



## The Road to Phnom Penh: Cambodia Takes up the Gun

**O**N MARCH 18, AN AMERICAN-backed military coup overthrew the neutralist government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, forcing the Cambodian left into all-out insurgency and providing American counterinsurgents with yet another Vietnam. First South Vietnam; then Laos; now Cambodia—American power has finally toppled the last domino in Indochina into communist revolution.

For over a decade, the United States had tried to unseat Sihanouk and replace him with a right-wing regime. Though a conservative in domestic policies, Sihanouk jealously guarded his country's independence, knowing that entangling alliances could only lead Cambodia straight into the Indochina war, and from there into a full-scale revolution of her own. He also knew that if Cambodia ever became a junior partner in America's Asian alliances, she would open herself to the territorial expansion of her traditional enemies, the Thais and the South Vietnamese.

He was right. General Lon Nol, Cambodia's new ruler, has abandoned neutrality. South Vietnam's General Thieu has agreed to occupy Cambodia, defending Lon Nol from the Cambodian people, at least until a successful Cambodianization of the war permits the withdrawal of South Vietnamese combat troops. The Thais have volunteered military aid and their own combat troops. And the Americans, striking from air and land, are turning Cambodia into the newest battlefield in an unending war.

Sihanouk, meanwhile, is now chief of his country's revolutionary movement. "America attracts communism," the former neutralist once explained, "like sugar attracts ants."

Sihanouk first became King of Cambodia in 1941, appointed by the Vichy French, who from the outset of World War II administered the country on behalf of the Japanese. In early 1945, after Vichy fell to the Allies, the Japanese seized direct control of Indochina, made the right-wing collaborator Son Ngoc Thanh premier, and pushed Sihanouk to declare Cambodia independent of French rule. Following the defeat of Japan in World War II, the French returned, jailing Son Ngoc Thanh and forcing Sihanouk to make Cambodia "an autonomous state within the French

Union." This effectively reestablished French military and economic control, and gave the French the use of Cambodia and Cambodian troops in their campaign to regain control of Vietnam from the Viet Minh.

In reaction to the French takeover, many of Son Ngoc Thanh's followers fled to Thailand, where they organized a Cambodian independence movement. The new group, the Khmer Issarak, covered the political spectrum from right-wing nationalists to communists, and included ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia. By 1953, the anti-French Khmer Issarak, working closely with the Viet Minh, controlled three-fifths of Cambodia.

**S**IHANOUK, HIS NATIONALIST credentials now in question, began his own "royal crusade for independence." Capitalizing on French fear of the Khmer Serai and the Viet Minh, he skillfully maneuvered the French to back his crusade and, in October 1953, declared the independence of Cambodia.

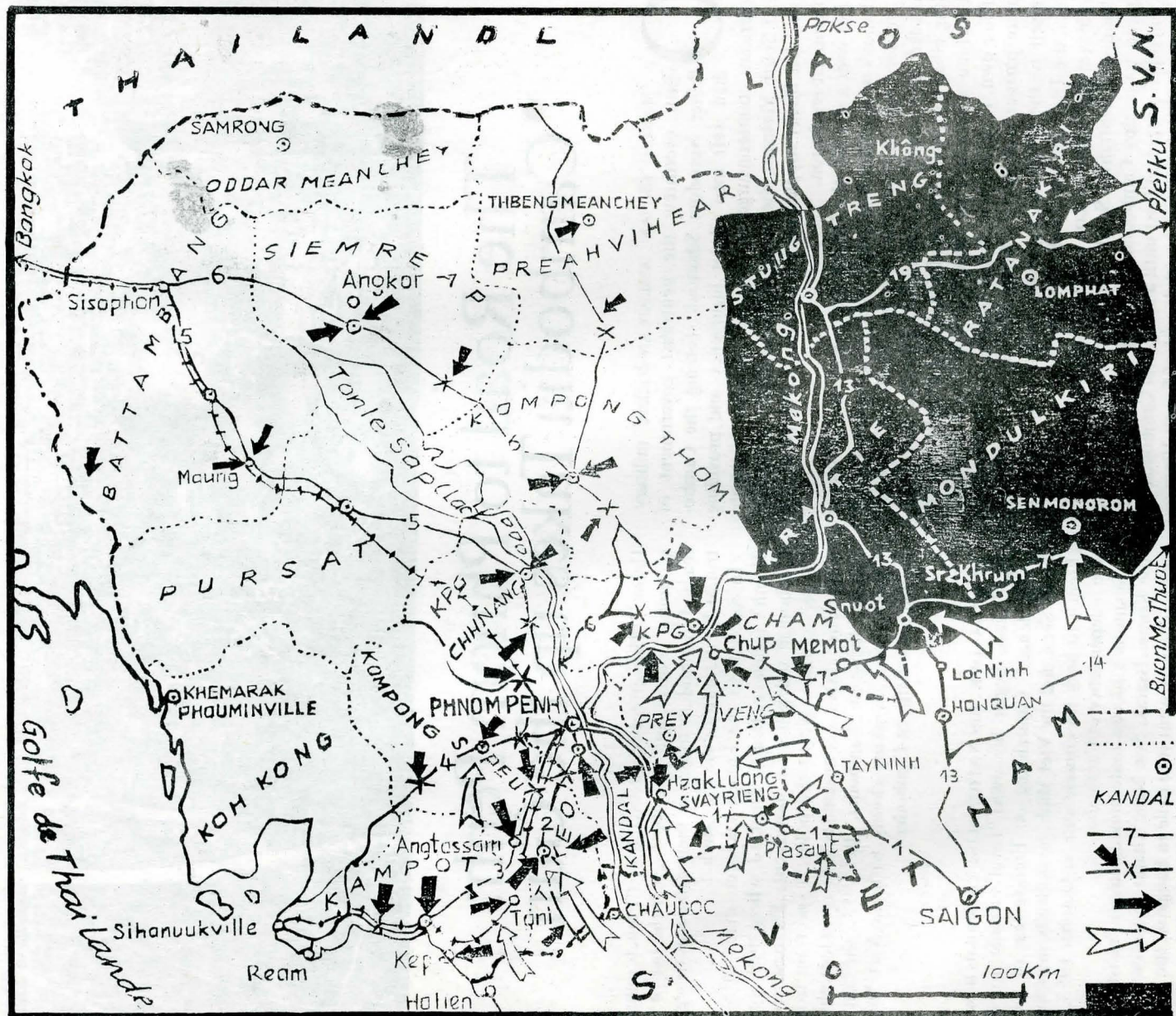
Sihanouk's success undermined the nationalist position of the Khmer Issarak. Son Ngoc Thanh and a few of his right-wing followers went into exile in Bangkok; the great majority of the Khmer Issarak, including the left, accepted Sihanouk's offer of amnesty and laid down their arms.

Sihanouk then set out to govern Cambodia in classic fashion: balancing right against left, class against class, while maintaining his own position as the indispensable man-in-the-middle. He permitted the communist Pracheachon Party to operate openly. But, stepping down from the throne, he actively campaigned for his own "Buddhist Socialist" Party, the Sangkum, helping it establish exclusive control of the National Assembly. He surrounded himself, both in the Sangkum and in his cabinets, with representatives of the entire span of Cambodian political life, including veterans of the Khmer Issarak. Yet he ran the government as a one-man show, single-handedly making decisions on even the most trivial matters.

Economically, Sihanouk practiced a kind of top-down socialism. But, rather than promoting growth, the profits of

by Banning Garrett







state-owned enterprises often ended up in the pockets of Sihanouk's palace cronies. He spoke of industrializing Cambodia, but he was unwilling, probably unable, to attack the large Khmer landowners or the ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese merchants. Balancing in this way, Sihanouk never had any real possibility of moving Cambodia from its subsistence rice economy into the world of modern production. In fact, his methods almost guaranteed the deterioration of economic conditions which contributed heavily to his downfall.

Sihanouk's "socialism" did have its positive effects. The bouncy Prince spent much of his time touring the countryside, inspecting and applauding the installation of mechanical pumps, new dams and canals, and encouraging the creation of agricultural cooperatives and the participation of villagers in voluntary labor schemes to build the many new facilities. In return, the peasants remained loyal to the throne, providing a base of support on which Sihanouk can still depend.

Sihanouk performed his greatest balancing acts, however, when trying to preserve his country's peace and neutrality in the face of America's escalating war in Vietnam. For a time he accepted economic and military aid from America—nearly 400 million dollars—which went to subsidize Cambodian imports, fund AID "development" programs, and provide equipment and training for the military. But the Prince also consciously sought aid from other major countries, both communist and non-communist, and steadfastly refused to join the anti-communist SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization). He allied with China, but kept sufficient independence so that he was able to cool relations in 1967 when China's Cultural Revolution spread to the youth of Phnom Penh's large Chinese community. He gave the North Vietnamese and NLF free use of Cambodia's border areas, but only in return for their pledge to stay out of his country's internal affairs.

**S**IHANOUK'S BALANCING ACT simply could not last, however. The war in Vietnam escalated, Cambodia's economy deteriorated, and the man-in-the-middle found it increasingly difficult to play off contending political forces.

From the left, the communist Khmer Rouge began to gain strength. Back in the spring of 1967 a left-wing rebellion broke out in Battambang Province, an area of right-wing terrorism and increasing pressure on the peasants by the landholding elite, government officials and the army. This rebellion marked the Cambodian left's first important military action since they fought with the Viet Minh against the French. Following the Battambang action, several former leaders of the anti-French fight emerged in the leadership of new guerrilla bands.

In response, General Lon Nol, a former Army chief whom Sihanouk had kicked upstairs to the post of Prime Minister, used the Prince's absence from the country to send the army on a search-and-destroy mission against the Khmer Rouge. Sihanouk returned and fired Lon Nol. But to keep things in balance he attacked three National Assemblymen as communist conspirators. The three—Hu Nim, Khieu Samphan and Hou Youn—fled from the capital and went to join the Khmer Rouge. In this incident, Sihanouk managed to

emerge once again the strong man in the center, but he paid a high price—the beginning of a real communist insurgency in Cambodia.

From that time on, the Khmer Rouge launched guerrilla attacks in most parts of the country. Last fall, T. D. Allman, writing in the authoritative *Far Eastern Economic Review*, reported that there were perhaps 3000 Khmer Rouge operating in the countryside, plus a network in the urban centers. Along with peasants, the guerrilla groups included "students, teachers and former French-trained government officers, largely expelled from Phnom Penh in 1967." They were led by Hou Youn and were active, Allman reported, in 15 out of the 19 Cambodian provinces.

The program of the Khmer Rouge was particularly interesting in light of more recent events. Their statements strongly condemned Lon Nol and criticized the army, police extortion and government corruption. Invariably, Lon Nol and his friends were referred to as "American stooges," a distinction the Khmer Rouge never attributed to Sihanouk.

During this same period, another insurgent group emerged, the Khmer Loeu. Hill tribesmen, numbering at most 60,000, the Khmer Loeu live in the remote province of Rattanakiri on the northeast border where Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam meet. This area, formerly Laotian, has never been under actual Phnom Penh control, and neither the Laotians nor the South Vietnamese have been willing to recognize Cambodia's claim to it. In order to establish their control, Cambodian officials began in 1959 to move ethnic Khmers into the province. The government also tried to relocate the Khmer Loeu into "strategic hamlets" and Cambodianize them, and to parcel out land—through which the Khmer Loeu previously had wandered freely—to Cambodian "colonists" from the lowlands. For more than a thousand years, the hill tribesmen of Southeast Asia have been retreating to more unfavorable land in the face of the advance of the more aggressive Chinese, Vietnamese, Lao, Siamese and Burmese. The Khmer Loeu, like so many of the other minority tribes of the area, were at the end of the road.

In 1968, the Khmer Loeu rebelled. Deserting their villages and moving into the forest, they organized and armed, apparently with the aid of about 50 NLF cadre who speak their language. Their battle, at first simply defensive, was soon to merge with the Indochinese revolution.

Though growing in strength, the Khmer Rouge and Khmer Loeu did not yet pose an immediate revolutionary threat to the government. But their insurgency further polarized the forces which Sihanouk was trying to contain.

The danger from the right was more immediate. Ever since 1958, when the United States grew tired of Sihanouk's neutralism, the CIA had financed and trained the Khmer Serai, a right-wing remnant of the old Khmer Issarak still under the leadership of Son Ngoc Thanh.

In 1959 the Khmer Serai, together with the Thai and South Vietnamese governments, tried unsuccessfully to overthrow Sihanouk. By November 1963 their continued efforts finally led Sihanouk, at great cost to the Cambodian government, to cut off all American foreign aid. In 1966 the Khmer Serai actually declared war on Cambodia, claiming responsibility for incursions across the border. Shortly



before the present coup, they infiltrated the regular Cambodian army to act as a Trojan horse for the CIA.

At the same time, the CIA recruited mercenaries from South Vietnam's million-strong Cambodian minority to fight alongside the Khmer Serai. These mercenaries, the Khmer Krom of Kampuchea (KKK), are extraordinarily vicious. "You know," one of them told J. C. Pomonti of *Le Monde*, "the KKK love to eat the flesh of the Vietnamese. Especially the liver. The liver, that's the best."

**I**NCREASINGLY PRESSED from both left and right, Sihanouk found less and less room in which to maneuver. The aristocracy, the merchants and the army were all angered because they had lost their traditional share of the financial action; students unable to find jobs and civil servants and intellectuals felt powerless; everyone resented the inefficiency of his one-man rule. Sihanouk's economic schemes, inadequate on paper, were further hampered by his unwillingness to delegate authority and to operate in a consistent fashion. He tried to make too many and too trivial decisions, and his over-all plans were too unstable to allow others to carry out long-range planning.

Finally, in December 1969, the right wing began a concerted drive for power. In order to pay for imports Cambodia was falling deeper and deeper into national debt, and the domestic economy was in sharp decline. Eager to seize the time, rightist businessmen led by Lon Nol and Sirik Matak pushed through the National Assembly, against Sihanouk's will, measures to denationalize banking and the import-export business, bring tax receipts directly into the government treasury instead of into the office of the Chief of State (Sihanouk's office), and shut down the state-run gambling casino, which had long been a source of income for the palace. The United States and the World Bank joined in the push for denationalization, unexpectedly withholding aid even after the July 1969 resumption of U.S.-Cambodian diplomatic relations.

The following month Sihanouk left for France, once again hoping to prove himself the indispensable man. Soon after, Lon Nol stepped up the already existing racist press campaigns against the Vietnamese minority in Cambodia. In early March, the army organized anti-Vietnamese demonstrations in Svay Rieng province. Then, on March 11, soldiers in civilian dress, reportedly members of the Khmer Serai, led 10,000 demonstrators in an attack on the embassies of the North Vietnamese and the Provisional Revolutionary Government. "The demonstrators—numbering about 10,000—were hardly hostile to the sacking in a country where anti-Vietnamese feeling runs deep," reported Allman, "but the demonstration was hardly spontaneous. Few of the students would have shown up had they not been ordered, and they undoubtedly had no idea that the ultimate result of their demonstration would be the ouster of Sihanouk."

Trying to head off the impending coup, Colonel Oum Mannorine, Sihanouk's brother-in-law, and the pro-Sihanouk police attempted on March 16 to arrest Lon Nol. They failed, and on March 18 Lon Nol and the army took over the government.

It was, as Allman points out, "an upper-class coup, not a revolution."

**O**NLY DAYS AFTER the coup, Lon Nol's army killed several hundred unarmed pro-Sihanouk Khmer peasants. By early May the army had also massacred more than 5000 Cambodian Vietnamese, imprisoned nearly 200,000 (60,000 of whom were shipped to Vietnam) and tried, unsuccessfully, to mobilize Khmer villagers for race war against the remaining ethnic Vietnamese. The army launched these attacks more for political than racial reasons: the ethnic Vietnamese in the border area and in the large Vietnamese community showed great sympathy for the NLF. As one assemblyman explained, "Each Vietnamese face could hide a Viet Cong." The massacres of course drove the ethnic Vietnamese, many of them formerly apolitical shopkeepers, sharply to the left.

Lon Nol also brought several thousand Khmer Serai and Khmer Krom into the country, and expects to double the size of his army with 45,000 more U.S.-trained and U.S.-paid Khmer Krom. (U.S. advisers are recruiting additional ethnic Khmers in South Vietnam and Thailand, and will continue to maintain control, even if the U.S. formally withdraws.) In it for the flesh and the money, these mercenaries, along with the Khmer Serai, have been even more intent on looting than is the regular Cambodian army. Even more vicious are the South Vietnamese troops, who, outraged by the massacre of Cambodian Vietnamese, loot the wreckage of the towns they destroy, run the South Vietnamese flag up over occupied buildings, openly demonstrate their contempt for the Cambodians and show little concern for Cambodians caught in crossfires with pro-Sihanouk forces. The paradox is grotesque: the same Vietnamese troops who refuse to fight in their own country are now defending a Cambodian government which massacred their fellow Vietnamese, while they themselves massacre the Khmer people who are fighting to topple that government.

The Americans, if personally less brutal, have produced the most widespread savagery, bringing their "forced urbanization" strategy from Vietnam into Cambodia. As Professor Noam Chomsky explained after returning from a recent trip to Southeast Asia: "It is important to understand that the massacre of the rural population of Vietnam and their forced evacuation is not an accidental by-product of the war. Rather it is of the very essence of American strategy. The theory behind it has been explained with great clarity and explicitness, for example by Professor Samuel Huntington, Chairman of the Government Department at Harvard. . . . He explains that the Viet Cong is 'a powerful force which cannot be dislodged from its constituency so long as the constituency continues to exist.' The conclusion is obvious, and he does not shrink from it. We can ensure that the constituency ceases to exist by 'direct application of mechanical and conventional power . . . on such a massive scale as to produce a massive migration from countryside to city' where the Viet Cong constituency—the rural population—can, it is hoped, be controlled in refugee camps and suburban slums around Saigon. . . . Technically, the process is known as 'urbanization' or 'modernization.'" In other words, Chomsky comments, the answer to a people's war is to eliminate the people.

The strategy has one obvious advantage: it requires only enough occupying troops to hold the cities and bomb the countryside. In Laos, with a population of less than three



*US troops of the 4th Infantry Division entering a Cambodian village which had been completely destroyed by US aircraft*



*Lon Nol regime soldiers seek protection from stench of decaying bodies .*



million, the policy of urbanization has produced over 700,000 refugees and, under Nixon, bombing has increased sevenfold, to 27,000 sorties per month. In Cambodia, where the U.S. and its allies are unable to tie down several hundred thousand troops and where the population is already hostile, forced urbanization is perfect—especially since the terrain, unlike that of Laos, is flat and without natural protection from bombing. The saturation bombing that preceded the U.S. invasions (raids of 100 B-52s) may be a portent of things to come. Nixon is clearly in a bind to end the war—one way or another—within the near future. As the Lon Nol regime crumbles further and the anti-American forces gain more control of the countryside, Nixon will be forced to pull out or escalate further.

**A**RMED STRUGGLE, LED from the underground, is the only path that will lead our people to victory and will permit its ideals to triumph,” urged the deposed Prince Norodom Sihanouk after calling for a National United Front (NUF) to liberate Cambodia. That armed struggle is now under way, led by the still popular Sihanouk and his former Khmer Rouge antagonists, Hu Nim, Khieu Samphan and Hou Youn. Their strategy is one of protracted war. Khmer Rouge, Cambodian Vietnamese and a few NLF and North Vietnamese cadres are attacking government outposts and taking towns and villages. More important, they are equipping and training the peasants to fight for themselves as part of the NUF. Even though North Vietnamese troops could easily have overrun the country and set up their own puppet government, the NUF, with North Vietnamese support, seems intent on organizing the countryside first, and only then seizing control of Phnom Penh and the government.

The NUF forces apply this same people's war strategy in their attacks. In mid-April, small NLF forces, with an undetermined amount of support from pro-Sihanouk Cambodians, seized Angtassom, the scene of an earlier massacre of pro-Sihanouk people and a town embarrassingly close to the capital. Demonstrating both its ineffectiveness as a military force and its unerring ability to alienate the local population, the Cambodian Army surrounded the town in overwhelming numbers, called in air strikes, fired mortars and automatic weapons into the town and finally encircled it, leaving a convenient hole through which the guerrillas could escape. When the offensive finally came, the guerrillas had gone, leaving the town untouched and allowing the local inhabitants to flee. By contrast, the Cambodian troops, according to Allman, entered the town and, finding the shops in the market neatly shut and locked from the outside, proceeded to loot and burn them. By the time the Cambodian troops were finished, about 40 per cent of the town had been razed. While the government claimed that the NUF had attacked to replenish their supplies, at Angtassom, as at every other NUF halt in Cambodia, the communist troops seemed more interested in giving political lectures than in taking anything from the inhabitants. They left rice warehouses untouched and, according to one villager, even “turned down a chicken I offered them, saying they carried their own food with them.”

By late May the NUF already claimed to have liberated hundreds of villages, representing a population of more

than one million (out of a total of seven million). They controlled the provincial capitals of Kratie, Mondolkiri and Stung Treng, and have attacked government troops in the capitals of Kompong Cham, Prey Veng, Takeo, Kampot and Rattanakiri. Fifteen of the 19 Cambodian provinces have either military operations, people's uprisings or an established revolutionary power. In liberated regions the population reportedly has established local NUF committees and has “established the political power of the people.”

**I**N ITS PROGRAM, THE NUF stresses one principal task: the unification of all classes, including the national bourgeoisie, against the invasion of the Americans and South Vietnamese and the government of Lon Nol. The program calls for modernization of the country, maintenance of a neutral foreign policy, and the guarantee of those rights generally associated with middle-class democracy—freedom of speech, the right to vote, religious freedom, sexual equality and the rights of ownership of land and property. The program makes no mention of socialism, and except for guaranteeing peasants the right of ownership of the land they cultivate, seems no more revolutionary than FDR's “Four Freedoms.”

Yet in the course of fighting “the American imperialists,” their Indochinese “satellites” and their Cambodian “flunkies,” the NUF seems more likely to lead a full-scale social revolution than simply to reinstate Sihanouk as the middleman in a fundamentally unbalanced social system. While the Prince still has great appeal among the tradition-minded peasantry, he has no independent organization; the Khmer Rouge are actually organizing the peasants and leading the military struggle. The entire NUF is cooperating closely with the communist-led revolutions in Laos and Vietnam, and they are receiving arms from China, despite Chinese wariness of further escalation of the Indochina war.

“We will lend you money for the affairs of your country,” Sihanouk quotes Mao. “But concerning arms: we are not in the habit of selling; we are not arms peddlers. We cannot sell you arms; we can only give them to you.”

Cambodia's property owners and middle-class, on the other hand, seem hardly likely, or able, to restore the precoup political system. A number of the aristocrats, generals and businessmen are linked so closely with Lon Nol that most of their countrymen clearly see them as traitors. Other aristocrats, still favorable to Sihanouk, are permanently losing their base of power to the Khmer Rouge. The Chinese businessmen are increasingly vulnerable and generally willing to form protective alliances with a revolutionary government. The Vietnamese shopkeepers have either been jailed or have fled. And the civil servants and office workers seem hardly strong enough to recreate Cambodia as a non-communist domino.

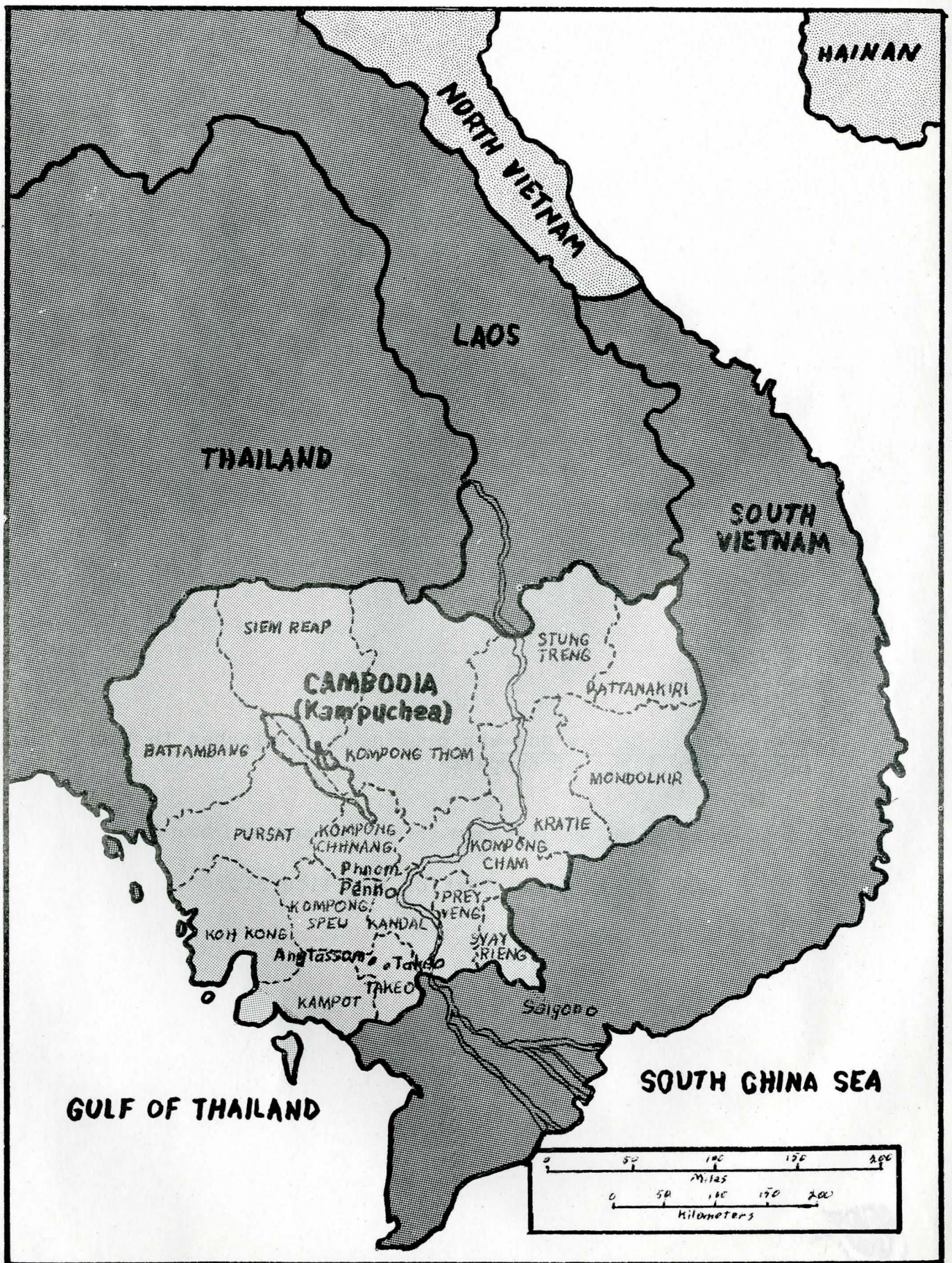
The road to Phnom Penh is still hard, blocked by Lon Nol, the Khmer Serai and the Khmer Krom, the CIA and the Pentagon, the Thais and the South Vietnamese. But when the NUF finally gets there, it will be not a coup but a social revolution.

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