
Part Two: Political, Diplomatic and Military Issues

The Japanese Interregnum in Indochina: A Comparative Perspective

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Introduction

The final months of World War Two, from the Japanese *coup de force* of 9 March 1945 through the period of Japan's surrender to the Allies, represent a crucial stage in the decolonization of the three countries of Indochina whose significance is sometimes overlooked or at least overshadowed, particularly in the case of Vietnam, by the more “exciting” events of August 1945. In each case, the French fall from power presented an opportunity for moderate nationalist elements and a reigning monarch—Bảo Đại, Norodom Sihanouk, and Sisavangvong—to exercise a somewhat greater degree of authority than before. The outcome of these events was different in each country. In Cambodia, Sihanouk consolidated his authority sufficiently to navigate the transition back to colonial rule when the French returned. In Laos, King Sisavangvong (who only accepted “independence” under duress) would be temporarily eclipsed by the Lao Issara under rival Prince Phetsarath but would re-emerge triumphant—like Sihanouk, in cooperation with the French—after the Issara regime's flight into exile. Vietnamese Emperor Bảo Đại, on the other hand, though temporarily enjoying a higher profile than he had for the previous two decades of his reign, would be completely displaced by the August Revolution and would only return to the political stage at a later point in time and with little real success. A study of these three cases in comparative perspective allows us to better appreciate the significance of what we may call the “Japanese interregnum” for Indochina as a whole.

By 1945, the political landscape in the various *pays* (countries) of Indochina was quite diverse. Although the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) had a presence in all of them, in Cambodia and Laos its membership remained largely Vietnamese; only a small handful of Khmer and Lao Communist leaders had emerged, and there would be no separate parties for these two countries until the 1950s. The ICP seems to have remained totally quiescent in wartime Cambodia, and in Laos it only emerged from the shadows in the final months of the war. In Vietnam,¹ by contrast, the ICP through the Việt Minh had consolidated its authority over considerable stretches of territory, though it had to share political and geographical space with groups such as the Đại Việt Party, the Cao Đài, and the Hoà Hảo.

¹ There were of course three separate “*pays annamites*” under French rule, but in this paper “Vietnam” will be used to refer to them collectively.

Vietnamese nationalism had become fairly polarized, with numerous moderates and conservatives looking to Japan for support against the French, and the more radical elements sympathetic to the ICP. During the war the Japanese had selectively cultivated relations with the non-Communist elements, a policy which annoyed the French and stimulated political aspirations among those groups so favored but which arguably contributed little to their strength and popularity over the long term. Cambodia and Laos had a much smaller group of political elites, in both cases dominated by members of the royal family. Moreover, before March 1945 these two countries had generally been less impacted politically by the Japanese occupation than Vietnam.² Many nationalists in these two colonies were more concerned about the presence and influence of large Vietnamese communities than they were about French rule, and consequently they were less inclined to look to the Japanese for support against France.³

The *coup de force* of 9 March (known in Japanese as the *Meigo Sakusen*), by removing the French from power, allowed moderate nationalists to temporarily consolidate their power through nominally independent regimes. Although this “independence” was granted, delimited, and constrained by the Japanese, the Indochinese political elites nevertheless enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy than they had under the French, and more importantly the word “independence” was at least being bandied about after having been conspicuously absent from colonial discourse. Bảo Đại, together with his Prime Minister Trần Trọng Kim, endeavored to recover for his imperial government some of the authority and prestige that it had lost under decades of French “protection.” Sihanouk, too, acquired a government leader, the nationalist leader Son Ngoc Thanh. In Laos, Phetsarath shifted from being the senior civil servant in the colonial regime to a Prime Ministerial post under his cousin Sisavangvong.

This paper will consider three specific aspects of the Japanese interregnum. First, it will look at the relationship between the three rulers and their respective Prime Ministers. Second, it will examine the role of the ICP during the interregnum. Finally, it will consider how this five-month period shaped the decolonization of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

1. Rulers and Prime Ministers

It is not clear how much say Bảo Đại had in the choice of Trần Trọng Kim as his Prime Minister. While it seems certain that there was an attempt to recruit his former Interior Minister Ngô Đình Diệm for the job, Diệm would not have been a congenial choice for the Emperor given the former’s abrupt departure from his Cabinet in 1933, at which point he had made very public his disenchant-

² Most of Japan’s political influence among the Vietnamese was concentrated in Cochin China, whereas the economic consequences of the Japanese presence were most severe in Tonkin, where a serious famine in the final months of the war killed somewhere between one and two million people. For an overview of Japanese activities in Cambodia and Laos, see the chapters by Sasagawa and Kikuchi respectively in this volume.

³ Norodom Sihanouk claimed in one of his memoirs that the Japanese had given support to two of his cousins, both of whom “cast flirtatious eyes in their direction” in hopes of displacing him on the Throne, but this threat does not seem to have been a substantial one; Sihanouk, *Souvenirs doux et amers* (Paris: Hachette, 1981), p. 93.

ment with the imperial government under French authority. The Japanese were not unanimous in their support of Diệm, and he himself was not willing to work with Bảo Đại, preferring the long-time royal pretender Cường Để, whose hopes had been dashed by Japan's decision to keep the reigning Emperor on the throne rather than support his rival. Moreover, Diệm was probably a canny enough politician to understand that linking himself to a power which was on its way to losing the war would not benefit his personal interests.⁴ (Cường Để had spent several decades in exile, much of that time in Japan, and many pro-Japanese elements among the Vietnamese were in favor of his return as a replacement for Bảo Đại).⁵

Kim, a conservative intellectual who, like Diệm, had some links to the Japanese, had no real political background and was therefore less likely to overshadow Bảo Đại or compete with him for prestige, nor did he come with Diệm's personal and political baggage. The dynamic of the Bảo Đại-Trần Trọng Kim relationship is unclear from available sources but appears to have been relatively amicable. Kim assembled a Cabinet which was arguably better equipped for the task than Bảo Đại's "reform Cabinet" of the early 1930s, and collectively they kept the Empire limping along until the August Revolution.⁶ After those events brought an end to the Empire of Vietnam, Kim went into temporary exile and never re-entered politics.

Sihanouk, by contrast, had a much more tense relationship with Son Ngoc Thanh, who entered his Cabinet as Foreign Minister in May and then became Prime Minister shortly before the Japanese surrender (Thanh was a far more prominent figure than Ung Hy, who nominally headed the government until August, but as Finance Minister rather than a full-fledged Prime Minister). Thanh had close ties to the Japanese, had been living in Japan, and was clearly an outsider *vis-à-vis* the Cambodian royal elite, for whom he had little respect or sympathy. A half-Vietnamese ethnic Khmer from Cochinchina, he was not exactly republican but was certainly not a dedicated royalist and definitely no great admirer of Sihanouk (The feeling was mutual: the latter was later to compare Thanh's time in power with that of a Nazi *Gauleiter* in German-occupied Europe).⁷ Thanh's clear loyalties to Japan and his evident

⁴ This argument is made in André Nguyễn Văn Châu, *Lifetime in the Eye of the Storm: Ngô Đình Thị Hiệp, a Younger Sister of Late President Ngô Đình Diệm*, 2nd edn. (Texas: Erin Go Bragh Publishing), pp. 216–32; the author also claims that Diệm felt the Japanese had been too "duplicitous" in their dealings with the Vietnamese. For first-hand observations on Diệm, Bảo Đại, and Cường Để see the translated excerpts of Japanese diplomat Yokoyama Masayuki's memoirs in François Guillemot, "Knowledge in France of Japan and Indochina (1940–1945)," in Shiraishi Masaya ed., *Indochina, Thailand, Japan and France during World War II* (Tokyo: Waseda University Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, 2015), pp. 316–18. A detailed study of these events is in Masaya Shiraishi, "Background to the Formation of the Tran Trong Kim Government in April 1945: Japanese Plans for Governing Vietnam," in Takeshi Shiraishi and Motoo Furuta ed., *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1992), pp. 113–41.

⁵ The most detailed study of Cường Để is Trần Mỹ-Vân, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan: Prince Cường Để (1882–1951)* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁶ On the Kim Cabinet, see Bruce McFarland Lockhart, *The End of the Vietnamese Monarchy* (New Haven: Yale Council on Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), ch. 8; David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), ch. 6; Vũ Ngự Chiêu, *The Other Side of the 1945 Vietnamese Revolution* (Houston, TX: Văn Hoá, 1992); and Phạm Hồng Tung, *Nội các Trần Trọng Kim: bản chất, vai trò và vị trí lịch sử* (Hà Nội: Chính trị Quốc gia, 2009).

⁷ Sihanouk, *Souvenirs*, p. 109.

political ambitions created tensions between the two men. These tensions broke into the open with an attempted coup in August, apparently with Japanese backing, which temporarily strengthened Thanh's position but which Sihanouk ultimately turned to his advantage with the impending French return. Thanh would maintain a political role through the decolonization period, but as a bitter opponent of Sihanouk.⁸

The interregnum was a tense time in Laos as well, since Sisavangvong and Phetsarath not only represented rival branches of the royal family but had dramatically different loyalties. There is no evidence that Phetsarath was particularly pro-Japanese, but he resented French rule for its policy of encouraging Vietnamese immigration into Laos and was ready to pursue the cause of Lao independence. The King and Crown Prince Savang Vatthana, on the other hand, remained loyal to France and had little enthusiasm for Japanese-sponsored independence, not least insofar as it boosted Phetsarath's power and prestige (Although a high-ranking Japanese official, Consul Watanabe Taiso, arrived in Luang Phabang within two weeks of the *coup de force*, he was unable to persuade a reluctant Sisavangvong to declare independence until early April, when the sudden influx of Japanese troops persuaded the King that the French were really and truly out of power).⁹

This rivalry would become even more serious in the weeks following the Japanese surrender, when Phetsarath was closely linked to (though did not directly head) a new government under the Lao Issara. The Issara regime was built on the foundations of the "independent" government sanctioned by the Japanese, but it was still a different entity. The King's unwillingness to support this new government—again because of the combination of his pro-French sentiments and his antipathy towards Phetsarath—led to his being temporarily deposed. Although he was later reinstated in the face of a threatened French reoccupation, he was effectively disassociated from the anti-colonialist cause in Laos, whereas Phetsarath had become one of its most visible symbols.¹⁰

2. The ICP's Role

Vietnam's August Revolution is of course the important ICP victory—and indeed the sole one—of this period, and its foundations were laid during the interregnum and well before. Hồ Chí Minh and the Party leadership had correctly predicted that the Japanese–French collaboration would eventually come to an end, and by the time it did, in March 1945, it was clear that Japan's defeat was only a matter of time. Just as it had for most of the war, the ICP wisely chose not to challenge the Japanese military, since provoking armed clashes with an enemy which was itself already facing defeat and which had

⁸ See David P. Chandler, "The Kingdom of Kampuchea, March–October 1945: Japanese-sponsored Independence in Cambodia in World War II," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 17, 1 (1986): 80–93; Milton Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light Prince of Darkness* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1994), ch. 3–4; and the Sasagawa chapter in this volume.

⁹ Kikuchi Yoko, "Raosu–Nihon Kanki no Kosatsu: Dainiji Sekai Taisenki wo Chushin ni" [Laos–Japan Relations During World War II], *Ajia Taiheiyō Tokyū*, 20 (2013), p. 79.

¹⁰ An excellent overview of Phetsarath's career is in Søren Ivarsson and Christopher Goscha, "Prince Phetsarath (1890–1959): Nationalism and Royalty in the Making of Modern Laos," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 38, 1 (2007): 55–81.

generally left the rural areas alone would not be a strategically sound decision. It is certain that the Party had little respect for the Trần Trọng Kim government, any more than it did for Bảo Đại, who was viewed as a feudal collaborator if not a downright traitor. However, it did not confront the regime directly, concentrating instead on expanding its liberated zone through famine relief measures and localized seizures of power. This strategy left the ICP in a strong position during the power vacuum between the Japanese surrender and the Allied reoccupation and enabled the Việt Minh to take the lead in the August Revolution, establishing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

For Laos, it seems clear that the ICP (more specifically, the Việt Minh) was building up a support base in the comparatively large urban Việt Kiều (Vietnamese immigrant) communities. (It should be remembered that the Vietnamese constituted the largest ethnic group in all major Lao towns except for Luang Phabang.) We know very little about their activities, however, and it is tempting to suggest that much of the Việt Minh's work among them was informal and more or less off the official French radar screen. After 9 March there were some clashes between Lao and Vietnamese in certain towns, but these may well have been driven by ethnic tensions rather than political divisions.¹¹ During the weeks after the Japanese surrender, when the short-lived Lao Issara government was in power, the Việt Kiều communities actively came out on its side, and the Việt Minh were the most logical link between the two groups. Although Phetsarath and the Issara leaders did not have pro-Vietnamese sympathies, by early October they were joined by Phetsarath's half-brother Souphanouvong, who was firmly in the Việt Minh camp. Thus while the ICP was not a major player in the events of 1945, it had least a supporting role among the Việt Kiều.¹²

This is certainly more than could be said for Cambodia. Although there was a sizable Vietnamese minority, it was more diverse in socio-economic terms and more spatially diffused than was the case in Laos, and it does not seem to have been as politically engaged as the Lao Việt Kiều. While the ICP did have a small Khmer following by 1945, there was no significant Party activity until after the French return. Son Ngoc Thanh was not as anti-Vietnamese as most of the Cambodian elite (not least because of his ethnicity), but he was certainly no Communist, and he apparently had no political links to Vietnam at this point in time. Thus political developments in Cambodia during the interregnum—notably the activities of nationalists linked to the Buddhist Institute and *Nagara Vatta* newspaper were largely a Cambodian and non-Communist affair.¹³

¹¹ See Michel Caply, "Le Japon et l'indépendance du Laos," *Revue d'histoire de la Deuxième guerre mondiale*, 86 (1972): 67–82, which portrays elements of the Vietnamese community as virulently and violently anti-French. The author, whose real name was Jean Deuve, is hardly an unbiased source since he experienced these events first hand after parachuting into Laos in early 1945. His picture of Vietnamese militants is certainly credible, however, and fits with the account of the American OSS Raven Mission which reached Laos in September and had little sympathy for the French; see Arthur Dommen and George Dalley, "The OSS in Laos: The 1945 Raven Mission and American Policy," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 22, 2 (1991): 327–46.

¹² Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Political Struggles in Laos 1930–1954* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1988); Bruce M. Lockhart, "Narrating 1945 in Lao Historiography," in Christopher E. Goscha and Soren Ivarsson ed., *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003), pp. 129–63.

¹³ Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 2nd edn (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004).

3. Long-Term Consequences

For Vietnam, it has been tempting to see the Japanese interregnum as a brief blip on the historical radar screen that quickly faded from sight after the August Revolution. However, as recent scholarship has shown, the interlude of the Bảo Đại-Trần Trọng Kim government did have longer-term consequences. First of all, it was able to begin mobilizing nationalist sentiment, particularly among youth, which would later help to strengthen the Việt Minh's base of support.¹⁴ This was particularly the case in urban areas, which were more directly accessible to the government. Secondly, as David Marr has demonstrated, the DRV government established in September 1945 was to a significant extent built on the administrative foundations of the Empire of Annam.¹⁵ Finally, a case can be made that without the reinvigoration (however fleeting) of the monarchy during these five months, Bảo Đại's forced abdication in August might well have been the definitive end of his political career. Although the French-sponsored "Bảo Đại solution" of the late 1940s and early 1950s was largely a failure, it might never have been attempted in the first place if Bảo Đại had remained simply an impotent French puppet until the end of the Nguyễn dynasty.

For Cambodia the continuity between the interregnum and decolonization is much clearer. Sihanouk had been on the throne since 1941 but as a "protected ruler" (*souverain protégé*) had been largely removed from political developments until the *coup de force* changed his circumstances. Japanese-sponsored "independence" gave him the opportunity to make use of his considerable personal charisma and political wiles. From March 1945 onward, he would remain the single most dominant figure in Cambodian politics. Although French reoccupation in 1945–6 meant that genuine independence was delayed for several more years, Sihanouk's strategic decision to jump back on the French bandwagon from which he had rather abruptly alighted in March and work towards that independence in cooperation with the French ensured that he would become its main architect. Despite his idiosyncrasies, Sihanouk was fundamentally much less hostile to the French than Thanh was, and this stance enabled him to stay in power through the turbulent years of decolonization.

The Lao case is the most complex of the three. In some important respects, the nationalist gains made by Phetsarath and the Lao Issara in 1945 were largely nullified by the French reoccupation of Laos in early 1946, when virtually the entire Issara government fled across the Mekong to Thailand. Phetsarath was never again to play a significant role in Lao politics, even after his return from exile in the late 1950s. His cousin King Sisavangvong, by welcoming back the French and effectively voiding the independence proclaimed in 1945, which he had only very grudgingly accepted in the first place and under considerable Japanese pressure, ensured the victory of moderate royalist nationalism.

The number of moderate nationalists working with the King gradually expanded over the course of

¹⁴ See Phạm Hồng Tung, *Nội các Trần Trọng Kim*, pp. 212–14. To some extent this mobilization was built on the foundations laid by similar activities under the Decoux regime; see Anne Raffin, *Youth Mobilization in Vichy Indochina and Its Legacies, 1940 to 1970* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).

¹⁵ Marr, *Vietnam 1945* and David Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945–46)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

the First Indochina War. With the exception of Phetsarath, all of the Lao Issara leaders who took part in the events of 1945 would return to Laos and remain on the political stage for the next three decades, including Souphanouvong and Phetsarath's full brother Souvanna Phouma. Both of these princes had been involved with the Issara government but were to go in very different directions following their return. Souphanouvong joined the Communist-led Neo Lao Issara (the forerunner of the Pathet Lao), while Souvanna Phouma joined the Royal Lao Government along with the rest of the former exiles. Although this regime, re-established by the French after their reconquest of Laos in 1946, represented a significant "disconnect" with the Issara movement, at a symbolic level, that movement and the events of 1945 have remained part of the political heritage claimed by Communist and non-Communist Lao nationalists alike.¹⁶

The contrast between the fate of the Vietnamese monarchy on the one hand and its Lao and Cambodian counterparts on the other hand is instructive. As noted above, although Bảo Đại was brought out of exile by the French in the late 1940s and put at the head of a congeries of anti-Communist figures and movements known collectively as the State of Vietnam, this attempt to build a viable alternative to Hồ's DRV was largely a failure, not least because of Bảo Đại's personal failure to build up any substantial base of support. In Cambodia and Laos, on the other hand, the two royal governments—which joined Bảo Đại's as the Associated States of Indochina—survived the challenge of the ICP-led revolutionary movements (the Khmer Issarak and Neo Lao Issara respectively). Although these movements viewed the royal governments as illegitimate, it was Sihanouk and Sisavangvong and not the revolutionaries who negotiated successive treaties of autonomy with the French and ultimately oversaw the transition to independence after France's final defeat in Indochina. When the Geneva Conference was held, Sihanouk was able to persuade the organizing powers that the Khmer Issarak did not even deserve a place at the negotiating table. The Lao revolutionaries (soon to be known as the Pathet Lao) were also partially delegitimized by Geneva in that their resistance government was not recognized and their only gain was restaging areas in two provinces, on the assumption that they would eventually rejoin the Royal Loyal Government. Laos remained a monarchy until 1975 and Cambodia until Sihanouk's overthrow in 1970, whereas the Vietnamese Empire had ceased to exist in 1945. (When Bảo Đại returned to power in the late 1940s it was as a non-royal Chief of State.)

Conclusion

To conclude, the months which followed the Japanese *coup de force* of March 1945 were in some respects the beginning of the decolonization process, as was the case elsewhere in Southeast Asia, particularly in Burma and Indonesia. Although it was only in Cambodia that the leader of a Japanese-sponsored regime remained in a pre-eminent political role over the long term, throughout Indochina the interregnum gave moderate nationalists a taste of power and autonomy. In the words of the late histo-

¹⁶ See Lockhart, "Narrating 1945 in Lao Historiography."

rian Ralph B. Smith, speaking specifically about Vietnam during these few months, “Vietnam may not have gained real independence in the fullest sense, but for the first time genuine independence became a real possibility.”¹⁷ When the French re-occupied Indochina, whether peacefully or violently depending on the circumstances, it was clear even to the most ardently Francophile Indochinese that things could not go back to the way they had been before the arrival of the Japanese. In the case of Cambodia, as David Chandler has elegantly put it, this short period “close[d] with the torn fabric of French controls sewn back together”¹⁸—but not as tightly as before and certainly with much less appearance of permanence; the same would be true for Laos within a few months’ time. In Vietnam, the fabric was irreparably torn. Unfortunately this reality was much less clear to many French policymakers, and the largely political developments of 1945 were soon overshadowed by the military conflict of the First Indochina War. During this conflict, it can be suggested, the rivalries between different groups of moderate nationalists—and, to a lesser extent, between those nationalists and forces linked to the Việt Minh—were shaped by the events of the interregnum that preceded the French return.

It is also useful to consider both the five-month interregnum and the whole Japanese Occupation of Indochina in a broader Southeast Asian context. One of the most striking aspects of the region’s modern history is the number of political figures whose careers were either launched or boosted by their wartime cooperation/collaboration with the Japanese: Sukarno and Aung San are the most prominent examples. Even individuals such as Ba Maw in Burma and José Laurel in the Philippines, who headed Japanese-established governments and did have brief difficulties with the Allies after the war, were able to “bounce back” and continue their political activities after independence. Thailand’s Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram, whose alliance with the Japanese became a liability and was a prominent factor in his fall from power in 1944, was likewise able to return to leadership within two years of the war’s end. By contrast, top collaborators with the Nazis in occupied Europe like Pierre Laval (France), Anton Mussert (Netherlands), and Vidkun Quisling (Norway) were all executed after the war. China’s Wang Jingwei died before the war ended, but had he lived, he would almost certainly have been put to death by the Guomindang like many of his political allies.

The Southeast Asian examples, along with the men and movements studied in this paper, remind us of at least two important lessons to keep in mind when we consider the Japanese Occupation. Firstly, World War Two, with its temporary displacement of the colonial governments is often seen—correctly—as a fatal blow to the Western powers’ prestige which marked the beginning of the end of colonialism (This was certainly true for the French in Indochina as well, and not just after the March 1945 *coup de force*). Yet, in many respects, it also marked a beginning insofar as many of the politicians from the wartime years would become the leaders of post-independence Southeast Asia.

Secondly, we should not be too quick to dismiss Japan’s Southeast Asian collaborators and supporters—in Indochina or elsewhere—as naïve or opportunistic. In the early years of the war, it was not at

¹⁷ Ralph B. Smith, “The Japanese in Indochina and the Coup of March 1945,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 9, 2 (1978), p. 287.

¹⁸ Chandler, “Kingdom of Kampuchea,” p. 91.

all a foregone conclusion that the Japanese would eventually be defeated and that the colonial masters would return (with varying degrees of success). The individual acts of brutality towards Southeast Asian populations that would eventually alienate popular support for the Japanese presence occurred gradually over the course of the Occupation (An important exception was Malaya and Singapore, where the *Sook Ching* or Purification campaign of executions began soon after the Japanese invasion). Indochinese saw very little brutality, and the most violent and tragic consequence of the Japanese presence—the famine in Tonkin—would only occur in the final months of the war. In 1941 and 1942, the Greater East Asian Prosperity Sphere appeared to many Southeast Asian nationalists of different political stripes as much more than mere rhetoric, and they cannot be faulted for having enthusiastically signed on to the Japanese cause. The Japanese Occupation, then, was much more than a military event; it represents a crucial chapter in the history of Southeast Asian nationalism.