

# **The Thais in Exile: Repression, exile and emergence of the guerilla in the North East of Thailand (1960-1965)**

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**ABSTRACT**—While Thailand's fate during the Cold War may seem more enviable than that of most of its Southeast Asian neighbors, the country nonetheless experienced greater unrest as the United States were sinking into the War in Vietnam. And the North-East, the poorest region of the kingdom, was among the most affected by the violence which broke out between the Thai armed forces and the Communist Party. In this part of Thailand, the development of the communist forces was possible largely due to the proximity of Laos.. The dynamic between the Vietnamese Revolution and the foreign reaction then began to reach the Thai ally of the United States. In this paper, this dynamic is observed through the study of the activities of the “Thais in Exile” and their relations with Laotian and Chinese politicians and how these activities helped the organization of an armed opposition to the Thai Regime.

Keywords: Cold War, Thai North-East, Laos, China, Vietnam, Thais in Exile

## **Introduction**

From the 1940s to the 1970s, the history of Thailand and Laos is closely linked. Thailand had been engaged early in the

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Cold War with the return to power, in 1948, of Plaek Phibun-Songkhram, a former collaborator of the Japanese, who turned collaborator for the United States. In the mid-1950s, Phibun launched a pseudo process of democratization which failed to give his government any democratic legitimacy. The democratic aspirations of the population, which were reflected in particular in the desire to keep Thailand out of the East-West conflict, were taken over by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat who, in 1957, overthrew the Phibun government. Sarit immediately launched a process of rapprochement with the United States and, from 1958, the tensions related to the Cold War context worsened.

Laos also experienced in the second half of the 1950s a deep political instability which was not to be resolved before the end of the Vietnam War. Following the Geneva Agreements of 1954, the Laotian communist forces of Pathet Lao (PL), who had fought alongside the Viet-Minh forces during the Indochinese war (1946-1954) were given control over two regions located in the North (Phongsali) and North-East (Houaphan), on the Vietnamese border. From 1956, a process of reunification of Laos was initiated between the Royal Government and the Communists, organized since January within the Neo Lao Hak Xat (NLHX). This process provided for the participation of the NLHX in the Royal Government and the return of the Communist-controlled provinces under the central government authority. On November 18, 1957, the Communist-controlled provinces were returned to the royal administration, and on November 19, two members of the NLHX entered the Royal Government. Following the complementary legislative elections of May 4, 1958, the NLHX obtained 9 seats of deputies.

In reaction, the Laotian right, on June 10, 1958, created the *Comité pour la Défense des Intérêts Nationaux* (CDIN) or Committee for the Defense of National Interests. Following the resignation of the Souvanna Phouma<sup>2</sup> government on July 22,

<sup>2</sup> Son of Tiao Maha Oupahat Bounkhong, Souvanna Phouma was born in 1901 in Louang Phrabang. After studying in France, he worked in the colonial administration in Laos. During the Japanese occupation, he was di-

1958, a right-wing government, led by Phoui Xananikon, was established on August 18 of the same year. Subsequently the influence of the military only increased (on January 24, 1959, generals entered the government). On May 12, 1959, the leaders of the NLHX were placed under house arrest. They managed to escape on June 6 and from July the guerrillas resumed.

It was in this confused situation that, on August 9, 1960, Captain Konglè's coup d'état took place in Vientiane. Konglè (born in 1934 in the province of Savannakhet) handed power over to Souvanna Phouma on August 17 (supported from August 24 by the NLHX). The Laotian capital was then, for a few months, under the control of the neutralists.

In Thailand, Sarit Thanarat anti-communist “cleaning” attempts seem to have had the effect of precipitating the start of the armed struggle with Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). This failure of the operations carried out in the North East seems to have been partly determined by the proximity of Laos, a real refuge for the people fleeing the repression. Thailand itself began to be caught up in the cycle of wars initiated by the Vietnamese Revolution. As Arno Mayer wrote:

“In fact, revolution and foreign war are inseparably linked. Although there can, of course, be war without revolution, there can be no revolution without war. The fate of revolutions in small or medium-sized powers perhaps best dramatizes the centrality of interstate relations and war: they are either crushed by military intervention from abroad or, alternatively, shielded or imposed by foreign bayonets.”<sup>3</sup>

This article attempts to show how the “preventive” anti-rector of Public Works. In 1945, he participated in the anti-French Lao Itsara government and lived in exile in Thailand from 1946 to 1949. From 1951 to 1954 he was Prime Minister. From the second half of the 1950s, he became a central figure in the Laotian neutralist movement (Deuve 2003, 369-370).

<sup>3</sup> Arno Mayer, *The Furies*, Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 533.

communist repression implemented by the Thai government had the effect of initiating a revolutionary war supported from Laos, a rear base of the Thai opposition. If the support of the Chinese, Vietnamese and Laotian communists to the Thai opposition has often been noted in the literature dealing with Thailand during the Cold War (as in Tom Marks's work (1994)), the activity of the Thais in exile in Laos, their relations with Laotian politicians or important Thai figures like Pridi Phanomyong and Kulap Saipradit are largely ignored.

### **Repression under the government of Sarit Thanarat**

In a report of April 22, 1965, the French Ambassador to Laos, Pierre Milet, mentioned the political activities of a group of Thais in Laos:

“Some Thais grouped in ‘The Association of the Thais in Exile,’ in conjunction with the ‘Thai National Liberation Movement,’ have not ceased for several years, from Laos, to intrigue against the Government of Bangkok. In November 1960, the ‘Association of Thais in Exile’ planned to ask Pridi Panomyong to form a government on foreign soil. Dismembered and dissolved in 1961 after the takeover of Vientiane by the Phoumist [rightist] troops, this association nevertheless continued, undercover, in its action in Laos and Thailand. The main members of this movement would be: a former deputy of [Ubon], Thim Phuriphat, who, after going to China in 1956, took refuge in Laos; Mit Satanon [Sattanon], one of Thim Phuriphat’s assistants who created in the region of Xieng Khouang, a movement of Pathet Lao obedience; and Kulap Saipradit, a pro-communist writer who visited Moscow and Peking several times. In 1961, Kulap Saipradit was in Communist China, where he had been commissioned by the Chinese Government to organize, with Pridi [Phanomyong] on Radio-Peking, a program in Thai especially intended for the students in Thailand. He is believed to be the author of leaflets circulated in the Northeast in favor of a secession movement; Savang [Sawang] Trachu, former MP and Communist supporter who fled to Laos, who was one

of the most active members of the Thai Workers Union in Laos; Amphone Souvannabon [Amphon Suwannabon], Thai of Laotian origin, former supporter of Pridi, who is said to be a member of the Chinese Communist Party since 1951.”<sup>4</sup>

The presence of these Thais in exile in Laos was a direct result of Sarit Thanarat’s policy to strengthen ties with the United States and increase the anti-communist repression. Sarit’s government was distinguished by its use of violence. As Thak Chaloemtiarana (1979, 201) wrote:

“immediately after Sarit’s second coup in 1959, parliament was dissolved, parties were banned, newspapers came under censorship, political gatherings were outlawed, and people suspected of being sympathetic to communism or opposed to Sarit’s leadership were arrested and imprisoned. From 1958 to 1963, Sarit invoked Article 17 to order the execution of eleven persons. Five were executed for arson, one for producing heroin, one for leading a messianic uprising, and four on charges of communism.”

The spectacular nature of the repression was part of a “take-over” of Thailand following the erring way of the government’s attitude towards China during the year 1957, an attitude that has been described by Kulap Saipradit (2005, 20).

In May 1961, in the North East of Thailand, repression resulted in the death of Khrong Chandawong, a former deputy from the province of Sakon Nakhon.<sup>5</sup> These events were mentioned by Pierre Fistié (1967), who wrote that around 100 people had been arrested. He added that Khrong, “along with the other heads of the plot, were taken to Bangkok for questioning, then brought back to their provinces of origin and shot without further trial,

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4 AMFA(N)/66.PO. 263. The French ambassador in Vientiane, Pierre Milet, to the Foreign Affairs minister in Paris, April 22, 1965. “Subversion dans le Nord-Est.”

5 Teacher, friend of Tiang Sirikhan, elected several times deputy, Khrong Chandawong had already been arrested in 1948 for separatism then, in 1952, for participation in the Peace Movement (Matukham 1978, 23-57).

under Article 17 of the Provisional Constitution.” The account made by Fistié takes up most of the points that were made in the Thai press. Thai newspapers were particularly interested in the fate of the leaders of the movement, the discoveries of documents and weapon caches,<sup>6</sup> organized training in the forest and connections with foreign countries. Newspapers (*San Seri* and *Phim Thai*, May 14) reported that the movement’s name was “Solidarity and Justice” (*Samakkhitham*) or “Movement for the Development of Society” (*Khabuankhan Phatthana Sangkhom*). Among the objectives attributed to the movement were the secession of the North-East, the overthrow of the king, the development of agriculture with the help of China and the Soviet Union, the establishment of free education and health systems (*Chao Thai*, May 17). The movement, which seems to have existed since 1957 (Matukham 1978, 132), would have sought to develop a sense of Lao national belonging among its members, who were said to have numbered more than a thousand (*San Seri*, May 14). The newspapers stressed the ties they attributed to the movement with the Laotian Neutralists and Communists.

Three of the movement’s cadres were arrested along with Khrong: Thongphan Sutthimat, Phakdiphong Sithisak and Khrong’s eldest son, Witthit Chandawong (*Thai Raiwan*, May 14). Thongphan was executed with Khrong.<sup>7</sup> Shortly after Khrong’s arrest, his second son, Thamrong, left Thailand for Laos. Thamrong’s younger sister, Khuankhrong, joined him later, before their mother was arrested (Phusuwan 2001, 23-26). Other arrests took place in December 1961. They led, in the province of Nakhon Phanom, to the first clash between government forces and “communists” (Keyes 1967, 54). The following year, toward the end of 1962,

6 According to Khrong Chandawong’s widow, Taengon, the evidence for the existence of these weapon caches had been completely forged by the police (Phusuwan 2001, 23).

7 Thongphan Sutthimat was from Wannaniwat District, Sakon Nakhon Province. He had been a teacher. He had participated as a member of the Socialist Party in the 1957 election campaign during which he supported Khrong, but he himself has not been elected.

Khrong's widow, Taengon, was arrested with over a hundred other people. Released at the end of 1964, she left Thailand for China after passing through Laos and into Vietnam, from where she flew to China. She did not return to Thailand, with her son Thamrong, until 1989 (Phunsuwan 2001, 26, 31-37). The repression carried out by the Sarit government prompted many politicians and residents of the Northeast to seek refuge abroad.

### **The formation of the Association of the Thais in Exile in Laos and the support of the Laotian neutralists and communists**

The Thai Foreign Ministry probably knew about the creation of an “Association of the Thais in Exile” (*Samakhom Thai Phlat Thin*) in Vientiane in the fall of 1960. According to Thai sources, it was founded by Suwan Chantha rawong, son of the mayor of Udon Thani, Sawang Trachu, former deputy for Khon Kaen (North East), and Somphong Suwannaphon. By telegram of October 26, 1960, the Thai embassy in Vientiane reported the creation of the “Thai Workers Association” in Vientiane, first called the “Association of the Thai in Exile” and then the “Thai Help” (*Thai Upatham*). On October 21, 1960, the Association had tried, without success, to be officially registered. The Association declared that its leaders were Mit Sattanon and Somphong Suwannabon. The Embassy believed that Sawang Trachu was involved. The Association was also said to receive support from Konglè.<sup>8</sup> The Thai Embassy was in possession of two letters written by Mit on November 1 and 2, 1960 showing his hostility toward the Thai government.<sup>9</sup>

8 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (4/4). Note from the Permanent Secretary of the Interior Ministry, Police General Luang Chattrakankoson, to the Director of the Police Department, November [11], 1960.

9 The first letter was intended for the clergy and the faithful of Nong Khai province, the second for the monk Phra Prichayanmuni, head of the local clergy. In the letter to the latter, Mit mentioned the Sarit Thanarat government as dictatorial. He said he knew that a large part of the clergy did not like him and tried to fight him. Mit addressed his support for this opposition. Phra Prichayanmuni had helped Mit to move to Laos with his wife four years earlier. In the address of the Association of the Thai Workers in Laos to the

Official reports give little information about Mit Sattanon and the members of the Association in general. Mit was said to be a law graduate, a former district deputy director and a refugee in Laos, where he was escaping imprisonment. He was believed to have been from Ban Pong, Ratchaburi province.<sup>10</sup> As for the Association's treasurer, reports give the name of Wirat Thipphithak, originally from Hainan and who spoke poor Thai. He was based in the company called Sammat, in Vientiane.<sup>11</sup> When the Association renewed its registration process, it could count on

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clergy and faithful of Nong Khai, the president of the Association accused Sarit of interfering in religious affairs to the point of forcing two monks to defrock, which, wrote Mit, had never happened in the history of the country. He encouraged the monks to oppose the government. See NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (4/4). Letter from Mit Sattanon to the monk Phra Prichayanmuni, November 2, 1960; letter of the Association of the Thai Workers in Laos to the clergy and the Buddhists of Thailand, November 1, 1960.

10 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (4/4). Note from the Permanent Secretary of the Interior Ministry, Police General Luang Chattrakankoson, to the Interior Minister, December 1, 1960; note from the Permanent Secretary of the Interior Ministry to the Interior Minister, October 18, 1961. Mit's real name remains unclear. That of Winai Ratnawanchai, former deputy district director at Hat Yai, was mentioned as head of the Association. See NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (4/4). Note from the Permanent Secretary of the Interior Ministry, Police General Luang Chattrakankoson, to the Interior Minister, December 7, 1960; note from the Deputy Director of the Police, May 1961.

11 This company was involved in the sale of construction materials, an activity which would have served as a screen for various illicit businesses. The company was also said to have brought Chinese people into Thailand. The embassy thought Wirat could have been the same person as Lim Eng. The latter would have been the director of the Hongsa Company in Vientiane and co-president of the Association of Thai people in Exile. See NA /(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (4/4). Note from the Permanent Secretary of the Interior Ministry, Police General Luang Chattrakankoson, to the Interior Minister, December 1, 1960; Note from the Permanent Secretary of the Interior Ministry, Police General Luang Chattrakankoson, to the Interior Minister, December 7, 1960.

the help of prominent Laotian advisers,<sup>12</sup> such as: Chao Bounvat Ounkèo (Director of the Political Department of the Laotian Interior Ministry), Thao Khamphoui Douangphuchai (deputy for Saravan), Thao Khoun Sisoumang (member of the office of the Laotian Prime Minister),<sup>13</sup> etc. The Association allegedly planned to invite Pridi Phanomyong to set up a government in exile.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Mit Sattanon was suspected of serving his own interests through membership fees.<sup>15</sup> In November 8, 1960, the Thai Ambassador to Vientiane referred to frequent appearances of many Northeastern Thai deputies in the capital, mentioning Sawang Trachu in particular. He also reported that officials at the US Embassy were beginning to take an interest in the activities of the Association and some expressed concern over northeastern Thailand.<sup>16</sup>

On December 16, 1960, Konglè's troops were forced to

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12 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (4/4). Note from the Permanent Secretary of the Interior Ministry, Police General Luang Chattrakankoson, to the Interior minister, December 1, 1960.

13 Since August 1960, he was the head of the press section at the Prime Minister's office of the neutralist government of Souvanna Phouma and secretary general of the "Youth Association." Later, in December 1960, he participated in the "Battle of Vientiane against the troops of Phoumi Nosavan." From 1961 to 1962 he was with the neutralists in Khang Khai. Like Kinim Phonsena, he was assassinated in 1963, "by foreigners." Khoun Sisoumang was from Louang Phrabang and had a Vietnamese father. He had the opportunity to study in France (1953-56) and later become an activist in leftist organizations. Khoun also visited the USSR. Back in Laos, he participated, in 1956, to the neutralist newspaper Lanxang (Deuve 2003, 346).

14 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (4/4). Note from the Permanent secretary of the Interior ministry, Police General Luang Chattrakankoson, to the Director of the Police Department, November [11], 1960.

15 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (4/4). Note from the Permanent Secretary of the Interior Ministry, Police General Luang Chattrakankoson, to the Interior minister, December 1, 1960.

16 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (4/4). Letter from the Thai Ambassador to Vientiane, Sombun Pansathian, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bangkok, November 8, 1960.

withdraw from Vientiane following an attack launched by those of Phoumi Nosavan (pro-United States and pro-Thai military leader)<sup>17</sup>. Neutralist forces retreated to Xieng Khouang and were followed by members of the Association of the Thais in Exile.<sup>18</sup> On March 9, 1961, a meeting took place in Phnom Penh between Souvanna Phouma (Prime Minister of the Neutralist Government) and Phoumi Nosavan and, on May 11, 1961, that resulted in a ceasefire. In May, Thai reports indicated that

the Association headquarters were in Vientiane. According to these reports, 3 Chinese pharmacies were trafficking gold in order to finance “the destabilization organization which comes directly under the Laotian communist organization.” This is the first reference to the links between the Association and the Laotian Communists.<sup>19</sup> Later, Mit Sattanon was reported active on the Lao-Thai border. Several reports mention visits he made to mountain villages near the Xayabouri province. His propaganda would have prompted some Khmu villages to rally his group.<sup>20</sup>

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17 From Savannakhet, he worked as a secretary in the Indochinese Federal Sûreté. In 1945, he participated in the Lao Itsara movement and remained in exile in Thailand from 1946 to 1949. Then he joined the Viet-Minh “but disappointed not to be appointed to an important position [he returned] to Laos and [entered] in 1950 in the Lao National Army [...].” In 1956 he became chief of staff of the Laotian army. In 1957, he completed an internship in France at the École de Guerre. In 1958, he was member of the CDIN. While a colonel and Secretary of State for National Defense, in December 1959 he instigated a coup against Phoui Xananikon. Following Konglè’s coup d'état (August 1960), on August 15, 1960, he organized a Committee opposed to the neutralists and supported by the United States and Thailand (Deuve 2003, 358-359).

18 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (2/4). Permanent Under-Secretary of the Interior Ministry, Phuang Suwannarat, to the Directors of the Police and Interior Departments, June 12, 1962.

19 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (4/4). Note from Deputy Director of the Police department, Prasoet Ruchiruang, to the Permanent Secretary of the Interior Ministry, May 9, 1961.

20 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (3/4). Note from the Permanent Secretary to the Interior Minister, December 24, 1961, to the Head of the

Konglè later confirmed to the former Thai deputy Sawang Trachu the presence of Mit Sattanon in the Xayabouri area. He was in contact with the Chinese journalist named “Lu.” Mit is said to have been to Beijing where he met Pridi Phanomyong and entrusted him with his family. After that, he returned to Laos and cooperated with the NLHX.<sup>21</sup>

### **Perception of the Association of the Thai in Exile in 1962 (and the possible role of Kulap Saipradit)**

On May 11, 1962, the Thai Embassy in Vientiane transmitted information that came from Ngon Xananikon, then Laotian Minister of the Economy, according to which a group, made up of Thais and Laotians, who called themselves the “Thai patriots” (*Thai rak chat*), had gone to Paksan and may have already been to Thailand. The “Lao National Coordinating Committee” (*Krom Prasanngan haeng Chat Lao*) had also informed the Thai Embassy that these Thai patriots were active between Xieng Khouang and Xamneua, from where they were organizing the “infiltration” of the North East. According to the Thai Foreign Ministry, it was probably the Association of the Thais in Exile.<sup>22</sup>

The Embassy later reported that members of the Association were sending groups along the border to carry out propaganda. A branch of the Association would have been maintained in Vientiane with a former school teacher from Khon Kaen, “Phrom,” who welcomed the Thais arriving in Laos and sent them to Mit

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Foreign Affairs Section; note from the Permanent under-secretary of the Interior minister, Khun Nakhonratkhet, to the Director of the Police department, dated November 27, 1961; note from the Permanent under-secretary of the Interior minister, Khun Nakhonratkhet, to the Director of the Department of the Interior, November [9], 1961.

21 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 41. Note from General Ch. Nawisathian, Army Chief of Staff, to the Permanent secretary of the Interior ministry, February 1963.

22 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (2/4). Permanent Under-Secretary of the Interior Ministry, Phuang Suwannarat, to the Directors of the Police and Interior Departments, June 12, 1962.

Sattanon.<sup>23</sup> By the end of July, Thai sources indicate that the Association, whose headquarter was then in Xieng Khouang, had established command posts in the regions of Louang Phrabang and Champasak.<sup>24</sup> Towards the end of October, the Association was reportedly at the head of a force of several thousand men formed militarily in Phongsaly and Xamneua. According to Thai intelligence, former Thai politician refugees in mainland China were having monthly meetings in Xieng Khouang with the Association as well as with officials from North Vietnam, China and Laotian communists, with the aim of seizing power in Thailand.<sup>25</sup>

Around mid-October 1962, Kulap Saipradit, – a prominent Thai intellectual, journalist and writer, in exile in China since Sarit seized the power in Thailand, – had been reported “with the Free Battalion of the Association of the Thais in Exile in Xieng Khouang as spokesperson and aide-de-camp for this group.” The note from the Interior ministry added: “It appears that many Thais from the North East reside there.”<sup>26</sup> On December 9, 1962, the newspaper *Thai Raiwan* reported that Kulap had come to Xieng Khouang from Beijing. The article said it did not know what the role of the writer was and assumed that he came as an advisor for the Pathet Lao. The newspaper added that Kulap also visited Vientiane between November 16 and 22.

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23 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (1/4). The Thai Ambassador in Vientiane, Charunphan Itsarangkun Na Ayutthaya, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bangkok, June 11, 1962.

24 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (1/4). Note from the Under-Secretary of the Interior Ministry, Phuang Suwannarat, to the Supreme Command Headquarters Chief of Staff, and to the Directors of the Central Department of Information Processing, Police and Interior , on July 31, 1962.

25 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 41. Note from the Under-secretary of the Government, Sagna Kittikhachon, to the Interior minister and to members of the Government, October 24, 1962.

26 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 41. Note from the Under-secretary of the government, Sagna Kittikhachon, to the Interior minister, on November 9, 1962.

## **Sawang Trachu meets Kulap Saipradit and Pridi Phanomyong in China**

In February 1963, General Nawisathian, Permanent secretary of the Thai Interior ministry, wrote a note<sup>27</sup> according to which the former Thai deputy Sawang Trachu – who in November 1960 was considered as one of the founders of the Association of the Thais in Exile – was in contact with Oun Xananikom, an influential Laotian political figure who opposed the return of the French in Laos with the Free Lao government (*Lao itsara*). Most of the members of the Association of the Thais in Exile knew him. Sawang had known him since the days of the Seri Thai. However, “rightly or wrongly,” Oun had “a reputation for being in the pay of Thai generals (Phinith Ngeun Souk-Aloun Thongchanh 1998, 142).” Jean Deuve (2003, 355) stated more clearly that he pursued “a parliamentary career geared to the interests of Bangkok.” The fact that the Thai authorities had access to the contents of these letters suggests that Oun did not usurp his reputation.

General Nawisathian’s note of February 1963 states that the “neutralists of Vientiane” wished to know the plans of the Laotian left in contact with the Communists and wanted the Thai government to be informed of the attitude of the Thais in exile “favorable to the Communists.” They had therefore given their protection to Sawang Trachu. The first letter, dated January 19, 1963, mentioned the threats Sawang had received from a Thai from the North East (Bunchan Saisuan) and member of the NLHX. The second letter, dated January 24, 1963, retraced Sawang’s journey since he left Thailand in 1958. This letter sheds light on the activities of the Thais in exile in Laos and personalities such as Pridi Phanomyong and Kulap Saipradit, then in exile in China. Pridi, in his book *“Ma vie mouvementée et mes 21 ans d’exil en Chine populaire,”* gave no information about the Thais in Exile. Neither did his daughter Dutsadi in her book dealing

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27 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 41. Note from General Ch. Nawisathian, Army Chief of Staff, to the Permanent secretary of the Interior ministry, February 1963.

with her family's life in China nor the biographies dealing with the life of Kulap Saipradit. However, it is difficult to cross-check the information contained in Sawang's letters.

In the letter of January 24, 1963, Sawang Trachu, explained that he and his brothers had been members of the anti-Japanese resistance movement Seri Thai. In 1960, He was about 43 years old. He had already been elected deputy for Khon Kaen twice. Sawang left Thailand for Laos on October 23, 1958, following Sarit Thanarat's second coup. In Laos, Sawang received the support of Oun Xananikom. Following the coup d'état staged by Konglè, in August 1960, Sawang Trachu began to contact politicians in Thailand to determine whether it was appropriate to take revolutionary action in Thailand. They decided to consult Pridi and Kulap in China.<sup>28</sup>

Sawang traveled to China with the help of the NLHX. Before leaving, he met a group of 24 people from Sawang Daen Din who had fled government repression in Northeast Thailand. Among them was the 19-year-old son of Khrong Chandawong (probably Thamrong) who later accompanied Sawang to China.<sup>29</sup>

In his letter, Sawang reported he went to Beijing where he met Kulap Saipradit. According to the former deputy, Kulap questioned him on Khrong Chandawong's movement. At Sawang's request, Kulap agreed to take care of the education of Khrong's son. The former deputy added that several children of politicians locked up in Thailand were not receiving any help and could not study. Kulap asked Sawang to list them and make biographical notes for submission to Chinese authorities. Regarding the request for assistance, Kulap said that China would neither provide military support nor weapons. He said, however, that he would ask for material aid. In Beijing, Sawang also met "Liang

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28 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 41. Note from General Ch. Nawisathian, Army Chief of Staff, to the Permanent secretary of the Interior ministry, February 1963.

29 *Ibid.*

Chang Chue,” presented as the Chinese Asia-Africa Department President and Minister of the Overseas Chinese. He said he got on well with Pridi Phanomyong and recommended that Sawang get to know the journalist “Lu” who had lived in Thailand and was to be sent to Laos. Liang Chang Chue added that Lu and Secretary “Li Wa” were like his own delegates, if Sawang needed anything he could ask them.<sup>30</sup>

After his stay in the Chinese capital, Sawang Trachu wrote that he went to Guangzhou to meet Pridi Phanomyong and his wife Phunsuk. When they met, Pridi referred to Singkhapo,<sup>31</sup> which he presented as the nephew of “Khun Anuson,” a former Seri Thai, and asked if he really intended to support the Thais. Sawang felt that he was sincere. Referring to the Thai communists, Sawang said he feared the rulers had betrayed their ideals in order to align with the United States and enrich themselves, he mentioned in particular the name of Supha Sirimanon. Pridi replied that, in his opinion, Supha had not sold himself and compared his evolution with that of Tiang Sirikhan. Pridi himself had ordered him to join the Manangkhasila party (pro-Phibun Songkhram party) and get closer to the United States. Tiang had failed the mission and was killed by Police Chief Phao Siyanon. Everyone was still thinking that he was a traitor. According to Sawang, Pridi asked him to take the place left empty by Tiang. Sawang reportedly offered to appoint Pridi’s eldest son to head the Thai opposition in Laos, but the former Seri Thai leader insisted upon his appointment.<sup>32</sup>

Concerning the Chinese support for the Thai opposition in

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30 *Ibid.*

31 Member of the Central Committee of the NLHX. From 1960 to 1962 he was at the head of the Communist troops of the Vientiane-Xieng Khouang area. He remained an important military leader until the late 1960s, when young people trained in Vietnam began to replace the old cadres from the French war era (Deuve 2003, 363-364).

32 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 41. Note from General Ch. Nawisathian, Army Chief of Staff, to the Permanent secretary of the Interior ministry, February 1963.

exile, Wichitwong Na Pomphet (2006, 445-446) reported that at the beginning of his stay in China, the Chinese authorities offered to help Pridi take power in Thailand under three conditions: 1) to give the Chinese in Thailand the right to govern themselves as a minority; 2) to allow the opening of Chinese schools where the teaching is exclusively in Chinese; 3) to make Chinese a second official language. Pridi refused, which, according to Wichitwong, led the Chinese authorities to revise downward the budget planned to help the Thai refugees. The living conditions of the latter became more difficult which pushed them gradually to separate. Some believed that Pridi had made a political mistake.

After meeting Kulap and Pridi, Sawang Trachu and his group returned to Laos, to Vang Vieng.<sup>33</sup>

In the first half of April and May 1962, Sawang Trachu was reported near Vientiane, in the vicinity of which, he allegedly attended a meeting of the Association of the Thais in Exile (April 8). Among the members of the Association were three other former deputies: Phim Mahaphinit (Udon Thani); Toem Suepphan (Kalasin); Kasem Pathumwiang (Udon Thani). At the end of May 1962, members of the Thai Communist Party are said to have contacted Sawang. The former deputy would have succeeded in gathering Thais from Kunming and northeastern Thailand into 2 battalions (kongphan) armed by the Pathet Lao. On June 11, he was reported, along with Somphong Suwannabon, near Xieng Khouang.<sup>34</sup>

Towards the end of 1962, Sawang Trachu reportedly sent a man to contact the Thai Embassy in Vientiane to ask if he could return home. The former deputy would no longer have been able to endure his situation.<sup>35</sup> However, it seems that in the fall of

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 7 (1 and 2/4). The Under-Secretary of the government, Sagna Kittikhachon, to the Interior Minister, note of May 15, 1962; the Thai Ambassador in Vientiane, Charunphan Itsarangkun Na Ayutthaya, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bangkok, June 11, 1962.

<sup>35</sup> NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 41. Note from General Ch. Nawisathi-

1963 Sawang was still active in Laos, participating with Amphon Suwanbon to the “infiltration” of the North East of Thailand by an armed group of “Thais in Exile.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Laos, refuge and training center for the future Thai guerrillas in the North-East**

In Vang Vieng, before going to China, Sawang Trachu met many Thais from the North East. He distinguished among them 3 categories: those who left with their families to settle in Laos, those who settled temporarily in Laos once the work in the fields was completed and those who fled conscription. They were, according to him, several tens of thousands. Many of them took up arms for one of the three Laotian parties.

Among those who joined the ranks of the NLHX, Sawang noted: 1) several hundred who had been sent to study in Kunming after World War II and then, following the capture of the city by the Communists, had returned to Thailand or had enlisted alongside the Lao Itsara; 2) those who, mostly from Ubon Ratchathani, had been sent for training with the Lao Itsara during the fight against the French and were now present in southern Laos; 3) those who fled the crackdown on Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom provinces following the execution of Khrong Chanda-wong. According to General Singkhapo, those from Nakhon Phanom would have been around 600. Others were from Nong Khai but Sawang did not know how many there were. According to Sawang, they had strong resentment against the government in Bangkok and were courageous. Once trained in the handling of weapons, they were sent to fight the Thai authorities in the Nakhon Phanom region. There were 3 or 4 Thais whose leader was called Khiao who were to be trained at Dong Hai (political and military training center) and Thian Lang (artillery training center) in central Vietnam. Men who joined the NLHX received an, Army Chief of Staff, to the Interior Minister, December 1962.

36 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 41. The Deputy Director of the Administration Department, At Wisut yotaphiban, to the Permanent Secretary of the Interior Ministry, on October 3, 1963.

trainings in both political and guerilla warfare.

Sawang's portrayal of the men who had joined the NLHX stands in stark contrast to that of the men who enlisted in the troops of Konglè and General Phoumi Nosavan. Among them were: 1) men employed as laborers in Laos who enlisted in the army for the pay; 2) those who had settled with their families in Laos because of the 3 consecutive years of drought that had hit the northeast; 3) the many children who, after finishing their sixth year of secondary school, could not continue their studies due to the lack of institutions or means; and finally, 4) those who fled the conscription. Those enlisted in the ranks of Konglè or Phoumi only followed military training.<sup>37</sup>

As Sawang Trachu noted, the presence of the Thai is not only caused by political repression. It also has economic reasons. In fact, there has been a movement of populations from northeastern Thailand to Laos since, at least, the end of the war in Indochina. A document of December 25, 1954, intended for the head of the Thai government, reported the following:

“There are 3,258 Thai people from the North East who went to live in Central and South Laos to whom the Laotian services have issued identity cards. There are still other immigrants, gradually entering in October and November, who do not yet have a card and their number is about 1,000. Most often they leave to be workers.”<sup>38</sup>

A few months later, in August 1955, Thai authorities found that several inhabitants from the province of Sakon Nakhon, – ten families from Sawang Daen Din and nine people from Phannan-ikhom, – had emigrated to Laos in order to escape poverty and

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37 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. F. 41. Note from General Ch. Nawisathian, Army Chief of Staff, to the Permanent secretary of the Interior Ministry, February 1963.

38 NA/(3) OP. 0201. 9/44. Summary of the council of ministers, December 25, 1954.

settle with their relatives already living in Vientiane.<sup>39</sup>

## **The rise of violence in northeastern Thailand from 1963**

If 1962 was “calm” in the North East of Thailand, repression resumed from the beginning of 1963 with a “new and spectacular roundup of ‘separatist-communists.’”<sup>40</sup> The period between 1963 and 1965, the year in which the Communist Party of Thailand began the armed struggle against the government, was characterized by a gradual increase in violence in the North East. At the end of 1964, the head of the Police declared that in recent weeks “24 police collaborators [had been] systematically shot dead in the Nakhon Phanom region, a province bordering Laos.”<sup>41</sup> According to the government, the development of the armed opposition in the North East was made in connection with Laos. General Praphat Charusathian, Deputy Prime Minister, declared at the end of 1964 “that in favor of the fighting which [had] taken place in Laos, near Thakhèk, [...] a number of Chinese and Vietnamese guerrilla specialists had entered Thailand.”<sup>42</sup> On February 5, 1965 the “Thai Patriotic Front” published an open letter to the people of Thailand which included an anti-imperialist 6 point program.<sup>43</sup>

August 7, 1965 is traditionally considered the start of the armed struggle between the Communist Party of Thailand and the government. The province of Nakhon Phanom made a report stating what followed:

“On August 7, 1965 a spy informed us that the terrorist group was in hiding to recruit new members and spread Communism in the forest area near the village of Na Bua, where our

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39 NA/(3) OP. 0201. 9/44. Summary of the council of ministers, August 11, 1955.

40 AMFA (N) /66PO.1. 258. Note from the Asia-Oceania Directorate, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 11, 1962.

41 AMFA (N) /66PO.1. 263. “On subversion,” December 1964.

42 *Ibid.*

43 AMFA (N) /66PO.1. 263. Note from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, April 12, 1965.

services made an excursion to continue their research. That, until August 8, at 6.30 a.m., when they discovered about 15 terrorists. They fired at our men and a fight ensued that lasted for half an hour. The terrorists finally fled. Our services then seized firearms, ammunition, medical equipment, and Communist propaganda materials in large quantities. The result of the clash was, on the Police side, one gunshot death; Police Sergeant Chairat Singduang, and two injured; Police Colonel Sagnat Choranaphirom and Corporal Monchai Phodokmaifai. On the terrorist side, there was one shot dead, Mr. Yon Khamphueak.”<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

Stressing the link between the repression of Khrong Chandawong’s movement, the political and military activities of the Thai refugees in Laos and the development of the armed struggle from the mid-1960s, the French Ambassador reported the following in November 1966:

“Kuankem [Khuankhrong] Chandawong, daughter of the Communist leader [Khrong] Chandawong who was shot by order of Marshal Sarit, broke into [Nong Khai] province at the head of a group of around 50 men in uniform. After successively invading several villages and holding propaganda sessions where the obedience of Bangkok leaders to Washington’s slogans was stigmatized, the group split into five columns and managed to escape the surrounding maneuver of the soldiers from the Udon base supported by helicopters, and succeeded in reaching Laos from where they had come.

“Kuankem Chandawong, who is in her twenties, has been actively involved in the organization of subversive activities in the Northeast for several months.”<sup>45</sup>

The same note reported that the head of the Patriotic Front

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44 NA/(1) MI. 3. 1. 2. 16. D. 62.

45 AMFA (N) /66PO.1. 263. The French Ambassador to Thailand, A. Clarac, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, November 17, 1966.

in Thailand, Yod Tisawat, “a former parliamentarian,” had several times “crossed the border” from Laos to organize meetings of “cadres” in the provinces of Udon Thani, Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon, Roi Et and Maha Sarakham. By the mid-1960s, the left bank of the Mekong was emerging as a refuge, training center, and rear base for the then predominantly communist Thai opposition. At the end of 1966, the Thai authorities designated as insecure areas the regions of Ban Nakae, in the province of Nakhon Phanom, and in the south of the Phu Phan, the districts of Amnat Charoen and Trakan Phutphon, in the north of the province of Ubon, the region between Phon Phisai and Sawang Daen Din, in the provinces of Nong Khai and Sakon Nakhon.<sup>46</sup>

## **Abbreviations**

NA:	National Archives (หอจดหมายเหตุแห่งชาติ)
MI:	Ministry of the Interior (กระทรวงมหาดไทย)
OP:	Office of the Prime Minister (สำนักนายกรัฐมนตรี)
F:	File (ปีก)
AMFA (N):	Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Archives du Ministères des Affaires étrangères, Nantes)

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<sup>46</sup> 46 AMFA (N)/66PO. 1. 263. The French Ambassador to Thailand, A. Clarac, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, December 1st, 1966.

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