LAOS IN 1985
Time to Take Stock

Martin Stuart-Fox

For the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR), 1985 was a year of anniversaries. On 22 March, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of its founding as a separate entity, and thirty years of "correct and creative" leadership of the Lao revolution. Then on 2 December, the régime celebrated its first decade in power with a lavish dawn parade before the That Luang, the nation's most venerated Buddhist shrine and symbol of the Lao state. In addition, 1985 marked the termination of Laos' first five-year plan — an occasion to assess both the achievements of the past five years and the direction of the second five-year plan due to run from 1986 to 1990. Amid the self-congratulation therefore, the year provided an opportunity to take stock of the results of a decade of socialism. The inescapable conclusion was that, whether measured by the extent of economic development, by the rapidity of the socialist transformation of Lao society, or by the effectiveness of the creation of new, dedicated socialist men and women imbued with the principles of Marxism-Leninism, the changes produced have been less far-reaching than anticipated.

Nonetheless, the LPRP leadership set out to make the most of the two anniversaries. Special instructions were issued by the Party Secretariat on how to celebrate the "two great, historical days of the nation in 1985". A major year-long "emulation campaign" was launched in order "to score as many achievements as possible in strongly and firmly consolidating and perfecting the system of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the political, ideological, and organizational fields", and "to create an atmosphere of revolutionary enthusiasm and joy for the entire Party, Army, and people to strive together determinedly to fulfill various political tasks effectively at each level in 1985" (*Foreign Broadcast Information Service* [hereafter cited as *FBIS*], 11 February 1985). Detailed instructions were issued to the "administrative branch" and the Lao People's Army (LPA) on how to achieve the "two strategic tasks" of national defence and socialist construction during the year, thereby to fulfil the goals of the first five-year plan. A "Two Historical Days Committee" was set up "to promote and guide the [emulation] campaign relentlessly so as to discover good aspects that must be further promoted and weak ones which must be consolidated and rectified in a timely manner" (ibid.).

Politics and the Party

The thirtieth anniversary of "the noble, glorious LPRP" was an occasion to re-emphasize the leading role of the Party in the Lao revolution and the socialist transformation of Lao society. LPRP Secretary-General Kaysone Phomvihane took the opportunity in an interview on Radio Hanoi to stress the historical links between the LPRP and the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1930 and disbanded in 1951 to make way for separate parties in each of the three Indochinese countries. Kaysone described the original nucleus of the LPRP as "a party organization of the Indochinese Communist Party", and proclaimed that the present LPRP had inherited

"the glorious historic mission" of the ICP (*FBIS*, 21 March 1985). The success of the LPRP in leading the Lao revolution was due to many factors, Kaysone said, but the most decisive one was the leadership of the Party. The "wise and clearsighted leadership of the LPRP ... the correct and creative line and policies of our Party are the most fundamental factor deciding all victories of the revolution", a Radio Vientiane broadcast noted (*FBIS*, 27 February 1985). This was because the Party had "creatively applied Marxism-Leninism to the practical conditions of Laos", Foreign Minister Phoun Sipaseut told a Tass news agency correspondent (*FBIS*, 19 March 1985).

According to a Soviet publication, membership of the LPRP had risen to 43,000 by early 1985, an increase of some 8,000 members since the Third Party Congress in April 1982. Much of the increase has been among ethnic Lao, thus offsetting the earlier preponderance of Lao Theung (Lao of the mountain slopes, ethnic minority tribes) who earlier had made up the majority of the Pathet Lao. But this increase in membership has not been without its problems. The level of education of cadres is sometimes disappointingly low. As many have joined the Party for opportunistic reasons, the level of commitment to the goals and policies of the Party is often not much higher. A recent Party document candidly admitted that "the intellectual level and sense of discipline of members of the Party are very low", with the result that cadres at all levels are unable to assume responsibilities that are often beyond their capacities (*Le Monde*, 3 December 1985). One of the goals set for 1985 was to improve political and ideological work, particularly within the Party. "Special importance" should be attached to "the training and building of [a] contingent of key cadres", Kaysone told members of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) in his annual political report (*FBIS*, 29 January 1985). They should "maintain a sense of organization and strict discipline ... maintain a close relationship with the masses ... adopt a simple way of life, practise thrift, and wholeheartedly and timelessly serve the people ...". They should "fight against a sense of discouragement, ambition, and lack of self-confidence, and ... against a sense of regionalism" (*FBIS*, 9 and 15 January 1985).

Reading between the lines, it is not hard to detect a note of concern over the quality of those who have joined the Party. The LPRP is often seen as providing a means for personal gain or political advancement. At the local level, Party membership depends more on personal and family relationships than on a formal process of selection of the best candidates. Loyalty to a powerful figure within the Party has led to the emergence of "clans" whose opposition is based not on ideological considerations, but on conflicting personal or family interests. The LPRP has thus become an instrument for the pursuit of personal ambition and family influence, or a means of obtaining a more comfortable standard of living with higher levels of consumption. This seems to be what is meant in the Party document referred to above in which it is stated that during the construction of socialism in Laos, instead of being used to strengthen the economic and political bases, the "organization has been allowed to develop according to the imperialist system" — a probable reference to the "clanism" that characterized political culture under the former Royal Lao regime. As a consequence, the document warned, unless the political level of cadres is raised and work methods changed, not only will political goals not be met, but the masses will lose confidence in the regime itself.

Two means were emphasized during 1985 to raise the political consciousness of Party members and of the masses. The Party and State School for Political Theory organized a series of courses given by Soviet instructors on Marxist-Leninist theory for middle-level Party cadres; and more LPA troops were sent to work at the "grass-roots" level. The use of Soviet rather than Vietnamese instructors, and the publicity given to this, was itself of interest — though senior LPRP cadres continued to undergo ideological training in Vietnam. Continued involvement of the army in political education at the village level was indicative of the enhanced political role and standing of the LPA in the LPDR, and of

the trust placed in army discipline and organization as an example for the Party itself to emulate — developments which will be further discussed below.

That the difficulties faced by the Party have raised political tensions was revealed in Kaysone's speech to the SPA in January, when he stated that "the struggle to resolve the problem of who is winning over whom between the two lines in our country — socialism and capitalism — developed to a new phase in a fiercer and more uncompromising manner in the past year". The struggle was described as being "between us and the enemy", but it was clear that "the enemy" was within the Party, as well as outside it. Four times in the course of his speech Kaysone returned to this theme of the "two-line struggle". The struggle "to determine who will win over whom between the two systems" was being "fiercely contested", Kaysone told delegates, and there were "possibilities for a complicated, fierce and furious change in the struggle" in the future. The struggle extended "to all respects and ... all domains", but the primary "battlefront" was that of "circulation and distribution and economic relations with foreign countries" (*FBIS*, 29 January 1985). Kaysone again referred to this "struggle" in his special address marking the tenth anniversary of the founding of the LPDR, and linked it directly to "hostile forces" ranged against the regime.

It is difficult to be sure to what extent the struggle between the two lines is being conducted within the Party itself. Clearly, a primary target for those who want to push the pace of socialist transformation in Laos is the constellation of external forces preventing this — notably Thai economic obstructionism and support for Lao anti-government insurgency, and Chinese "expansionism and hegemonism". But there are other "forces" which could be seen as influencing the socialist transformation of Lao society — notably those promoting the economic policies which have been in force since 1980, and which have encouraged not only a continuation of the economy of small producers selling on a free market, but also made allowance for continued capitalist investment by wealthy individuals. Among those arguing in favour of such policies must be numbered economists of the World Bank, of which Laos is a borrowing member; some officials who had served the previous regime and who in the present government hold the rank of vice-minister or departmental head without ideological commitment to Marxism-Leninism; and certain representatives of formerly wealthy families who are in a position to take advantage of the government's leniency. Finally, in addition, there are those pragmatists within the Party who, for various reasons, both economic and nationalistic, support the present policies, and who do not want to see a return to the earlier (1976–79) hard line. What the relative strengths of these groups are, and how much political power they actually possess, are difficult to determine. But that political differences over economic policy do exist is evident from Kaysone's statement.

The broad political line in force since 1980 appears to have come under attack by certain groups within the Party only after the Third Party Congress of 1982 decided to make more pragmatic use of technically competent officials who had served the previous regime. Older veterans of the thirty-year struggle who knew little but how to fight a guerrilla war were eased aside to make way for some of those who had been their ideological enemies. In 1983 and 1984, a series of arrests took place of more than fifty officials from various ministries, including a total of six vice-ministers. The first of these arrests was apparently due in part to opposition and jealousy within the Party to the promotion of certain officials. After six months in confinement, 32 officials were found guilty of crimes against the state and given prison sentences. Most, including both convicted vice-ministers, were later released however, after the arrest of two more vice-ministers and other officials suspected of making false statements against them. A third series of arrests at the end of 1984 was linked to charges of corruption. One vice-minister of finance, Oudone Pholsena, was implicated in the fraudulent purchase of second-hand bulldozers. Another vice-minister, Chanpeng Bounnaphon, from the Ministry of

Commerce, was subsequently released in June 1985 presumably after charges against him were found to be unsubstantiated. This left three vice-ministers still in prison at the end of 1985, one on charges of corruption, one implicated in the manufacture of false evidence, and one apparently for criticizing too freely the economic policies of the Party.

This series of arrests, and in a number of cases the subsequent release and rehabilitation of officials, was symptomatic of tensions which continued within the LPRP and the government during 1985. Ideological differences, personal jealousies and ambitions, "clan" loyalties and the influence of powerful "protectors", increasing corruption, and a determination to "discipline" those too critical of the Party line, all seem to have played a part in these events. But so too did the signal failure of the Lao Government, even after ten years in power, to develop effective judicial procedures for investigating charges brought against officials. With the decisions of the sixth and seventh plenums of the LPRP Central Committee to press ahead with the socialist transformation of Lao society, especially in the areas of agricultural co-operativization and state ownership and management of the economy, these tensions seem set to continue, and the struggle between the "two paths" to become still more "complicated" and "fiercely contested" in the lead-up to the Fourth Party Congress due to be held in 1986.

Another important political trend which continued during 1985, but whose relationship to the "two-line struggle" is as yet unclear, was the growing importance of the Lao People's Army, not only in Lao political life and society, but also in the economic exploitation and development of the country. The LPA was described as acting as "the shock force of... the Party and people" in carrying out its assigned tasks of "increasing the national defence potential; heightening combat readiness to defeat all schemes of the enemies; consolidating and building forces for the implementation of Party work, logistics and technical work to guarantee an improvement of living conditions, and the work of turning to the grassroots..." (*FBIS*, 14 January 1985). In 1985, LPA cadres took a more active part in political mobilization at the village level. More significantly, the army was called upon to increase its involvement in the task of economic construction by taking responsibility not only for its own construction projects and management of army factories and farms, but also for the exploitation of Laos' major natural resource, timber.

The army's increasing economic role was portrayed in official statements as a natural extension of the need to co-ordinate the two strategic tasks of national defence and socialist construction. In the Lao view, each entails the other. Just as every citizen is expected to be vigilant in opposing the enemies of the regime, so the army is expected to contribute to the economic construction of the country. In fact, the extension of LPA responsibility to "cooperate with friendly forces to exploit forests in some areas", as Kaysone rather cryptically announced to the SPA, is a development of considerable political and economic significance, for it provides the army with an independent source of foreign currency potentially outside government control. Kaysone did warn, however, that LPA "forest exploitation and preservation companies" would have to "respect and correctly implement state regulations and procedures", and that economic construction units would be expected to continue to perform their political and public security tasks (*FBIS*, 29 January 1985).

A spokesman for the Ministry of Defence explained that LPA timber exploitation companies would be free to negotiate their own contracts with foreign buyers. Profits would be used to finance development projects assigned to the army under the second five-year plan. The goal was for the army to become, like provincial administrations, a self-sufficient economic unit. Army timber concessions are located mainly in Khammouane and Savannakhet provinces, both of which have well-developed communications with Vietnam and Thailand (interview with the author, August 1985).

LPA involvement in the timber industry may have been authorized in the hope that exports could be increased. The industry has experienced a number of difficulties, partly

because of problems encountered in extracting timber, and partly because of inexperience in marketing, and subsequent charges of corruption against forestry officials. Already, however, the industry suffers from competition between provinces, each of which has the right to sell timber, and this problem is unlikely to be solved by introducing yet another marketing authority. Perhaps the army may be able to ensure what the present Ministry of Industry, Handicrafts and Forestry seems to be incapable of providing — a steady supply of seasoned timber to Vientiane's plywood and furniture factories.

A further factor potentially increasing the political influence of the army in Laos is the change in command structure announced early in 1985. Leadership has been shared in the LPA between military commanders and political cadres at each command level. Under the new system, this dual command structure will be replaced by a single officer responsible for both military and political decisions. This "one-man command system" aims at "ensuring unified Party leadership, promoting and developing the responsibilities of a commander, and persistently strengthening the Party leadership and combat capability of the army" (*FBIS*, 18 April 1985). The Defence Ministry spokesman confirmed that every officer would undergo political training and would be a member of the Party — a situation likely to strengthen the political influence of the army by expanding the unified and disciplined army "bloc" within the Party.

Economic and Social Achievement

The tenth anniversary of the founding of the LPDR provided an occasion to review progress made towards the stated goals of economic development and the transformation of Lao society. In theory, these goals are to be achieved through the simultaneous action of three revolutions — in economic production relations, in the application of science and technology, and in the creation of a new socialist mentality among the Lao population. Economic and social achievements provide some measure of the success of Party and government policies in pursuing these "three resolutions". A primary problem, however, in making such an assessment is the unreliability of Lao statistics, many of which are little more than informed guesses, and the lack of published information. In what follows, the primary sources have been Kaysone's speech marking the tenth anniversary of the LPDR: *Nouvelles du Laos*, December 1985, published by the Embassy of the LPDR in Paris; the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Staff Report on Laos, dated January 1985; and a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) draft report submitted to the Lao Government in August 1985.

In his tenth anniversary speech, Kaysone claimed that during the first ten years of the LPDR, gross domestic product (GDP) more than doubled while production per head of population increased by 60 per cent. Presumably these figures were calculated on base figures for 1975 or 1976, both years of severe economic disruption and low production. A better measure of economic development is provided by changes in GDP corrected for inflation over the course of the first five-year plan. A 6.6 per cent increase from 1980 to 1981 was followed by two depressed years when GDP rose by only 1.9 per cent and then fell by 3.3 per cent. A recovery of 8.1 per cent was registered in 1984, according to the UNDP report. Figures for 1985 were not available, although GDP per inhabitant was given as US$98 in real terms, one of the lowest in the world (*Nouvelles du Laos*, December 1985). Other economic indicators included a balance of payments deficit, made up by foreign aid, which amounted to an average of US$93.1 million over the period 1980–84, with a marked decline in 1984 due to a reduction of both imports and exports. Inflation too declined in 1984, the last year for which figures are available, as the rise in the cost of living declined from 66 per cent in 1983 to 20 per cent in 1984. Gross international reserves stood at under US$20 million, with a foreign debt of over US$400 million, one-third of which was owed to Western banks and governments, and two-thirds to Soviet bloc countries.

By the end of 1985, Laos found itself almost entirely dependent on foreign aid, both for development investment, and to cover the country's economic budget deficit. Revenues in 1984 were estimated at just over 4.5 billion kip, two-thirds of which was derived from transfers from public enterprises, and 25 per cent from taxes on the private sector. (The official exchange rate is 108 kip to US$1, though the black-market rate is three times as much.) Agricultural tax amounted to only 5 per cent of total revenue. Expenditure was just over 8 billion kip, half of which was earmarked for capital expenditure. The deficit was made up with foreign loans and grants. Because of debt repayment difficulties which have increased over the last five years, Laos must seek gifts of aid in the future — especially since the country's pattern of foreign trade is increasingly oriented towards the Soviet (non-convertible currency) bloc. Total foreign aid to the LPDR remained in the vicinity of US$80 million per year, a maximum sum in terms of the country's ability to absorb and make proper use of it.

In the vital agricultural sector, a major goal of the first five-year plan was for the country to become self-sufficient in food production. This has essentially been achieved, but only by supplementing rice supplies with other foodstuffs. Total individual consumption is said to have risen from 280 to 350 kilograms per year. Kaysone reported that rice production had doubled since 1975, a year when harvests were still badly affected by wartime disruptions. During the period 1980–85, however, the average annual rate of increase in production fell in 1982, fell again in 1983, and only returned to the 1981 level with the good season of 1984, according to IMF and UNDP figures. The official government figure for 1985 put production at just over 1.3 million tonnes, well below the planned target of 1.4 million tonnes. More disappointing still was the fact that yields remained among the lowest in the world at 1.1 tonnes per hectare for upland rice, 1.7 tonnes per hectare for wet rice, and 2.1 tonnes per hectare for dry-season irrigated rice. Farmers continue to use local varieties and traditional farming methods. Chemical fertilizers and even organic manure are rarely used. Increased production has been due to an increase in the area under cultivation. Kaysone also reported that the area of land under irrigation had risen threefold, but it was not clear whether he was referring to wet- or dry-season irrigation. The latter only amounts to 13,000 hectares, not all of which is used, and produces no more than 1.25 per cent of the total harvest. Mechanization of agriculture, almost entirely limited to state farms, is said to have increased five times over pre-1975 levels but has clearly been insufficient to boost overall production figures. The plan to amass a stockpile of rice equal to six months national consumption has not begun to be met.

Maize, root crops, soya beans and peanuts all registered a slight increase in production for the year 1981 over the base year (1980) of the five-year plan. Figures for 1982 and 1983 have not been published, probably because both were years of low production as a result of unfavourable climatic conditions. Increases during 1984 and 1985 have nowhere been near enough to meet the target of 60 per cent increases in production of these crops during the first five-year plan. Nor have the targeted increases of 53.5 per cent for coffee and 89 per cent for tobacco been met. (Significantly, Kaysone reported only that industrial crops had "progressively been developed"). Animal breeding has been more successful, with the target figure of 23 per cent increase from 1980 to 1985 largely being met. The number of pigs and chickens have increased substantially in the rural areas according to the UNDP report, but figures issued by the government must be taken as estimates only (cf. *Nouvelles du Laos*, December 1985). The number of cattle and buffalo combined has been put at 1.5 million head, but the claim that this represents a 60 per cent increase over 1976 must be treated with caution as statistics during the early years of the regime were little more than guesses.

Co-operativization of agriculture received renewed impetus during 1985 as part of the process of socialist transformation through the revolution in relations of production.

Kaysone claimed the establishment of more than 3,000 co-operatives, comprising half of all peasant families and half the total area of rice paddies. In addition, thousands of mutual-aid teams of agricultural workers are said to have been organized to perform seasonal work as required (mainly during planting and harvesting — a traditional form of co-operative labour in Laos). An alternative set of official figures issued by the Embassy of the LPDR in Paris placed the number of co-operatives at 3,184, comprising 61.5 per cent of all peasant families and 58 per cent of all cultivated land (*Nouvelles du Laos*, December 1985). As the goal had been to have 60 to 70 per cent of the farmers in co-operatives by the end of 1985, the suspicion remained that the figures were less than accurate. Apparently, membership of a co-operative does not entail an end to private ownership of land in Laos. Farmers may include their land in the co-operative during the wet season, and withdraw it during the dry season. All that happens in many cases seems to be that farmers agree to work communally during certain seasons. The UNDP estimates that as many as 90 per cent of all farmers continue to own their own small parcels of land (averaging about 1.5 hectares). The organizational status of co-operatives is thus very variable, with the result that statistics on the number of co-operatives are a most misleading indicator of the extent of socialization of agriculture in the LPDR.

Timber and forest products such as benjoin, resins, and sticklac constitute a major exploitable resource for the LPDR. Potential timber production has been estimated at two million cubic metres per annum or about eight times the current extraction. Exploitation is in the hands of six state forestry companies, provincial authorities, and now the army. The country possesses more than fifty sawmills with a capacity of over half a million tonnes of sawn timber per annum. At present they produce no more than 20 per cent of this amount because of the shortage of timber and the lack of machine spare parts and fuel. Lao Plywood, a state-owned company, is also producing at well below the installed capacity because of shortages in the supply of timber. Timber production figures for 1985 were not available, but the fact that what should be Laos' major industry was given such brief mention in Kaysone's tenth anniversary speech, and that the army is being brought in to try to increase exploitation of timber resources, are both indicative that difficulties continue to plague the industry.

The manufacturing industry registered disappointing results during the course of the first five-year plan, and the target of doubling the production was nowhere near reached. After the economic stagnation of 1982–83, the industry failed to recover with the rest of the economy in 1984. Output fell by a further 6 per cent, mainly because of shortages in raw materials, and trained personnel. The industry continues to account for only a little over 5 per cent of the gross national product (GNP) of the LPDR, a level well below the average for even the least developed countries. Almost all the eighteen factories under the control of the Ministry of Industry continued to function well below capacity in 1985, though production did improve over 1984 figures. The mining of tin ore and gypsum also registered slight increases during 1984 and 1985, but no new mining ventures got under way. The sale of hydro-electricity to Thailand continued to account for more than two-thirds of Laos' total export earnings, and almost 90 per cent of exports for convertible currency. Installed capacity at the Nam Ngum dam amounted to 150 kW, five times the 1977 level, but there has been little extension of the internal distribution network.

Communications and transportation were designed priority areas in the five-year plan, but once again targets have not been met. Laos boasts fewer than 5,000 automatic telephones in the entire country, most of them in Vientiane. Telephone contact has yet to be established between Vientiane and some of the more remote provincial capitals whose only link to the rest of the country is by telegraphy using Morse code. International communications have been improved through a satellite link to Moscow and telex lines to Bangkok, but still remain inadequate to meet the needs of a modern state.

Improvements have been made to the road network, but not as rapidly as planned. Roads to Vietnam, especially Route 9 from Savannakhet to Danang, have been upgraded, as has the main north-south axial road (Route 13). The government claims to have constructed 3,000 kilometres of new secondary rural roads and constructed or repaired 700 bridges and culverts. Two major bridges on Route 13 over the Nam Ngum and Nam Cading rivers have been built with Soviet aid. Inter-provincial trade remains slight, however, both because of insecurity due to anti-government insurgency, and because of a lack of vehicles, poor maintenance and shortages of spare parts in state transport companies.

Kaysone succinctly stated the goal of social and cultural change in the LPDR in his tenth anniversary speech. The central task, he said, was to create a culture and system of education with a national and socialist character aimed at forming "the new socialist man". He claimed that the number of primary school children had doubled and the number of secondary and tertiary students had risen by 7.5 times during the first decade of the new regime. Six thousand students had obtained university degrees, while a further 23,000 had completed their secondary studies, ten times as many as in 1975. (Other government figures cite lesser increases. See *Nouvelles du Laos*, December 1985.) In addition, illiteracy for the age group 15–45 had been totally eradicated by the end of 1984, Kaysone claimed. The achievements of the regime in the field of education have certainly been considerable in terms of increases in the number of students, number of teachers employed and number of schools opened. Pre-school enrolments have increased fourfold to meet the target set in the first five-year plan, but still includes fewer than 5 per cent of eligible children. Primary enrolments remained virtually static; but secondary enrolments rose (with an increase of 30 per cent for those who completed secondary studies), and tertiary students numbered 3.5 times greater in 1985 than in 1980. In 1985, an estimated 85 per cent of all Lao children were being provided with some form of schooling, according to UNDP figures — not quite the 100 per cent envisaged in the five-year plan.

These statistics, however, mask some serious problems faced by education in Laos. To begin with, standards of education have plummeted, as have the conditions under which students learn and teachers teach. A large percentage of qualified teachers have fled the country over the past ten years. Their places have been taken for the most part by inadequately trained replacements. Primary-school teachers found themselves promoted to teach at the advanced secondary level, while anyone who could read or write could be co-opted as a primary school teacher. In addition, students often lack the most basic equipment, such as pencils and paper. Very few textbooks are available, and those that are are of poor quality. Teachers lack any form of teaching aid, and are paid so little (when salaries arrive at all) that they can often only afford to teach part-time. In order to make enough to survive, many engage in petty commerce or farming on the side. More serious is the fact that almost half of all primary students only complete two years of education — just enough to learn to read and write at the most elementary level. More than 80 per cent of all primary school students do not complete the five years of primary schooling. The standard of those that go on to secondary school, or to vocational schools (in agriculture, forestry, animal beeding, and so forth) at the secondary level, is often extremely low. Those picked to study abroad, in languages not learned at school (Russian is taught, but not German, Czech, or Hungarian), often find themselves incapable of passing the courses. Russian instructors at the new Vientiane Polytechnic Institute found the standard of half the first year's intake so low that they had to introduce a pre-university year in order to bring them up to minimal entry levels. As for the claim to have erased illiteracy, this cannot be taken at face value, despite major efforts made in adult education. Literacy is supposedly in Lao, a second language for much of the population. Many tribal people do not even speak the language, let alone read it. The United Nations estimates that illiteracy has declined over the past ten years from 65 per cent to 15 per cent,

in itself a considerable achievement, especially for an underdeveloped country with inadequate means of communication and few resources. The government only undermines its own credibility by claiming a 100 per cent literacy rate, simply in order to meet the unrealistic target set in the first five-year plan.

Plan targets in the field of public health were stated in general terms of improved services, prophylaxis and sanitation, except for the number of hospital beds and medical personnel. The target figure of 13,000 hospital beds has not been met. There are some 2,000 beds in thirteen major hospitals in Vientiane and the provincial capitals, and 100 small hospitals at the district level. But even if one counts two or three beds in each of the 700 or so dispensaries at the subdistrict level where health care is dispensed by nurses only, the total number of beds still does not amount to more than 7,000. The total number of medical personnel is said to be over 20,000. These include more than 350 doctors plus four times as many three-year trained assistant doctors, an increase of more than three times the 1976 figure, but less than three times the 1980 base figure set by the first five-year plan. Medical education has registered some success with the number of students in medical school showing a sevenfold increase over 1976. There is still a reluctance among graduates to volunteer for posting to district hospitals in remote areas, however, even though all students have to complete three months of rural practice in their final year. Simple hygiene has been promoted at the village level by health workers who are given a few weeks training and sent back to look after village first-aid posts. By 1985, some 18 per cent of Lao villages were said to have potable water supplies, and improved sanitation elsewhere had reduced diarrhoea and other intestinal diseases by half. Malaria too is being brought under control, and has been all but eliminated in Champassak and Vientiane provinces. (Information provided by the Minister of Public Health, Khamliang Pholsena, in an interview with the author, August 1985.)

Other successes have been registered over the past ten years, according to Kaysone, in the areas of culture, the arts, and in publishing and the media. Traditional culture is being preserved through schools of dancing, music and handicrafts. More than ten publications appear regularly, including the popular cultural review *Vannasin*, the party journal *Pasason* (The People), and a new theoretical journal *Alun Mai* (New Dawn), which was published for the first time in 1985. Vientiane now boasts a new powerful Soviet-built 150 kW radio station, which broadcasts in Lao, French, English, Vietnamese, Khmer, and Thai. Some of the seven regional stations transmit broadcasts in the minority languages. Laos has a Soviet-built satellite receiving station which links the LPDR to the inter-sputnik network. Television began on a trial basis in December 1983 and had increased transmissions to five days a week by mid-1985. Regional stations will be built for some provinces as part of the second five-year plan. Lao TV is still trying to compete with Thai programmes which are easily received in Lao towns along the Mekong. Watching Thai television programmes is tolerated in Vientiane, and in most other provinces, with the exception of Champassak where the hard-line provincial authorities have made it a criminal offence, and have banned the possession of TV sets completely.

Government officials in Vientiane acknowledge the close interrelationship between traditional Lao culture and Buddhism, and the regime seems prepared to promote the former by tolerating the latter. By August 1985, Laos had 16,312 monks, of whom 9,415 were novices. Of this total, about 3,000 live in Vientiane. Buddhist pagodas in Vientiane and Luang-Prabang were mostly in an excellent state of repair. New premises and Buddha images were being constructed and sculpted, and old pagodas were reportedly being refurbished even in parts of the country which had been under Pathet Lao control for decades, such as Phong Saly and Houa Phan provinces. No government permission is needed: the decision to construct a pagoda, and invite monks to take up residence there is a local one. Officially, there are 2,812 pagodas in Laos, 373 of which have been renovated or rebuilt since 1975.

LPRP policy towards Buddhism has softened considerably since the period 1976–78 when the authorities actively discouraged Buddhist ceremonies and expressions of popular belief. Now even members of the Party are permitted to enter the *Sangha*, the order of monks, for limited periods in order to perform traditional funeral ceremonies for close relatives. All major Buddhist ceremonies are attended by senior communist officials; and wives of members of the Politburo can be seen devoutly performing the necessary rituals. Monks also study politics, including Marxist-Leninist theory, but only to the extent that everyone else does as citizens of the LPDR. The monks claim that they, as citizens of the LPDR, need to understand government policies, and that there exists no conflict between Buddhism and socialism. A spokesman for the Lao Buddhist Association listed the tasks of monks in the LPDR as: to instruct people in the Buddhist religion, to be teachers and/or practitioners of traditional medicine, to take a leading role in village self-aid projects (including construction of village pagodas), and to promote international peace and understanding (interview with the author, July 1985).

A further target which was not met in 1985 was the promulgation of a constitution. Despite hints early in the year that a new constitution would be ready for the tenth anniversary, nothing eventuated. In reply to written questions directed to the committee of the Supreme People's Assembly charged with drafting the constitution, a spokesman claimed that the Assembly of People's Representatives which met in December 1975 had adopted a series of "constitutional decrees" which effectively stood as "the constitution itself which is necessary in order to govern, lead and develop the country according to the reality, principles and models of a people's democracy". In effect, therefore, according to this interpretation, the LPDR has had a constitution since its inception. Nevertheless, a new constitution is being drawn up. Its proclamation, the spokesman said, is "near", but "depends on internal and other conditions which affect the LPDR".

One target that was achieved in 1985 was to carry out the country's first complete population census since Laos gained independence in 1953. The government announced a population in March 1985 of 3,584,803 made up of 49 per cent males and 51 per cent females. Population figures were given for all sixteen provinces (three new ones have been formed since 1983 — Bokeo, Bolikhamxay, and Sekong) as well as the administratively independent municipality of Vientiane, which extends over seven former districts of Vientiane province. Savannakhet has the largest population (543,611) and Sekong the smallest (50,909). Vientiane province has a population of 264,277 while the municipality has a further 377,409. The total urban population is 15 per cent as against 85 per cent in the rural areas. By age, 47 per cent of the population is under 15, 47 per cent aged between 15 and 60, and 6 per cent older than 60. The birth rate is given as 46 per thousand, and the death rate is 17 per thousand, giving a rate of population increase of 2.9 per cent.

It is difficult to sum up the overall economic and social results of the first five-year plan. Clearly, most targets have not been met yet, and it is safe to say that targets for the second plan, to run from 1986 to 1990, are likely to be less ambitious. The government has appreciated the necessity to begin with small-scale practical projects which build on existing resources, both natural and human. The desperate shortage of trained manpower, poor communications and an underdeveloped infrastructure will continue to limit the ability of the country to absorb quantities of aid in excess of current levels for some years to come. Industry, which registered the most disappointing results during the first five-year plan, is likely to remain of minor importance. After a decade of communism, Laos remains what it has always been, a nation of subsistence-level peasant farmers, ruled by a small educated élite concerned as much as anything with the perpetuation of their own political power.

In terms of the three revolutions, relatively little has been achieved during the first decade in power of the LPRP. Major industries have been nationalized, but as these employ no more than 8,000 workers, no radical change has thereby been effected in the

overall economic relations of production. In the dominant agricultural sector, co-operativization has been patchy and partial, and relations of production differ little from traditional patterns. The revolution in science and technology has also failed to produce substantial results, mainly because educational levels are so low. Even routine maintenance of mechanical or electrical equipment is beyond the capabilities of most villagers, so that technology can only be introduced at an appropriately basic level. As for the cultural and ideological revolution aimed at producing new socialist Lao men and women, it is hardly a step in advance of the others. Rather than becoming ideologically committed to the building of socialism, most Lao have simply learned to live with the new system. It took people some time to understand the changes which were taking place, but once some of the fear of arbitrary arrest receded, they began responding to and shaping their new environment in characteristically Lao ways — through passive non-cooperation, through wary refusal of commitment, through family contacts and pressures, and through the manipulation of people rather than ideas. As a result, after ten years of socialist government there seem to be few examples of the "new socialist man" in Laos.

Foreign Relations

If rhetoric was anything to go by, the direction of Lao foreign policy remained unchanged in 1985: on the one hand, unswerving loyalty to and support for the "special relationship" with Vietnam, and ever closer relations with the Soviet Union; on the other, chronically strained relations with Thailand, and sustained denunciation of the People's Republic of China. However, a closer study reveals some interesting developments which suggest that the Lao may be attempting to manoeuvre in the small space available to them between rhetoric and reality. Not only did Lao relations with the United States improve markedly, but in different ways positive signals were sent to Beijing and Bangkok. It is even possible to discern a tentative attempt by the Lao to redefine their relationship with Vietnam within a broader Indochinese context.

Relations with Vietnam and the Soviet Union

In a series of major speeches and foreign policy statements made during 1985, Lao leaders seemed to be attempting to place the "special relationship" between Laos and Vietnam within the context of a tripartite relationship between the three countries of the "Indochina solidarity bloc". Writing in the Vietnamese communist journal, *Tap Chi Cong San*, for a Vietnamese audience, Kaysone Phomvihane did refer to the special relationship between Laos and Vietnam, but in his speeches to the SPA in January, and on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the LPDR in December he referred only to "the special solidarity, fighting alliance, and multiform cooperation" which constituted the "special relations" said to exist between all three states. No mention was made of a "special relationship" linking Laos and Vietnam alone.

Similarly, in a major interview with a Tass correspondent marking the thirtieth anniversary of the LPRP, Lao Foreign Minister Phoun Sipaseut made no mention of the Lao-Vietnamese special relationship, saying only that "the special solidarity, militant alliance, and all-round cooperation" among Laos, Vietnam and Kampuchea comprised "the decisive factors for the victory of the revolution in each country" (*FBIS*, 19 March 1985). In addition, a *Pasason* editorial pointedly noted that since its founding the LPRP "has always held aloft the banner of national independence" (*FBIS*, 28 March 1985).

The "special relations" existing between Laos and Vietnam were briefly referred to in the joint Lao-Vietnamese declaration marking the five-day official visit of Truong Chinh, President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) Council of State, to Laos in May (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, *Bulletin de Nouvelles*, no. 50 [15 June 1985]). The communiqué specifically recognized the continuing importance of Vietnam's assistance "marked by the spirit of proletarian internationalism" for the defence and socialist

construction of the LPDR. Both sides also affirmed their determination to intensify their co-operation, especially in the economic, cultural, scientific and technical domains. In his own speech, however, Truong Chinh, while referring to the "model relations between Vietnam and Laos", was careful to place those relations within the context of "the solidarity, alliance and all-round cooperation among the three Indochinese countries" (*FBIS*, 29 May 1985).

Something of the degree and extent of Vietnamese influence in Laos was revealed by Kaysone in his *Tap Chi Cong San* article, where he wrote that

> to unite with Vietnam has always been a policy of strategic significance, a sacred sentiment and glorious obligation of the Lao party, administration and people, and also a governing principle for all activities of all party, administrative and mass organizations and a criterion for fostering the revolutionary qualities for all party members and cadres at all levels. (*FBIS*, 27 March 1985.)

Not too much importance should be given to the phrase "unite with Vietnam" since Kaysone also stated that the policy of the LPDR was "to unite and cooperate in all fields with the Soviet Union". What is significant about the above statement is that it reveals the means by which Vietnamese influence is perpetuated within the LPRP: pro-Vietnamese sentiments constitute the criterion by which the revolutionary qualities of Lao cadres are judged, and thus by which political advancement is determined. This was also clearly indicated in a discussion of the revolutionary qualifications of LPRP cadres, one of which is to "love the relationship and special solidarity with Vietnam and Kampuchea" (as against, of course, harbouring any pro-Chinese sentiments). (*FBIS*, 15 January 1985.) Kaysone restated similar criteria in an interview with Radio Hanoi on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the LPRP (*FBIS*, 21 March 1985). Vietnam clearly continues to exercise considerable influence over what occurs in Laos.

Trilateral rhetoric should not therefore be seen as decreasing the importance of the Vietnamese connection for the LPDR, especially if this is judged by continuing contacts between the two states. The Truong Chinh visit brought the highest ranking Vietnamese delegation to Laos since Party leaders of all three states met for a summit conference in Vientiane in 1983. The Party leaders met again in December 1985 when both Le Duan and Heng Samrin attended the LPDR tenth anniversary celebrations. A number of other important exchanges occurred between Lao and Vietnamese economic and financial delegations in preparation for the second Lao five-year plan. A forestry agreement was signed, and plans were drawn up for preliminary studies on the exploitability of Lao iron ore deposits — all of which seemed to link Laos even more closely with Vietnam.

Evidence for Lao attempts to create, despite the constrictions of the Lao-Vietnamese relationship, some slight freedom of action in the field of foreign policy should not, however, be sought solely in the nature of Lao-Vietnamese exchanges, and in the rhetoric which accompanied them. It should also be sought in subtly changing patterns of action taken with respect to other states, even allies. Lao relations with Kampuchea were warm as ever in 1985. Politburo member Phoumi Vongvichit told Japanese journalists in June that Kampuchea was prepared to provide Laos with additional access to the sea, and that the necessary road would be constructed. A number of bilateral exchanges took place, though most were within the tripartite context. However, contacts between Laos and Kampuchea were of lesser significance and frequency than between either state and Vietnam, and the Lao-Kampuchea leg of the tripartite relationship still remained very much of secondary importance.

Relations between Laos and the Soviet Union were of greater significance. President Souphanouvong led the Lao delegation to the funeral of Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko, and then returned to attend Soviet celebrations marking the tenth anniversary of the victory over fascism. Kaysone also went to Moscow on what was

described as "an official visit of friendship" to meet the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. A series of exchanges also took place in preparation for Laos' second five-year plan. A high-level delegation of the Soviet State Planning Commission visited Vientiane in February, and other meetings followed throughout the year. In Laos itself, Soviet anniversaries were celebrated, and Soviet policies endorsed on every possible occasion at meetings and mass rallies.

Lao statements on foreign policy continued to make the distinction between the "special solidarity" which existed between Laos, Kampuchea and Vietnam, and the "close solidarity" between Laos and the Soviet Union (*FBIS*, 19 March 1985). But the warmth of Lao-Soviet relations can be judged by an editorial in the LPRP journal *Pasason* which was lavish in its praise for the new Soviet leadership, and described the relationship as characterized by "close fraternal friendship, combatant solidarity, and all-round cooperation" (*Khaosan Pathet Lao*, News Bulletin, 15 March 1985). What is more, the joint communiqué issued after Kaysone's meeting with Gorbachev underlined the two leaders' "common will to continue to deepen and enlarge by all means cooperation between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, and between the Soviet Union and Laos" (*Khaosan Pathet Lao*, Bulletin Quotidien, 29 August 1985). As a later editorial in *Pasason* noted, relations between Laos and the Soviet Union are such that no enemy can destroy them (*Khaosan Pathet Lao*, Bulletin Quotidien, 31 August 1985).

Relations with China

Interestingly, it is in Lao relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) that the gap between rhetoric and reality is most apparent. The "Beijing reactionaries" continued regularly to be accused of stepping up their "collusion with the U.S. imperialists and other reactionary forces to feed, train and arm exile Lao reactionaries and use Thai territory as a staging point for subversive and sabotage activities" against the LPDR (*FBIS*, 29 January 1985). And yet, spokesmen for both the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed Phoumi Vongvichit's view that all is relatively peaceful along the Lao-Chinese frontier (interviews with the author, August 1985).

The litany of Lao criticism continued unabated, however. China was accused in the Lao media of opposing and sabotaging all revolutionary movements struggling for independence and peace in Southeast Asia. The "Chinese ruling clique" was taken to task for having "gradually destroyed the socialist economic foundation in China and ... increasingly replaced it with capitalist production methods" (*FBIS*, 23 January 1985). Beijing was said to have "evil intentions" and to be pursuing "sinister schemes" of collusion with other reactionary forces aimed at undermining the countries of Indochina (*FBIS*, 26 February 1985).

But if the rhetoric continued to be the same, the reality was somewhat different. By all reports, traditional patterns of local trade across the Lao-Chinese frontier have been re-established; representatives of minority ethnic groups straddling the border are again moving freely to and fro; and the armies on both sides are in friendly contact. The local Chinese military commander is even reported to have suggested sending a delegation to join in the celebrations for Lao Army Day, an offer which the Lao turned down as "premature".

Clearly, Chinese-Lao relations have undergone some important changes since the early 1980s when Beijing seemed set to foment large-scale armed insurgency in northern Laos. Vientiane claims that Lao forces have defeated all Chinese attempts to infiltrate insurgents. That this is not the full story is suggested by the continued existence of anti-government forces in northern Laos (*Le Monde*, 5 October 1985).

A Defence Ministry spokesman interpreted the peaceful situation on the Lao-Chinese border as part of a subtle Chinese policy to drive a wedge between Laos and Vietnam

by adopting different policies towards the two states. This suggests that the Chinese have changed their policy towards Laos not just because of the lack of success of the northern insurgency, but as part of a longer-term plan to improve relations with Vientiane and eventually expand Chinese influence in the region.

The Lao are in a quandary as to how to respond to these Chinese moves. In his speech to the Supreme People's Assembly, Kaysone warned that "there has been no change in China's expansionist-hegemonist policy towards the three Indochinese countries". At the same time, however, he appealed for improved relations with the PRC, an offer he repeated in his tenth anniversary speech:

> We have always nurtured the friendship which has linked us for a long time to the Chinese people, towards whom we express sincere gratitude for their support and assistance in the cause of the liberation of our country and the struggle of our people against the Americans. We hope that the relations between our country and the People's Republic of China will be normalized on the basis of mutual respect for [each other's] independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and non-interference in [each other's] internal affairs, non-aggression and peaceful coexistence.

It is at least worth noting, also, that the Gorbachev-Kaysone joint communiqué specifically stated that both countries favoured normalization of relations with the PRC, provided these were not prejudicial to any third country — an obvious concession to Vietnamese fears.

Relations with the United States

In his speech in January to the SPA, Kaysone reaffirmed Lao aspirations "to restore friendly relations with the American people and to normalize relations with the United States on the basis of the various principles of peaceful coexistence". Kaysone blamed lack of progress in improving relations on the failure of the U.S. Government to abandon "its hostile policy" towards the LPDR. A month later, an American military mission from the U.S. Joint Casualty Resolution Centre in Hawaii was at work near Pakse in southern Laos excavating the site of a U.S. Air Force C-130 crash which occurred in 1972. It was the first time Lao and American military personnel had worked together for more than a decade. The excavation was entirely successful: the remains of all thirteen airmen who died in the crash were exhumed and identified.

In March, the American Embassy handed over 5,000 tons of rice which had been promised in response to Lao appeals for assistance after severe flooding reduced harvests in the latter part of 1984. Then in July, Laos announced that it would send a delegation to visit the joint casualty Resolution Centre in preparation for subsequent joint missions to locate more of the estimated five hundred and sixty odd Americans missing-in-action (MIA) in Laos. The Lao announcement expressed the hope that the United States would take "concrete, reasonable steps" in response to this "humanitarian and goodwill attitude". The Reagan Administration promptly asked Congress to remove the LPDR from the list of enemy countries to which U.S. aid cannot be directed. The House of Representatives agreed, but the Senate was expected to be less amenable.

In September, a Lao delegation spent four days in Hawaii. This was followed by a round of meetings in Washington and New York between State Department officials and Lao representatives, including Foreign Minister Phoun Sipaseut. By the end of 1985, Lao-U.S. relations were warmer than at any time since the Pathet Lao came to power. The Lao initiative over the MIA issue, together with talks to be held between Vietnam and the United States on the same question, was welcomed by the eleventh biennial conference of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the three Indochinese states held in Phnom Penh in August. Any improvement of Lao relations with the United States thus appears to have Vietnamese blessing. The LPDR stands to gain most as a result of improved relations with the United States, however, through possible resumption of U.S. aid.

Relations with Thailand

Relations between Laos and Thailand could only be described as strained throughout 1985, despite attempts to improve them. The problem of the "three villages" continued to preoccupy authorities in Vientiane, where the conviction grew that Lao-Thai differences could only be resolved through discussions at the highest level — discussions which Bangkok seemed most reluctant to enter into. While the Lao saw the "three villages" dispute as but one of a number of outstanding problems which required solution, and thus symptomatic of the state of Lao-Thai relations in general, the Thai saw it as an isolated incident which could be resolved at the local level. Conflict over the three villages dates from March 1984 when Thai engineers were prevented by Lao troops from completing a new road close to the border between the Lao province of Sayaboury and the Thai province of Uttaradit. Each side claimed the disputed area containing the three villages of Ban Mai, Ban Klang and Ban Sawang — the Lao on the basis of the 1907 French map delimiting the border, and the Thai on the basis of an American aerial survey map made in 1978. In June 1984, Thai forces occupied the area. Strong Lao protests were followed by three inconclusive rounds of negotiations. Then in October 1984, Thai troops pulled out of the three villages, taking most of the population with them. According to Vientiane, however, Thai forces continued to occupy a series of ridges overlooking the villages, just inside Lao territory. In addition, the Thai refuse to repatriate the villagers or to pay compensation for damage inflicted to persons and property, as demanded by the Lao.

Thai rejection at the end of 1984 of Lao calls for a new round of negotiations was followed by a barrage of criticism of the Thai regime during the first part of 1985. Articles in *Pasason* exposed "the dark side of Thai society", accused Thai leaders of pursuing a pan-Thai expansionist policy towards Laos, and warned Thai leaders that by following their "Chinese masters", they would lead their country into "a devilish trap being prepared by China for its prey" (*Khaosan Pathet Lao*, New Bulletin, 28 March 1985). By June, however, Vientiane had toned down its war of words, and again called for a resumption of negotiations. Continuing strained relations were blamed on "ultra-rightist reactionary forces within the Thai ruling circles", and Vientiane called for a return to "the spirit and content" of the communiqués signed in 1979 between Kaysone Phomvihane and the then Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak Chamanand.

The Lao proposal for wide-ranging talks "to solve problems of mutual concern with the aim of... turning the Lao-Thai border into one of peace and friendship" was rejected by Bangkok as insincere. Lao Foreign Minister Phoun Sipaseut nevertheless renewed the Lao proposal in a letter to his Thai counterpart in July. This time the Thai sent a delegation to Vientiane to make preparations for the talks, but to no avail. While the Lao wanted to discuss a whole range of problems including not only the three villages but also transit rights for Lao imports and exports, mutual trade, and refugees, the Thai saw no reason for anything but regional-level negotiations on the border problem — a position denounced by Vientiane as an obstructionist refusal even to try to improve relations.

Lao authorities insisted on their own sincerity in wanting good relations with Bangkok, since this was "in Laos' national interests" (interviews with Foreign Ministry officials, August 1985). Not only had the presence of Thai troops on Lao territory become an obsession in Vientiane, but the Lao were infuriated by Thai economic and trade sanctions affecting 273 "strategic goods" for which special permission has to be obtained from the Thai authorities before transit permits are issued. These goods include everything from medicines to bicycles, oils and lubricants, and even needles and thread. Among items for which the Thai refused permits was a consignment of asphalt to repair Vientiane's pot-holed roads in preparation for the tenth anniversary celebrations. The Thai maintained that it might be used to construct military airport runways — while at the same time permitting the transit of jet fuel for Lao MIG fighter planes.

Even the new Thai policy towards Lao refugees which came into force in July has failed to contribute to improving Lao-Thai relations. In 1984, more than 18,000 refugees crossed the Mekong to Thailand, most of them ethnic Lao from the Vientiane area, with a high percentage in the 15–21 age group. This was more than double the figure for the previous year. A representative of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in Vientiane attributed the increased outflow to persistent rumours that to be eligible for resettlement in third countries, refugees had to reach Thailand before the end of 1984. More than seven hundred a month continued to leave Laos during the first half of 1985. As of 1 July, however, Thai authorities began screening refugees. Only those who could prove that they left Laos for political rather than for purely economic reasons would henceforth be permitted to stay in Thailand. The rest were to be repatriated as illegal immigrants. For the month of July, the number of refugees dropped to ninety, only about half of whom were accepted after screening. Even these faced a long stay in the Na Pho refugee camp before being "released" for resettlement. The new Thai policy does meet some Lao criticisms (see *FBIS*, 12 February 1985) but ran into difficulties when Vientiane refused to permit the return of "economic refugees" retained for longer than a few days in Thailand, for fear that some had been recruited as Thai agents. The new Thai policy, therefore, seems hardly likely to improve relations between the two countries. Only a comprehensive agreement could achieve that — as the Lao have argued all along.

Conclusion

The anniversaries celebrated in 1985 and the completion of the first five-year plan provided opportunities for the Lao leadership, and the country's principal aid donors, to take stock of the effects of the first decade of communism in transforming Lao society, developing the country's economy, and creating new socialist men and women. The results, by any estimation, can only be described as meagre, though predictably the regime put on a brave front in proclaiming its "victories". After ten years, the country still has an inadequate legal system and no constitution. One-tenth of the population comprising most of the educated class has left the country, and the re-education programme for those prevented from leaving has been singularly ineffective. Amnesty International estimates that as many as 7,000 political prisoners continue to be held under some kind of detention or internal exile in the LPDR (Amnesty International background paper on the LPDR, 20 April 1985).

The LPRP has succeeded in enforcing its political will on the population, but the Party itself suffers from serious weaknesses. Political power is concentrated in the hands of remarkably few men, while the level of political consciousness and commitment, and the standard of technical education and understanding of most cadres are abysmally low. By far the majority of the 85 per cent of the population who are peasant farmers live at a subsistence level, many of them virtually outside the money economy. The co-operativization of agriculture is more nominal than actual in many if not most areas. Excess production is just enough to feed the reduced urban population, but yields are still very low, and agricultural exports minimal. Targets have hardly been met in any important area of the economy, except for the production of hydro-electricity. Industrial performance has been most disappointing; road construction is behind schedule; and state-run trade and commerce has proved, in Kaysone's words, to be "very difficult and very complex" (tenth-anniversary speech). In the social domain, extension of education has been accompanied by a disastrous decline in standards, and claims of 100 per cent literacy cannot be taken seriously. In the fields of public health, improvements have been made, but most villages still never see a qualified doctor.

It is little wonder that a major concern of the Lao government is to obtain sufficient foreign aid to fund the budget deficit and provide for economic investment for development projects. Vietnam, desperately poor itself, is unable to meet Lao needs.

Other members of the socialist bloc have their own problems. Only the Soviet Union is in a position to provide substantial aid to Laos. The Lao, however, have always shown themselves willing to accept assistance from a variety of sources. To this end, the foreign policy of the LPDR has always been to maintain friendly relations with all states, including China, the United States, and Thailand. In 1985, the LPDR attempted, in different ways, to improve relations with all three states. Perhaps this could be interpreted as a move, even if slight, towards a more even-handed foreign policy. Or perhaps Lao revolutionary leaders have simply come to the realization that the transition to socialism is going to take very much longer than they thought, and that Laos is going to need all the help it can get.

MARTIN STUART FOX, Ph.D., is Senior Lecturer in Asian History at the University of Queensland. He has published numerous articles on Laos in academic journals, is Editor of *Contemporary Laos: Studies in the Politics and Society of the Lao People's Democratic Republic* (1982), and author of *The Murderous Revolution: Life and Death in Pol Pot's Kampuchea* (1985), and *Laos: Politics, Economics and Society* (forthcoming).