

# Elite family ties still bind the Lao Peoples' Revolutionary Party

21 January 2021

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The Lao Peoples' Revolutionary Party (LPRP) held its [11th Party Congress](#) in Vientiane from 13–15 January 2021. Party congresses, the biggest events in the Lao political calendar, are held every five years. This congress brought together 768 delegates representing what the party claims are its 348,680 members — just under 5 per cent of the population.



The purpose of this political theatre is to elect the members of the party's politburo and central committee. But, of course, there is no election. Positions in the new central committee are determined beforehand, through an opaque process that entails as much horse-trading between powerful families and regional interests as it does a sober examination of merit.

The new political pecking order within the party reveals not just who will wield power for the next five years, but who the up-and-coming political actors will be. Those who jump the furthest up the list are the ones worth watching — and cultivating.

As expected, former general secretary and current Lao President Bounnhang Vorachith retired, making way for Prime Minister [Thongloun Sisoulith](#) to take his place. But it is only after national elections in February that the new National Assembly is expected to rubber stamp Thongloun's election to the presidency and the new government be will be formally revealed.

Looking at the order of ranking within the politburo, it is likely that the new prime minister will be current Lao Vice President Phankham Viphavanh, who jumped from fifth to second position.

Only one other member of the previous politburo retired but increasing its membership from 11 to 13 allowed four new members to be elected. Of these, two were well-positioned as former members of the party secretariat. The surprise additions are other two new members: Sisay Leudetmounson, up from number 23 to 12, and Saleumxay Kommasith, up from 50 to 13. Sisay is currently Vice President of the National Assembly. She joins Pany Yathotou to become the second woman in the politburo. As Minister of Foreign Affairs, Saleumxay's promotion suggests that his ministry will likely be of increasing significance in the years ahead.

The congress also named a nine-member secretariat to be chaired by Thongloun which will include three other members of the new politburo plus the five central committee members next in line, all of whom have been rapidly promoted within the party. Among them are two women: Viengthong Siphandone, daughter of former president and party leader Khamtai Siphandone, and Sounthone Xayachack, head of the party's External Relations Committee — another indication of the importance the party attaches to foreign relations.

The new central committee increased from 69 to 71 members, with the number of alternate members also increasing from eight to ten. Seven of the eight previous alternate members were promoted to full membership which, with retirements, made way for the inclusion of 33 new faces as either full or alternate members.

Among these new members, the names of certain former powerful politburo members stand out. They include two additional members of the Siphandone family to join Sonesay (number 9 in the new politburo) and Vienthong (number 18 in the central committee), and a third member of the Phomvihane family. Kaysone Phomvihane and Khamtai Siphandone were both former secretary-generals of the party. These promotions serve as a reminder of the extent to which powerful families still determine political outcomes in Laos — just as they did during the previous Royal Lao regime.

What can be expected from the new political line-up?

When Thongloun became prime minister five years ago he did so with the promise to clean up some of the country's [endemic corruption](#). For the next two years he went through the motions, but the kind of campaign conducted in China and [Vietnam](#) that saw senior party members up to the politburo purged and imprisoned did not happen in Laos.

It is possible now that Thongloun has risen to leadership of the party that he will pursue his anti-corruption drive more forcefully, but it is unlikely. Far more than in China or Vietnam, powerful political families in Laos are related through marriage. Corruption virtually benefits the entire party elite, and any attempt to reduce or eliminate it immediately runs up against family ties and interests. Little wonder that the Anti-Corruption Authority has had [minimal impact](#) and that Laos ranks 130th out of 198 countries in Transparency International's [corruption index](#).

On the [economic](#) front, Laos faces serious problems. Tourism has collapsed under the impact of COVID-19. And the country has a mounting debt problem. In order to construct the [Boten-Vientiane high-speed rail line](#), [Lao debt](#) to China is estimated to have reached [45 per cent of](#)

[GDP](#). If this debt is not paid down, Laos is in danger of becoming financially dependent on China.

The policy response has been to build more hydroelectric dams on the Mekong in the hope of making Laos the ‘powerhouse’ of mainland Southeast Asia. Although building dams pleases China, it has run into [opposition from Cambodia and Vietnam](#) — both neighbouring states and fellow members of ASEAN. For Laos to go ahead with more new dams threatens to strain regional relationships. Evidently, the new politburo faces difficult [challenges ahead](#).

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