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7
LAOS: FROM BUDDHIST KINGDOM TO MARXIST STATE[1]

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INTRODUCTION

The interrelationship between Buddhism and politics in Laos has deep historical roots. The earliest traces of Buddhism within what are now the geographical limits of the modern Lao state date back to the sixth or seventh centuries on the plain of Viang Chan (Vientiane), and some form of Buddhism was known in Luang Phrabāng well before the founding of the Lao kingdom of Lān Xāng in the mid fourteenth-century (Gagneux 1972; Lévy 1940).[2]

The political importance of Buddhism throughout the classical period of Lao history derived from the legitimation it provided for the exercise of power at all levels of Lao society. Theravāda Buddhism, the form practised in Laos, legitimized monarchical rule by subsuming the earlier basis of legitimation through descent from Khun Bôrom mythical ancestor of the Lao race, and the worship of powerful territorial spirits (*phī meuang*) within a universalized Lao-Buddhist world-view.

Introductory parts of various Lao chronicles told how the Buddha himself had visited Laos, leaving the imprint of his footstep here and there, and prophesying that in this land in the future the *dhamma* would flourish. It was the concepts of *kamma* and rebirth, however, that both provided the basis for legitimation of power and structured the Lao-Buddhist world-view. Kings were reborn into the royal line as a result of their accumulated *kamma*. The power they exercised was thus theirs by right through the working out of universal law. In a similar way, Buddhism legitimized the entire hierarchical Lao social order, for whether one was noble or commoner, free or slave, also depended on *kamma* (Stuart-Fox 1983, 1996).

While Buddhism thus legitimized the exercise of power, however, that power was not arbitrary. The king was expected to rule as a *Thammarāxa* (*Dhammarāja*) in accordance with the *Thammaxāt*, rules of kingly behaviour based on Buddhist moral principles. Moreover, though Buddhism justified the rigidity of the social hierarchy, the *saṅgha* itself provided a means of social mobility for the talented and ambitious. To be a monk brought with it honour and status. Monks officiated on state occasions, advised kings, and often took the lead in resolving political crises (including succession disputes). Senior abbots were royal appointees, and the relationship between the monarchy and the *saṅgha* was close and mutually supportive (Stuart-Fox 1998).

The nineteenth-century marked the nadir of Lao fortunes, both politically and for the Lao *saṅgha*. Two centuries earlier, Viang Chan, then capital of the extensive Lao kingdom of Lān Xāng, had attracted monks from throughout Buddhist Southeast Asia to study at its monasteries. A visiting Dutch merchant at the time remarked that monks in Viang Chan were 'more numerous than the soldiers of the Emperor of Germany'. But the division of Lān Xāng, into three separate kingdoms early in the eighteenth century condemned all three to become tributaries of Siam. When in 1827 the last king of Viang Chan attempted to throw off Siamese suzerainty, his capital was sacked and destroyed. Only one pagoda (*vat*) and the stupa of Thāt Luang were spared. Thereafter only in Luang Phrabāng did limited royal patronage maintain some semblance of Buddhist scholarship, ceremonial and art.

THE FRENCH ASCENDANCY

In 1893 French gunboat diplomacy forced Siam to part with all Lao territory east of the Mekong. A further treaty in 1907 established the borders of the modern Lao state. For the French, however, Laos was little more than a hinterland for Vietnam, 'rounding out' as they put it, French Indochina. First priorities for the French when they took control of Laos were administration and taxation (Stuart-Fox 1995). Interest in Buddhism was minimal, for religion could safely be left to the Lao. If the Lao *saṅgha* was in a parlous state, then that was a problem for the Lao: it warranted no official French concern.

French colonialism was more insidious in its impact, however, than benign neglect might suggest, for French rule effectively eliminated any political influence for Buddhism in Laos. In part this was due to the separation of *saṅgha* and state, but other factors were also at play. To begin with, the choice of Viang Chan as the seat of colonial administration left the king of Luang Phrabāng as little more than a marginalized puppet symbolically ruling in a nominal protectorate. Moreover, since evidently the king ruled not by karmic right but by benevolent permission of the French Résident Supérieur, religious ritual legitimizing his right to rule was reduced to little more than entertainment, in the eyes of some, at least, of the French-educated Lao élite. Buddhism may have retained a nostalgic cultural significance (Abhay 1959), but it almost entirely lost its political legitimizing function. Political power was exercised in colonial Laos solely on the basis of French law backed by French force.

Buddhism was further marginalized in the colonial state by being deprived of its primary educative role, at least in the centres of power. Some attempt was made to use the *saṅgha* as an inexpensive means of providing rudimentary primary education in Lao (in preference to introducing a costly comprehensive state education system) through so-called 'pagoda schools'. Some training for monk-teachers and minimal facilities were provided, but the project was not an educational success. Moreover, it relegated Buddhism to the status of second

class provider for the state, since anyone with ambitions for their children preferred to send them to secular French-language schools.

Two developments in the 1920s and 1930s did something to retrieve the fortunes of Lao Buddhism. One was growing interest in Lao archaeology and history encouraged by the work of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient; the other was the impact on Lao Buddhism *per se* resulting from establishment of a Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh. In both French scholars took the lead, enthusiastically encouraged in Laos by the senior Lao figure in the colonial administration, Prince Phetsarāt Rattanavongsā, and his personal secretary, Sīla Vīravong. While historical studies began to reveal something of the greatness of the Kingdom of Lān Xāng, of greater symbolic significance was the reconstruction of the Thāt Luang (damaged by Chinese bandits digging for treasure in the 1870s) and the rebuilding of Vat Phra Kaeo (temple of the Emerald Buddha in Viang Chan before it was carried off to Bangkok in 1779). Several young monks were sent to Phnom Penh to pursue higher Buddhist studies, while courses in Pāli began to be taught in Viang Chan and Luang Phrabāng. The quality of monastic education and discipline were also improved through a new set of statutes reorganizing the structure of the *saṅgha* and its administration (Meyer 1931, 53).

By the late 1930s Lao Buddhism had experienced something of a 'renaissance' (Zago 1973, 133). While the level of knowledge and discipline in rural monasteries still left much to be desired, in the urban areas new *vat* were constructed and old ones repaired. In 1937 a College of Pāli was established in Viang Chan. By 1940, there were in round figures 4,000 monks and novices (i.e. aged less than 20) in the Lao *saṅgha* (Zago 1973, 135, n.14). Buddhism was thus in a position to play some part in the development of nationalist sentiment through the activities of the National Renovation Movement of the early 1940s.[3] Monks were among those strongly opposed to French moves to write Lao using Roman script, a project defeated largely through the opposition of Prince Phetsarāt. Buddhism figured too in the rediscovery of Lao history and culture celebrated in the pages of the Movement's news-sheet, *Lao Nyai*.

While the *saṅgha* played no direct role in the dramatic events of 1945 (internment of the French, declaration of Lao independence, Japan's surrender, establishment of an independent Lao government), monks were among the eager supporters of the Lao Issara (Free Laos) movement. With the French reconquest of Laos in May 1946, the Lao Issara government was forced into exile in Thailand and it was left to monks who remained behind to fan nationalist sentiments, and surreptitiously raise funds at Buddhist festivals to support the independence movement (Khamtan Thepbuali 1975, 36). Most were stongly nationalistic, opposing both continued French influence and the Viet Minh. So when in 1949 the Lao Issara divided into moderates and radical Marxists (the Pathēt Lao), only a handful of activist monks left the *saṅgha* to join the revolutionary movement.

THE KINGDOM OF LAOS

In 1946 the protectorate of Luang Phrabāng was combined with the directly administered provinces of central and southern Laos to form a single unified Kingdom of Laos, but it was not until 1949 that Laos gained a measure of real independence. Not until October 1953, under pressure from events in Vietnam, did France agree to full Lao independence. By that time, in part perhaps due to the uncertainties of war and fear of conscription, the number of monks and novices had increased to 13,500, more than three times the number in 1940 (Zago 1973, 135, n.14).

Under Article 5 of the 1947 constitution, Buddhism was declared the state religion, but it was not clear what role, beyond a purely ceremonial one, the *saṅgha* would play in Lao politics. The politicians handed power by France were almost without exception members of powerful families and clans from the three regions – north, centre and south – into which the country naturally divided. Moreover, they were French-educated, with a respect for French secular institutions. The King of Luang Phrabāng had been proclaimed King of Laos, but he was to be a constitutional monarch, safely removed (in Luang Phrabāng) from the centre of political power (in Viang Chan where the National Assembly met). Lao politicians looked not to the *saṅgha* for political legitimation, but to the constitution and the electorate.

But this was only part of the story, for in the popular mind the high social status of those elected to parliament or public office was still underwritten by a Buddhist world-view. Social status depended in part on family connections, in part on education, but it was belief in *kamma* that enabled such men to claim political office, for their positions of wealth and social prestige were implicitly accepted as theirs by right of their own accumulated merit. Conceptions that were essentially Buddhist thus continued to influence the shape of Lao politics, by reinforcing the claims of a conservative social élite to wield political power.

For three years after the Geneva Agreements of 1954 brought an end to the First Indochina war, negotiations continued between the Royal Lao government and the Pathēt Lao revolutionary movement aimed at reintegrating Pathēt Lao controlled areas into the Royal Lao administration. At last in November 1957, a Provisional (First) Coalition government was formed in which the Pathēt Lao were given two ministries, one of which was Religious Affairs. It was a fateful decision, one that set new parameters for the relationship between Buddhism and politics in Laos.

The incongruity of a communist minister, Phūmī Vongvichit, taking charge of the religion portfolio should not obscure the Pathēt Lao rationale for accepting it. The Ministry of Religious Affairs was responsible for supervising the *saṅgha*, the only nationwide organization independent of the civil administration that penetrated down to the village level. Moreover, as anyone could become a monk, the Pathēt Lao could easily infiltrate the *saṅgha* to propagate its message of 'true' national independence and anti-imperialism (aimed by then primarily at the United States). Not only did the *saṅgha* provide an ideal

communications network, the Ministry itself used government funds to bring monks to Viang Chan to attend seminars, nominally to discuss religious matters, but in fact providing a forum discussion of social and political affairs.

So effective was Phūmī Vongvichit's politicization of the *saṅgha* that one of the primary tasks of the right-wing government that took power after the collapse of the First Coalition was to subordinate the *saṅgha* to much closer government control. Under the terms of Royal Ordinance 160, promulgated on 25 May 1959, monastic organization was brought into line with the civil administration of province, district, canton and village. Officials at each level of the *saṅgha*, from the abbot of a monastery on up, were henceforth appointed by the chief monk at the next highest level, with the endorsement of his administrative counterpart – who was thus in a position to veto any nominee to whom the government objected. Election of the *Saṅgharāja* to head the Order was by secret ballot among senior monks, from nominees vetted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. No one over the age of 18 could join the *saṅgha* without the written permission of the district chief, and had to carry a government-issued identity card. Civil authorities had to be notified not only when a monk left the *saṅgha*, but whenever he travelled beyond the district where his *vat* was located (Kruong Pathoumxad 1959). In fact, all monastic correspondence had to be forwarded through the secular authorities, who were also represented on monastic disciplinary tribunals.

This heavy-handed government response aimed not just to eliminate Pathēt Lao influence in the *saṅgha*, but to replace it with overt government control. With the backing, and on the advice, of the United States, since 1954 the dominant foreign power and principal aid-giver in Laos, the right-wing government attempted to use the *saṅgha* as the Pathēt Lao had done, as an instrument of government policy. In pursuit of this aim, the government attempted to involve the *saṅgha* not just in preaching anti-Pathēt Lao propaganda, but in actively supporting and working for government policies and programmes. It also encouraged extension, especially in southern Laos, of the strongly anti-communist Thai school of Theravāda Buddhism known as the Thammanyut-nikāy (though by far the majority of Lao monks belonged to the rival Mahā-nikāy).[4]

These moves provoked considerable opposition from within the *saṅgha*, leading to formation of two clandestine movements: one of 'novices in defence of their rights'; the other of 'young monks opposed to the Thai Thammanyut-nikāy'. While the former demanded improved and more relevant education for novices, including the right to read newspapers and discuss politics, the latter aimed to reduce Thai influence in Laos. Most of the agitation occurred in Viang Chan, and centred on demands for a return to the pre-1959 organization of the *saṅgha*, reinstatement of monks and senior lay officials dismissed for political reasons, including the *Saṅgharāja* and the principal of the Pāli school, and a return to monastic control of monastic affairs (Lao People's Democratic Republic 1979, 27–8). For the first time ever, in February 1960 a group of monks mounted a placard-waving demonstration, which rightist politicians denounced

and leftists supported. Government attempts to smother dissent thus enabled the Pathēt Lao to pose as champions of monastic autonomy, and of the protection of Buddhism as the national religion and guardian of Lao culture (Halpern 1964, 57–8).

Just how politicized the Lao *saṅgha* had become was evident from the popular response that greeted the August 1960 *coup d'état*. Captain Kônglae's call for an end to civil conflict and return to a policy of strict neutrality with respect to Cold War divisions immediately struck sympathetic chords among younger monks and novices. Once again monks took to the streets to demonstrate in favour of national reconciliation, neutrality, and an end to political corruption. Monks also often took the lead in the intense political discussions to which the *coup* gave rise. When rightist forces retook Viang Chan four months later, many monks retreated north with the neutralists. Those who remained or subsequently returned to their *vat* retained their sympathies for the neutralist cause.

During the next year and a half until the signing in July 1962 of the Geneva Agreements on the neutrality of Laos, the Pathēt Lao, in alliance with the neutralists, gained considerable sympathy and support within the *saṅgha*. There were several reasons for this (discussed at greater length in Stuart-Fox and Bucknell 1982). One was what has been called the *saṅgha's* 'inverse class structure' (Halpern 1964, 60), in large part a legacy of colonial education and language policy. As French remained the language of government (officially until 1962, but even thereafter), the élite sent their children to French-language schools. Children from poor rural families, however, could only afford an education by joining the *saṅgha*, where the education they received in the vernacular hardly equipped them for government service. Thus the only alternative for the more ambitious was to seek promotion within the *saṅgha*. As a result, most of the monastic hierarchy came from poorer backgrounds and could thus more readily relate to Pathēt Lao class propaganda.

A related reason for Pathēt Lao influence in the *saṅgha* had to do with the political marginalization of Buddhism. This had occurred under the French but continued under the Royal Lao regime. Though Buddhism was the state religion, it had lost much of its legitimizing role. Government leaders did not seek the advice of senior monks as earlier kings had done, and though monks continued to perform a ceremonial role in such secular celebrations as Independence Day and Constitution Day, this was more show than substance. As a result, senior figures in the *saṅgha* hierarchy tended to busy themselves with purely religious affairs or withdraw into contemplative isolation, so leaving the way open for younger, politicized, activist monks to exert greater influence, both within the Order and among the lay community.

Other factors playing into Pathēt Lao hands included the division into Thammanyut and Mahā-nikāy, which led to dissension within the *saṅgha*. The low level of Buddhist education and lax discipline, especially in rural areas, permitted some *vat* to become centres of political agitation (Niehoff, 1964, p. 110); while the *saṅgha's* own conception of its cultural and moral responsibilities, especially in the face of increasing American influence and declining standards of public morality,[5] led some monks at least to question government policy (Halpern 1964, 60). Little surprise, therefore, that Pathēt Lao calls for social revolution and moral renewal should strike a responsive chord with many younger monks.

Under the impact of the war in Vietnam, the Second Coalition government in Laos collapsed as rapidly as had the First. In the decade during which the Indochina War engulfed much of the country, the struggle for influence within the Lao *saṅgha* intensified, with both sides attempting to win over influential monks to their cause. At the Second National Congress of the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) held in Xam Neua in April 1964, point nine of the action programme called upon all Lao people 'to respect freedom of belief; oppose all schemes to sabotage and split up religions; and protect pagodas and respect Buddhist monks' (quoted in Zasloff 1973, 124). Activities of the Pathēt Lao organized National Association of Lao Buddhists, a member organization of the Lao Patriotic Front, were publicized over Radio Pathēt Lao, including the holding of seminars to denounce American intervention in Laos, and the rebuilding of pagodas destroyed by American bombing.[6]

The extent to which Buddhism became drawn into the revolutionary struggle in Pathēt Lao areas is evident from a captured PL document dated 14 January 1968, which reports the dispatch of thirty-three monks to various districts 'to preach revolutionary ethics . . . to protect Buddhism, to revive the real morality, to explain the revolutionary tasks to the people, and to resist the psychological warfare of the American imperialists and their reactionary lackeys' (Zasloff 1973, 61). Thus did politics and religion combine, to the extent that in the Pathēt Lao zone the latter became little more than the vehicle for the former.

The LPF held its Third National Congress in October 1968, at which a twelve-point political programme was adopted. Point three on this programme is worth quoting in full for the light it sheds on the increasing politicization of the *saṅgha*:

> A. To respect and protect Buddhism, and unite with all religions, thus contributing to realizing national unity and strengthening the national forces against US aggression;
>
> B. To oppose all acts of sabotage by the US imperialists and their henchmen against Buddhism, such as distorting Buddhist catechism,[7] controlling Buddhist monks and forcing them to serve criminal schemes, destroying pagodas or using them to preach decadent American culture, sowing discord among various Buddhist factions, etc.;
>
> C. To respect and defend Buddhism, preserve the purity of monks and their right to practise Buddhism, protect pagodas, encourage unity and mutual assistance among monks and believers of various Buddhist factions, and encourage solidarity among priests and followers of other religions. (Zasloff 1973, 124)

Reading between the lines, one can discern not only the extent to which the Pathēt Lao were using Buddhism to advance their own political agenda, but also

their concern over the Viang Chan government's attempt to do the same. After the breakdown of the Second Coalition, the Royal Lao government made a concerted attempt to use the *saṅgha* as a vehicle for its own policies and propaganda. Lao-speaking Thammanyut monks from north-eastern Thailand were encouraged to come to Laos to spread their anti-communist message, while Lao monks were sent to study in Thailand. Meanwhile monks of both schools were recruited to promote government development programmes. How such policies were pursued and how effective they were are worth examining for the impact they had on the politicization of the Lao *saṅgha*.

In the early 1960s American officials working in rural development were arguing that Buddhism in Thailand and Laos could be a vehicle for the technical changes which they believed it was necessary to introduce in rural areas in order to raise living standards and so reduce the appeal of communism. More specifically, Buddhist monks could supply the village level leadership required to get small scale community development projects off the ground (as they had in Laos in the village self-help programme of 1959, when it was discovered that financing for more than half the projects was going to construct monastic buildings) (Niehoff 1964, 110).

This suggestion was taken up by two government agencies, the Commission for Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which together in 1970 organized the first of a series of seminars for monks on community development. At the time a monastic census placed the total number of monks in government controlled villages at 6,348, of whom 42.8 per cent were aged between 20 and 25 (Vongsavanh Boutasvath and Chapelier 1973, 4). The decision to involve the *saṅgha* was taken not only because of the leadership role of monks in rural communities, but also because of their openness to modernization – especially where the *saṅgha* itself benefited.

More seminars followed. Most of the (screened) monks who attended became enthusiastic once they understood the programme and were convinced its aims were compatible with Buddhist teachings. An evaluation of the programme found that monks who had attended seminars spoke up in favour of community development on public occasions, though few took any initiative in promoting new projects. For that they relied on government officials, who in turn were reluctant to request active participation by senior monks (Vongsavanh Boutsavath and Chapelier 1973, 36–7). Monks showing most initiative were singled out and sent to Thailand for further training.

In the zone under Royal Lao government control from 1964 to 1975, which included all major population centres, the 1959 regulations ensured government control of the *saṅgha* as an organization, but failed to gain its whole hearted support for government policies, let alone the war effort. As the war dragged on, the *saṅgha* became increasingly critical of the impact of Americanization on Lao culture and morality. Conspicuous consumption by those who profited from the war, the adoption of a Western lifestyle by their children, prostitution and drug addiction, all contrasted adversely with everything that Buddhism stood for. When the cease-fire of 1973 led to formation of the Third

Coalition government, most monks welcomed the opportunity for peace and national reconciliation.

THE TRANSITION OF POWER

In May 1974, at Pathēt Lao urging, the National Political Consultative Council meeting in Luang Phrabāng unanimously endorsed what came to be known as the 'eighteen-point political programme' the fifth point of which committed the Coalition government 'to respect Buddhism and other religions; preserve pagodas and temples and other historic sites; and defend the right to worship of Buddhist monks and other religious believers' (National Political Programme 1975). These guarantees reflected the liberal and democratic tone of the document as a whole, which was widely welcomed as providing the political basis for national unity and reconstruction.

Peace and reconciliation were themes eagerly taken up by the *saṅgha*, encouraged by the new Minister of Religious Affairs, a pro-Pathēt Lao neutralist by the name of Ku Suvannamēthī, himself a former monk. Buddhist monks actively popularized the eighteen points, welcomed the 'liberation' of the Mekong towns in 1975, and were among the first to volunteer to attend political seminars conducted by the Pathēt Lao. The *Saṅgharāja* called on all monks to work closely with the new regime for the good of the nation, while Pathēt Lao cadres respectfully visited pagodas to explain their policies.

The strategy of the Pathēt Lao was twofold: to argue that Buddhism and socialism were compatible beliefs; and (given the shortage of trained PL cadres) to make use of monks to explain and justify the policies of the new regime to the people. In political seminars, monks were told that Buddhism and socialism both taught the essential equality of all people, and the promotion of happiness through elimination of suffering. The Buddha, they were told, was socially progressive because he had rejected the class into which he had been born out of compassion for the common people (Lafont 1982, 150). He was a great man, but then so were Marx and Lenin (Becker 1979).

A more sophisticated argument for the compatibility of Buddhism and socialism was advanced by Khamtan Thepbualī, the former monk whom the Pathēt Lao placed in charge of their religious policy (under the direction of Politburo member Phūmī Vongvichit). The timeless core of Buddhism had survived through the ages, according to Khamtan, through a process of adaptation to new social and political circumstances. Under capitalism, however, it had become corrupted and used in support of an unjust and exploitative social order. Under socialism, it would be purified of all superstition and unnecessary dogma to become a vehicle for moral and social progress (Khamtan Thepbualī 1975, 46–8; and interview with Khamtan Thepbualī, Viang Chan, 6 December 1980).

Among those superstitions of which Lao Marxists set out to purge Buddhism were its outdated cosmology and belief that *kamma* depended on accumulation

of merit (*bun*). Buddhist belief in multiple heavens and hells above and below a flat earth was ridiculed by reference to modern science. Space probes had demonstrated conclusively that the earth was round, and had failed to locate any heavens. Deep oil drilling had been equally unable to discover any hell. As for merit, it was absurd to imagine that this could be gained by feeding monks or giving donations to temples, or that it could be transferred by pouring holy water (Interview with Bhikkhu Sāthukhamfan, Bangkok, 19 November 1978). And just as the great Lao Buddhist king Phōthisārāt had proscribed the worship of the innumerable spirits (*phī*) which figure so prominently in Lao popular belief, so too did the new Marxist regime forbid their worship – with about the same nugatory effect.[8]

Even purged of such superstitions, however, Marxism and Buddhism in fact sought very different goals. While Buddhism offered the hope of individual salvation through eventual escape from the cycle of rebirth Lao Marxism proclaimed the transformation of society through the 'three revolutions' – in production, technology and consciousness (Doré 1982). The 'new socialist person' who would lead the struggle to build socialism in Laos was a world apart from the traditional Lao peasant resigned to acceptance of things as they are in the hope of a 'better' rebirth. Moreover, an essential contradiction existed between Marxist justification of revolutionary violence and Buddhist compassion for all sentient beings.

The contradictions evident in Pathēt Lao attempts to create some common intellectual ground between Marxism and Buddhism as a basis on which to use Buddhism for its own ends were paralleled by contradictions in its attempts both to destroy the social influence of the *saṅgha* and to make use of it to promote socialist policies. Just as the Royal Lao government, on American urging, had attempted to use the social status of Buddhist monks to promote community development, so the Pathēt Lao attempted to use monastic influence at the village level to gain acceptance of its socialist programme.

At the same time, however, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party which emerged from the shadows towards the end of 1975 was even more determined than the Royal Lao government had been to limit and control the independence of the *saṅgha*. For in the eyes of the Party, as the only vertically structured organization in Lao society reaching down to the village level, the *saṅgha* posed a potential threat, since it was believed capable, like the Catholic church in Poland, of serving as a focus of anti-Party resistance. (Incidentally, all foreign Catholic priests working in Laos were expelled in September 1975.)

Throughout 1975, therefore, as the Lao People's Revolutionary Party slowly tightened its grip on power, it both used and undermined the *saṅgha*. The very practice of requiring young monks, whether more or less committed, to spread Pathēt Lao propaganda steadily reduced the prestige of the Order by making it appear a pliant instrument of the Party. Not that monks had much option, for they were usually accompanied by cadres who listened to, and even recorded, their every word. Some were even accompanied by armed guards as they went from village to village, ostensibly for their own protection. Any monk who failed

to proclaim the Pathēt Lao message sufficiently enthusiastically would be sent for political re-education (Mahā Kanlā Tanbualī 1977, 48–9).

The independence of the *saṅgha* was formally destroyed in 1976 when, in an unprecedented move, the large ivory-handled ceremonial fans carried by senior members of the hierarchy as emblems of their rank were symbolically broken (Mahā Kanlā Tanbualī 1977, 58–9). Under close Party supervision, the *saṅgha* was restructured as the Lao United (Unified) Buddhists Association to include both the Mahā-nikāy and Thammanyut-nikāy schools (though many Thammanyut monks had already fled to Thailand). All executive positions in the new organization were filled by monks acceptable to the Party.

At the level of the *vat*, pressures were exerted on young monks to leave the Order and serve the revolution. Those who remained were required to perform some socially useful task – as teachers, or as health workers preparing and administering traditional medicines – and so earn their own livelihood. The *pātimokkha*, the fortnightly recitation in Pāli of the 227 precepts a monk must live by, was transformed in to a self-criticism session in Lao during which shortcomings, especially failure to follow the Party line, were admitted and publicly criticized (interview with Bhikkhu Vanna Buaphaphong, Nôngkhāy, 18 November 1978).

Despite the heavy hand by which the Party brought the *saṅgha* under its control, Buddhism was never a target for massive repression in Laos, as it was in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, or in China during the Cultural Revolution. The Party was careful in its Buddhist policy, especially during the crucial transition to power in 1975, not to provide a target for popular resentment or political opposition. In this it was assisted both by poor morale and a crisis of identity in the *saṅgha* itself, and by increasing popular cynicism over the opportunist political role played by a number of Buddhist monks. In retrospect, one can only endorse the admission of one senior Lao monk that 'the fall of Laos to the communists was partly the fault of the *saṅgha*, because the *saṅgha* had many weak points which made it an easy target for the communists' attack' (Mahā Kanlā Tanbualī 1977, 70).

BUDDHISM IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Six 'revolutionary monks' occupied a prominent position in the front row of delegates to the Congress of People's Representatives that met in Viang Chan on 2 December 1975 to accept King Savāngvatthanā's abdication and declare the formation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Yet there are only two references to Buddhism in the documents of the Congress. One, in the action programme, stipulated freedom of religion, but warned that monastic schools would be 'given directives whereby they will function in conformity with the orientation of national education'. In other words, religious teaching was to be controlled by the Party. The other reference came in the political report of

Kaisôn Phomvihān, Secretary-General of the LPRP. Monks, Kaisôn said, would be expected

> to contribute actively to reviving the spirit of patriotic unity, to encourage the population to activate production and economize, [and] to help people in their education in order to raise the cultural level and contribute to persuading, education and correcting those who take the wrong path or who do not behave properly so they may become good citizens. (*Documents du Congrès National des Représentants du Peuple* 1976, 25)

Political expectations of the *saṅgha* under the new regime could not have been stated more clearly. It was to act as an arm of the Party in promoting Party policies and educating a compliant citizenry. Apart from that, it had no clear religious or spiritual role to play in Lao society.

In the harsh years of 1976 and 1977 as the economy collapsed, drought ravaged the rice crop, and the regime struggled to enforce its power, new pressures were brought to bear on Buddhism. At first the Party tried to limit celebration of Buddhist festivals on the grounds that they were a waste of scarce national resources (JPRS 1976a), but as popular resentment mounted the policy was reversed. (The prohibition on mass celebration of the 1976 Rocket Festival (*bun bang fai*), traditionally associated with fertility, was widely blamed for the drought of the following year.) People were actively discouraged from visiting their local *vat* to make offerings, though this too was relaxed after it led in some places to potentially damaging confrontations.[9]

Even so, the government went out of its way to demonstrate that those monks who conformed to what was expected would be properly rewarded. Monks were invited to attend all state occasions, including Lao National Day and even May Day celebrations, where they were invariably seated in places of honour and mentioned first in any address. Phūmī Vongvichit, as Minister of Education, Sport and Religious Affairs, attended major Buddhist ceremonies, while another member of the Politburo, Deputy Prime Minister Nūhak Phūmsavan, headed the official party at the 1976 Thāt Luang festival. Monks officiated even at state funerals for Party members, and at the dedication of the memorial to Pathēt Lao cadres and soldiers who died in the revolutionary struggle.

While such outward forms were observed, however, the Party made it abundantly clear that it was in control. All monks were required to attend classes in political education, in order to know what to teach in their sermons. Their duties were to educate, to provide health care, to contribute to national development, and to propagandize on behalf of the regime. In the words of the 1976 Action Plan of the Lao United Buddhists Association, monks were to

> contribute effectively . . . to the national task, to participate in the progressive mass movement and be determined to wipe out all traces of the former backward regime and thwart all of the enemy's undermining maneuvers with respect to the fatherland and religion. (JPRS 1976b, 20)

Phūmī Vongvichit was even more specific in his address to Buddhist teachers (monks) attending a training course in Viang Chan in October 1976. Party policy, he told his audience, was

> to request Buddhist monks to give sermons to teach the people and encourage them to understand that all policies and lines of the Party and government are in line with the teachings of the Lord Buddha so that the people will be willing to follow them. (FBIS 1976)

Attendance at such 'training sessions in political and religious morality' was compulsory. Seminars typically lasted for a week or more, and were addressed by the regime's trusted henchmen. Monks who failed to display a properly compliant attitude were sent for longer periods of political re-education. In the region of Viang Chan, this seems to have been the extent of repression, but reports from southern Laos were more disturbing. There the Thammanyut school was more strongly entrenched,[10] and methods resorted to by the Party to enforce its political will more harsh. Monks whom the authorities suspected of being anti-communist were arrested, and a number were reportedly executed (interview with Bhikkhu Vanna, Nôngkhāy, 18 November 1978). If such reports were true, it may be that the government held some monks responsible for popular resistance, strongest in the south, to its abortive attempt to collectivize agriculture.[11]

In March 1979 the government established a new mass organization, the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), to act as a broad umbrella bringing together all officially sanctioned associations, including the Lao United Buddhists Association. The seventh point in the Front action programme committed it to ensure freedom of religious belief and protection of places of worship 'while resolutely countering all attempts to use religions to oppose the national interest or destroy the socialist regime' (Lao Front for National Construction 1979). The same month the 87-year-old former *Saṅgharāja*, who had been confined to his *vat* and forbidden to preach, escaped to Thailand on a raft of inflated inner car tyre tubes, bringing with him more reports of official repression.

As a member of the LFNC, the *saṅgha* was expected to promote not only the political line of the Party internally, but also its foreign policy externally. Lao Buddhists attended communist bloc orchestrated world conferences for peace, and were prominent in the Asian Buddhist Council for Peace.[12] At such venues they regularly denounced warmongering imperialists and other enemies of the regime. When Viang Chan moved to improve relations with Bangkok, a delegation of Lao Buddhists was dispatched to attend the festival of the Thāt Phanom, the most sacred shrine in north-eastern Thailand.

By the late 1970s vastly different estimates were being provided by government officials and monks who had escaped to Thailand on the state of Buddhism in Laos. According to official figures, the number of monks and novices (17,000) had actually increased since 1974 (Peagam 1977). Other

estimates put the figure at around one tenth as many (interview with Bhikkhu Mahā Bunkong, Bangkok, 13 November 1978). What was clear, however, was that the *saṅgha* as an organization had been reduced to an instrument of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. From being primarily an organization ministering to the religious and spiritual needs of the Lao people, it had become a mouthpiece for the political and social policies of the new regime. The morality it taught was no longer to assist people on their path towards ultimate enlightenment, but rather to encourage them to become 'new Lao socialist men and women' and participate in the building of socialism.

Or so Party ideologues hoped. For the vast majority of the Lao people, however, Buddhist conceptions of *kamma* and merit still shaped their view of the world. Even in the face of political pressure, women in particular had stubbornly continued to give food to monks and attend their local *vat*. So when the Party was forced to relax its hardline policies in the face of the failure of agricultural co-operativization, the conditions were present for a return to Buddhist observances (see Peachey and Peachey 1983).

In an interview with the author in Viang Chan in December 1980, Khamtan Thepbualī, Director of the Department of Religious Affairs, pointed out that religion in the Soviet Union continued to exist, even after sixty years of socialism. So Buddhism would continue to be practised in Laos. In fact it was unthinkable, he implied, that Laos should ever cease to be Buddhist. It was a theme repeated by other Lao friends and contacts: to be Lao was to be Buddhist, irrespective of the regime in power.

BUDDHISM AND POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY LAOS

By the late 1980s both internal and external pressures were forcing the Party to modify its policies. Building socialism in Laos was not something that was going to happen in a hurry. As the Soviet Union began to count the cost of its support for Vietnamese domination of Cambodia (and Laos), the countries of Indochina were forced to rethink their relations with the region. In Laos economic reforms introduced as part of the so-called 'new economic mechanism' effectively dismantled centralized economic controls to allow a freer play of market forces and foreign economic investment. So while the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe was a 'nightmare' for the Lao Party, it yet proved resilient enough to ride out the resulting political turbulence.

The political and economic model for Laos, and Vietnam, in the 1990s has been the People's Republic of China. So while it has permitted considerable liberalization of the economy, the Party has been determined to retain authoritarian control of political processes. When some younger Western-educated middle level officials began agitating for the introduction of multi-party democracy in Laos, three ringleaders were arrested and sentenced to long gaol sentences. None, it should be noted, apparently made any reference to Buddhism in their defence (Amnesty International 1996).

Social liberalization falls somewhere between the economic and the political. The Party has been very reluctant to permit any organization to be established over which it might not exercise full control. All officially endorsed organizations continue to be members of, and thus under the direction of, the Lao Front for National Construction – including the Lao United Buddhists Association. In fact, civil society in the form of citizen organizations functioning outside of government (i.e. Party) control hardly exists at all in the Lao case.

That said, acceptance of Buddhism as having a vital role to play in Lao social and cultural life has come a long way since the early years of the regime. While monks remaining for long periods in the *saṅgha* cannot be members of the LPRP, the earlier limitation on Party members entering the Order as a mark of respect, and to make merit, for a deceased parent has been relaxed. Party members, from the Politburo on down, regularly attend Buddhist ceremonies.

The sight of the 'communist' (and one can argue over whether this is any longer an appropriate term to use) power élite down on their knees before senior monks carries with it a symbolic message that is hardly lost on the Lao people. Even political leaders, it is widely conceded, are Buddhists first and socialists second. This is borne out by a visit to the former residence, now a revolutionary museum, of Kaisôn Phomvihān, founding Secretary-General and later President of the LPRP. For there in his private study stands a glass case containing a number of Buddha images, before which is an incense burner. Asked about the half-burnt sticks of incense, the guide explains, rather defensively, that Kaisôn did not actually light them himself: a servant did it for him. Moreover, it is openly acknowledged that in the year before he died, Kaisôn regularly meditated with a senior monk from a monastery just outside Viang Chan, and that 'senior leaders' invite monks to conduct Buddhist ceremonies in their own homes (interview with Phra Vichit Singālat, Viang Chan, 14 January 1997).

Just how important the Party considered Buddhism to be by the early 1990s is illustrated by the pomp and ceremony accompanying the state funeral for Mahā Thongkhūn Anantasunthôn, Chairman of the Lao United Buddhists Association. Not only did 'thousands' of monks attend, but so did three senior members of the Politburo, including the ailing State President, Suphānuvong (FBIS 1991). And in an interview with the author in December 1993, a month before his death, Politburo member Phūmī Vongvichit spoke warmly of the need to impart Buddhist morality to the younger generation who lacked the dedication and discipline of those who had carried out the revolution.

Buddhism has clearly regained much of the social position it temporarily lost during the early years of the regime. Throughout the Lao People's Democratic Republic lines of monks daily undertake their dawn 'begging' round and large crowds attend all major Buddhist festivities. The number of monks and novices combined has increased, though many have joined the *saṅgha* primarily to improve their educational prospects. (Monks attending the monastic high school at Thāt Luang in Viang Chan come overwhelmingly from the provinces.)

In rural areas, where there is still on average only one *vat* per five villages, nuns may outnumber monks (Miehlau, 1996, 50–1).

The *saṅgha* may have recovered much of its former popular standing, but links with the Party still remain close and it seems unlikely to regain greater independence. At its Sixth Congress, however, the Party acknowledged the need to upgrade monastic education. Loss of senior monks since 1975, through death or migration, and the emphasis given to political rather than religious education of younger monks has seriously reduced educational standards. Knowledge of Pāli in particular has declined to 1930s levels, with many monks able to chant by rote only the few phrases needed in commonly performed ceremonies. A new tertiary level Buddhist College has been established at Vat Ong Teu, providing a three-year degree. Students undertake compulsory studies in Buddhist *dhamma*, and a choice of either pedagogy (to become teachers) or linguistics (including Pāli and English). One difficulty has been to find qualified Lao teachers, as the *saṅgha* hierarchy, no doubt on Party instructions, does not want to rely on Thai monks (interview with Phra Vichit Singālat, Viang Chan, 14 January 1997).

A possible new political role for Buddhism seems now to be emerging in Laos; one that carries with it some dangers for the regime. It is obvious that Marxism as a political ideology has proved incapable of animating the Lao people. The problem for the regime, therefore, is what to replace it with. The Party justifies its monopoly of power on the grounds that it led the Lao revolution to its victorious conclusion. But as that event fades, and the suspicion grows that the revolution succeeded only in replacing one corrupt élite by another, the Party must seek some additional justification.

Here Buddhism would not appear to be of much help. Accumulated merit may reinforce the institution of monarchy and a hierarchical social order, but it hardly does much to justify who comes out on top in Party power struggles or proclaim egalitarianism and the 'self-mastery' of the masses. Where Buddhism does figure, however, is in its centrality to Lao nationalism as this is expressed both in Lao history and in Lao cultural identity. And it is towards Lao nationalism that the Party seems increasingly to be looking to shore up its political position.[13]

The danger of using Lao nationalism is that ethnic Lao constitute not much more than half the population of Laos, and that most of the hundred-odd ethnic minority groups and sub-groups are not Buddhist.[14] While revolutionary justification for the seizure and exercise of power rests on uniting all ethnic groups through concepts of resistance and struggle, nationalist justification would tend to reinforce historic ethnic Lao élitism, especially if combined with active missionizing. Buddhism could thus inadvertently promote social division.

It is not obvious to an observer that the secretive LPRP has any clear idea of where it is heading. The recent decision to establish the Ong Teu higher school of Buddhism which will attempt to resuscitate higher studies in Pāli and Buddhist exegesis might indicate recognition of the need to improve monastic

knowledge and discipline; but it might also aim to reduce growing reliance on Thailand. In the late 1990s as many as sixty Lao monks were studying in Thai monastic schools (plus another nine in Burma).[15] Moreover, as members of the Thai royal family enjoyed considerable respect in Laos, close ties between the Thai and Lao *saṅgha* could actually undermine Lao sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

Buddhism in Laos traditionally provided powerful legitimation for the exercise of political authority. Though the Buddhist *saṅgha* was effectively marginalized during the colonial period, both sides in the civil conflict that engulfed Laos from 1945 until the victory of the Pathēt Lao in 1975 attempted to make political use of Buddhism in support of their rival positions. Once victory was achieved, however, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party systematically reduced the *saṅgha* to an instrument of its political will.[16] With the collapse of communism in the late 1980s, the LPRP has adopted a policy of economic liberalization and political authoritarianism which requires new forms of legitimation. In place of revolutionary justification for the exercise of political power, the Party is reverting to nationalism. It is in this context that Buddhism is experiencing a resurgence in popularity, even though the *saṅgha* remains under tight Party control. Whether or not its social influence will permit the Order to regain a degree of institutional independence thus remains to be seen.

NOTES

1. This article was written before publication of Grant Evans, (1998) *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975*. Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, in which he argues that 'a re-Buddhification of the Lao state' (67) is presently underway as the central plank in 'a retraditionalized nationalism' (162). Much more controversially, Evans argues that the best way to overcome the malaise in Lao political culture would be to restore the monarchy, a proposition unlikely ever to be entertained while the Lao People's Revolutionary Party holds power.
2. The system of transliteration used in this chapter is taken from Martin Stuart-Fox (1997) *History of Laos*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
3. The movement was led by a group of young French-educated Lao intellectuals whose cultural nationalism gained French backing as a counterweight to pan-Thai propaganda from Bangkok.
4. The stricter Thammanyut-nikāy was founded by King Mongkut of Siam in the mid nineteenth century, whereas the Mahā-nikāy, though doctrinally similar to the Thai school of the same name, was organizationally independent.
5. The parallel between Buddhist asceticism and the selfless dedication of the revolutionary was one the Pathēt Lao deliberately fostered (Halpern 1967, 215).
6. This did not prevent local cadres from discouraging religious observance (Chapelier and van Malderghem 1971, 69–71).

7. This refers to attempts to interpret Buddhist scripture as powerfully opposed to Marxism.
8. The Party was still battling superstition years later. (See *Viang Chan Mai*, 14 May 1983 (JPRS 1983)). Today it no longer bothers (Miehlau 1996, 50).
9. Restrictions depended very much on the whim of local Party cadres, and varied considerably throughout the country.
10. Siamese influence was always stronger in southern Laos where the ruling family owed allegiance, after the Lao–Siamese war of 1827–8, to Bangkok.
11. On the role of Buddhism in peasant resistance to socialization of the rural economy, see Evans 1993.
12. The Council was a markedly left-wing communist front organization.
13. In January 1997, the government sponsored a three-day conference of scholars and Party officials on Chau Anuvong, the last king of Viang Chan, who died fighting for Lao independence not from the United States or France, but from Siam.
14. Actually 130 different ethnic groups and sub-groups have been identified in Laos, which the government groups as Lao Lum (Lao of the lowlands), Lao Thoeng (Lao of the mountain slopes) and Lao Sūng (Lao of the mountain tops).
15. In an interview with the author in January 1997, four senior monks indicated that the *saṅgha* hierarchy would prefer to send Lao monks to study in India (as a number did before 1975).
16. Whether this has pushed Lao Buddhism in the direction of Mahāyānist 'themes', as P-B. Lafont argues, seems unlikely, however (Lafont 1990, 161).

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8
FIRST AMONG EQUALS: BUDDHISM AND THE SRI LANKAN STATE

TESSA BARTHOLOMEUSZ

INTRODUCTION

The second, or 1972, constitution of post-independence Sri Lanka privileged Buddhism, Sri Lanka's majority religion, as 'foremost' among the religions of the island. At the same time, it guaranteed each of Sri Lanka's traditions (i.e. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity) equal protection under the law. In other words, Buddhism was ensconced in the 1972 constitution as first among equals, and it has retained its peerless yet parallel status as Sri Lanka marches into the twenty-first-century. Though the politics of Sri Lanka's present president, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaranatunga, have been informed by secular ideology, the constitution that her party drafted in 1997 further enhances Buddhism's relationship with the state. According to clause 7 of this draft constitution, the President must appoint a Supreme Advisory Council composed of Buddhist monks and lay people to assist in legislating laws, thereby magnifying the earlier constitutional status of Buddhism.

Sri Lanka's post-independence constitutional policies concerning Buddhism have a history that reaches back to the late nineteenth century. At that time, Sinhalas, the majority of whom are Buddhist, began to hone an ideology in which they were closely associated with the political history and territory of the island. Based on interpretations of the *Mahāvaṃsa*, a fifth-century chronicle of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the ideology established the Sinhala-Buddhist people, as the sole and rightful heirs to the island (Spencer 1990, 1–16). In the colonial situation, the rediscovery of the *Mahāvaṃsa* provided Sinhalas with proof that they, like their colonizers, were Aryan, and that Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon) could boast a long, glorious Buddhist civilization that could rival Europe's. Interpretations of the *Mahāvaṃsa* that rendered the island as authentically Buddhist and Sinhala fostered a sense of pride that equated nationality, Buddhism and territory (Gunawardana 1990, 76–7). While some have urged that only Sinhalas and Buddhists have rights to the island, thereby excluding minority ethnic and religious groups, most Sinhalas, at least since the late nineteenth century, have argued for the primacy of the Sinhalas in political, religious and cultural life. Despite differences in attitudes towards minority ethnic and religious groups, both ends of this ideological spectrum define Sri Lanka in Sinhala-Buddhist terms (Kemper 1991, 16). To one degree or another,