division of the Lao politicians, corruption and power. And most interestingly, the war was not known by civilian ambassadors because there was not supposed to be foreign military involvement in Laos due to the Geneva Accords. Therefore, a combination of politics, international diplomacy had to be used. The book also highlights prominent key players such as CIA officials, Prince Souvanna Phouma and his half brother Prince Souphanouvong, General Vong Pao (the leader of an army of tribal Hmong) and some prominent Lao senior army officers. Two significant coups led by Kong Le (1960) and Phoumi Noanvong (1963) were also discussed, but no mention was made of the hundreds of lives lost during the fighting in these coups.