

Laos: A Country Study. Edited by ANDREA MATLES SAVADA. Area Handbook Series. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1995. xliii, 366 pp. \$21.00.

This is the third in the Area Handbook Series on Laos, and like the previous two is designed to provide a broad, nonspecialized introduction to the country. After a brief chronology and country profile and a rather longer introduction by the editor, five chapters cover history, society, economy, government and politics, and national security. The appendix provides sixteen useful tables, followed by a fairly extensive bibliography (arranged to reflect the five chapters, which inevitably results in some repetition), a rather idiosyncratic glossary, and an index. The text is lightened by several average-quality illustrations and six maps.

As an introduction to the Lao People's Democratic Republic, this volume has both strengths and weaknesses. It is written in a readable style by experts on the country, and is full of accurate and relevant information. What one misses in an introductory text such as this is anything on language (there is nothing on the transcription or pronunciation of Lao words), literature, the fine arts, or culture in general—all areas included in the previous edition.

Also, whereas in the previous edition the six coauthors were jointly responsible, in the new edition the authors of each chapter are named. The historical overview is the work of Arthur Dommen, a political commentator with a long interest in Laos. Not surprisingly, his history is heavily weighted towards the recent period. Treatment of the early history of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang is highly schematic: not even the great kings who give their names to the main streets of Vientiane are mentioned (though a couple of obscure French explorers are), and the reader is given no idea why the kingdom either divided or declined. Fifty years of French colonialism are covered in not much more than a page, with only the briefest mention of the series of tribal revolts that formed the historical basis for the construction of revolutionary Pathet Lao nationalism.

Dommen is on much firmer ground where he draws on his own research on the postindependence and American periods. Precise dates and details for the 1950s and early 1960s contrast, however, with the selective treatment given to the post-1975 communist regime. The difficulty in any volume such as this lies in avoiding repetition, but even so the crucial decisions leading to introduction of the New Economic Mechanism and a market economy in Laos surely rate a mention as important historical developments over the last few years.

The chapter on society by W. Randall Ireson pays special attention to the environmental context. Sections on ethnic minorities and rural life draw on Ireson's own experience working in Laos for an American NGO. Throughout, interesting contrasts are pointed out between the representative groups he chooses—lowland Lao, Khammu and Lam and Hmong—in everything from house construction to social relationships and religion. Ireson is equally enlightening on urban society, Buddhism and animism, and health and education.

Susannah Hopkins contributes a solid chapter on the economy, drawing heavily on World Bank and United Nations reports. Attention is given to broad policies on agriculture, industry, and the environment. Some sections (mining, tourism) are briefer than one would like, but others (energy, roads) are more informative. Most useful, however, are discussions on those perennial problems besetting the Lao government, the budget and balance of payment deficits, taking account of the

financial sector, aid and investment. Statistics are supplied liberally (even if the accuracy of some is doubtful) but are not obtrusive.

The chapter on government and politics by MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff is, as might be expected from such experienced observers, clear, logically constructed, and comprehensive. The authors provide a succinct but insightful glimpse into the workings of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, including its leadership, ideology, and obsession with secrecy, followed by examination of the constitution and the structure of government. Full attention is given to the question of human rights, armed and political opposition to the regime, and refugees, while the discussion of foreign policy includes consideration of bureaucratic and economic, as well as political, constraints on Lao foreign relations. All in all, an excellent overview.

The briefest and least satisfying chapter is Nicholas C. Auclair's contribution on national security, but then this was probably the most difficult one to research and write. If secrecy has been characteristic of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, it has been even more so of the Lao People's Army. No serious studies have been made of the LPA: even its size is a matter of some speculation. Thus this chapter, fleshed out as it is through reference to the criminal justice system and narcotics (both mentioned elsewhere), leaves more questions than it provides answers.

One would like to know, for example, what the current relationship is between the LPA and the Vietnamese military; what the ethnic makeup of the LPA is; and whether it serves as an integrating force in Lao society. A serious omission is any discussion of the LPA's economic enterprises, particularly the powerful Mountainous Areas Development Company which, since its establishment in 1984, has expanded to cover not only forestry (much of its wealth comes from logging concessions) but also construction, industry, trade, and tourism. Another omission is the crucial relationship between the LPA and the Party. At the Party's Sixth Congress in March 1996, the military effectively took control of the Politburo (six out of nine members are now generals). Since the research for this volume was completed in July 1994, one can hardly expect this development to have been foreseen. It is just that the context might have been better presented.

That said, this is a useful introductory text for those wishing to know something about the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and as such it is a welcome addition to the still very limited literature on Laos.

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Minabasa Past and Present: Tradition and Transition in an Outer Island Region of Indonesia. Edited by REIMAR SCHEFOLD. Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1995. 128 pp.

Minabasa Past and Present seeks to show how the Minahasans have preserved characteristic features of their traditional culture under a modernized and apparently Westernized facade. But the eight contributions written for this volume and edited by Schefold add more insight to our perception of this volcanic and beautifully landscaped area of North Sulawesi than merely a demonstration of cultural continuity would suggest. Minahasa represents a regency of its own with a population of approximately one million inhabitants divided into eight subgroups with related