Marxism and Theravada Buddhism: The Legitimation of Political Authority in Laos*

Martin Stuart-Fox

LAOS AND KAMPUCHEA were the first countries whose traditional religion was Theravada Buddhism to adopt forms of Marxism-Leninism as their governing ideology. In Kampuchea, the regime of Pol Pot imposed its own peculiar form of Marxism through the ruthless suppression of Buddhism, which involved the destruction of monasteries and temples, and the forced secularization or murder of monks.[1] In Laos, the transition has been more gradual: Buddhism has been transformed to serve the interests of the Marxist state and the authority of the new regime. This process in Laos has been twofold: simultaneously, the leaders of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) have sought to undermine the traditional legitimacy which Buddhism accorded the former regime, and to establish new ideological justification for their own exercise of political authority.

In this paper, attention will be focussed on the means adopted by the leaders of the LPRP to effect a transition from traditional modes of legitimation of the exercise of state power to that provided by a Marxist world view. It will begin by briefly outlining the traditional model of legitimation, and note how this was undermined and weakened under French colonialism and by the former Royal Lao government. This will be followed by a discussion of Lao Marxism and a comparison of the structures of legitimation provided by Marxism and Buddhism. Finally, a study will be made of the means adopted by the new regime to utilize aspects of the traditional order to facilitate initial acceptance of Marxism-Leninism, while, at the same time, systematically reducing Buddhism to the status of an ideological appendage to the Marxist state.

THE TRADITIONAL LAO WORLD VIEW

At the social apex of the traditional Lao kingdom of Lan Xang stood the king. Below him, in order of rank, descended a social hierarchy

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[1] See, e.g., François Ponchaud, *Cambodia: Year Zero* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 146–53.

comprising members of the royal clan centered on the capital (Luang Prabang); a hereditary aristocracy of powerful provincial families; the lowland Lao peasantry, professing a popular form of Theravada Buddhism; and the animist hill-tribe peoples, whom the Lao previously lumped together under the derogatory appellation *Kha* (literally "slave," now known as Lao Theung, "Lao of the mountain slopes"). Outside the capital, Lao society was "loosely structured,"[2] and administration was indirect. At the lowest level was the village (*ban*), with five to ten villages comprising a *tasseng*, and a number of *tasseng* making up a *muong*, or district. The *cao muong*, or district chief, was a member of the local provincial nobility and enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy in administering his "feif." In fact, the overall structure was "quasi-feudal," with power exercised at all levels on behalf of a semi-divine king, whose principal functions were ritual rather than administrative.

This social structure, and the exercise of authority within it, were legitimized through a combination of Lao mythology and Indian Buddhist notions. These formed a single socio-religious world view, in which Lao creation-myths establishing both territorial claims and social origins were set within the framework of Buddhist conceptions of kingship, merit, and *karma* (moral destiny). Together, these diverse elements provided not only justification for the exercise of monarchical authority, but also legitimized the relative standing of all social classes in the Lao state.

The defining constructs of this Lao-Buddhist world view were reiterated in a series of annual ceremonies which took place in Luang Prabang. These festivals provided "the occasion at which the community [acted] to renew and to reaffirm the basic structures which undergird its own existence."[3] The mythic content of this world view included the creation of the Lao world, the origin of its people and of the royal house, the regulation of seasonal change, and the control of demonic forces. Buddhism both complemented and reinforced these ancient indigenous aspects—notably, in establishing the superior power of *Dhamma* (Buddhist truth) and symbolically locating its potency in the royal capital; in conceptually unifying indigenous with Buddhist beliefs; and in providing an ecclesiastical organization to support the exercise of secular power.

Re-enactment of the mythic aspects of the Lao world view had a twofold purpose: to legitimize both ethnic Lao rights vis-à-vis the *Kha*,

[2] The term was coined by John F. Embree in his paper, "Thailand: A Loosely Structured Social System," *American Anthropologist*, 52 (1950), pp. 181–93.

[3] Frank Reynolds, "Ritual and Social Hierarchy: An Aspect of Traditional Religion in Buddhist Laos," *History of Religions*, 9 (1969), p. 81. This paper and others on which I have drawn for this section have been reprinted in Bardwell L. Smith, ed., *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos and Burma* (Chambersberg, Pennsylvania: Anima Books, 1978).

and the status of the ruling house vis-à-vis those aristocrats who might be tempted to usurp the throne. Important among these re-enactment rituals was one commemorating the discovery by the mythic Lao ancestral couple of three gourds from which sprang, when they were broken open, three separate groups—the ethnic Lao nobility, Lao commoners, and the *Kha*. This creation myth not only accounted for the major ethnic division in Lao society, but also established the social divide between the Lao aristocracy and common people as one unbridgeable as that between ethnic Lao (Lao Loum) and *Kha*.

The distinction between the royal clan and the aristocracy was defined by tracing the royal lineage back to Khun Borom, whom the ancestral couple adopted as their son and heir. When the couple died, they were apotheosized into the guardian deities of the capital (the *devata luang*), and so of the kingdom. As ancestors they naturally required that the ritual worship in their honour be performed by their direct descendent—i.e., by the king alone. Thus, only the king could ensure the welfare of the state.

The relation between the Lao and the *Kha* was defined in religious terms through the ritual re-enactment of *Kha* submission to Lao authority. Nevertheless, relations between Lao and *Kha* remained ambivalent. The *Kha* were subordinate to ethnic Lao rulers, yet their inclusion in the social order was essential to the welfare of the kingdom. In Luang Prabang, prior *Kha* claims to the land were implicitly recognized in myth, wherein the founder of the kingdom, Khun Borom, bestowed on his eldest son the name of the *Kha* chieftain whom he had dispossessed. This symbolized "a divinely sanctioned transfer of land rights," but one which left to the *Kha* a certain residual status as the original masters of the land.[4] The *Kha* retained ritual rights while forgoing their jural rights to the territory under Lao rule.[5] Thus, while the social structure in Laos took for granted lowland Lao domination, the continued well-being of the state required a degree of ethnic co-operation that presupposed a measure of ethnic equality. It was a tension which, in traditional Lao society, was only partially resolved—and one which, in the later society of colonial and independent Laos, increasingly threatened the integrity of the Lao state.

The annual sequence of traditional ceremonial rituals enacted in Luang Prabang had two further important purposes: the regulation of seasonal change, and control of demonic forces. The regulation of the seasons was assured by festivities before and after the monsoon rains, which coincided with the venturing forth and retreat of the "naga" water

[4] Goran Aijmer, "Reconciling Power with Authority: An Aspect of Statecraft in Traditional Laos," *Man*, 14 (1979), p. 739. Aijmer points out, for example, the importance of the *Kha* in curbing the influence of demonic forces.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 743.

deities in the form of snakes—usually beneficent, though during floods aroused and angered. Seasonal ceremonies to prevent both flood and drought also assisted in maintaining the balance of power of divine forces, in order to prevent the more malevolent gaining the upper hand.

This ritual cycle effectively reiterated the claims of the royal clan to the office of monarch, of the nobility to its position of social authority, and of the Lao to their right to dominate all other ethnic groups. The legitimacy of the Lao socio-political order, however, did not rest solely on this ritual process. The virtual autonomy of Lao village society meant that villagers were in no way involved in the ritual cycle of the capital. The peasant's acceptance of the king's right to rule and the nobility's right to govern depended principally on the support provided for the conception of kingship by the popular form of Buddhism, which constituted the axiological framework of his world view.

Theravada Buddhism, through its tolerance and flexibility, came to provide the broader context within which a whole range of mythic folk beliefs could be integrated.[6] As Reynolds has pointed out:

> [Traditionally] in the ritual context . . . the whole process of recreation and the re-establishment of proper order in the world takes place within a Buddhist setting. Buddhist temples and monuments provide the environment for the ritual; Buddhist symbols impinge on every ceremony. Buddhist monks are omnipresent and the reciting of Buddhist texts provides a continuing accompaniment to all that occurs.[7]

The establishment of Buddhism in Laos pre-dated the founding of the first Lao kingdom by Fa Ngum in the fourteenth century, and Buddhism lent powerful support to the new state from its beginning. The legitimizing role of Buddhism in reinforcing state authority used to be symbolically reiterated in the New Year Ceremonies of March/April in Luang Prabang. The ceremonies centred upon the sacred Buddha image, the *Phra Bang*, which was both the palladium of the dynasty and a symbol of the authority and standing of the Buddhist *Sangha*. The superiority of the *Dhamma* over both gods and men was recognized in the acts of lustration of the *Phra Bang* performed by both the king and masked dancers representing the ancestoral guardians of the city. By his submission to the *Dhamma*, the king claimed his right to rule, but only through the power and on behalf of the Triratna—the "Three Jewels" of Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Sangha* (the community of monks). This submission and right to rule were recognized in the oath of loyalty taken by the nobles of the realm immediately following the king's act of obeisance. Thus, the hierarchical ordering of the temporal realm was confirmed by

[6] For the way in which Theravada Buddhism can effectively incorporate mythic and animistic elements, see A. Thomas Kirsche, "Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 36 (1977), pp. 241–66.

[7] Reynolds, "Ritual and Social Hierarchy," p. 81.

placing it within a religious context which re-emphasized the monarch's primacy. The king's recognition of a higher spiritual power reinforced his own temporal power by making him the means by which that higher Truth was transmitted from the spiritual to the mundane sphere for the benefit of his realm.[8]

The king's position was further enhanced in the eyes of his subjects through the concepts of merit and *karma*. In the Buddhist view, accumulation of merit led to rebirth under conditions which would favour advancement towards enlightenment, or Buddhahood. It was but a step from this to the popular view that accumulation of merit would lead to a "better" rebirth in terms of social position and standing within the community.[9] It was believed, therefore, that the king must have accumulated such merit through previous existences that he was king by spiritual, as well as hereditary, right. He owed his position primarily to the immutable natural law of *karma*, which holds each person accountable for the moral effects of his actions and intentions. Similar beliefs attached to the status of the nobility. Buddhism thus stood in support of the established social order.

The relationship between king and *Sangha* was, however, a reciprocal one. In return for the legitimation provided by the *Sangha*, the king was expected to demonstrate his religious commitment by donating generously to the upkeep of the monastic order, and by further extending the *Dhamma* throughout his realm. By virtue of its presence in almost every lowland Lao village, the *Sangha* acted as a force for unity within the state. Its monopoly over education ensured the propagation of an acceptable belief-system which effectively maintained existing social distinctions. In addition, the *Sangha* hierarchy provided an opportunity for social mobility for those whose ambitions were frustrated by class rigidity.

One further aspect of Lao Buddhism which requires mention has to do with the cosmic dimension of *Dhamma*. The Lao state, as in the case of other Theravada Buddhist polities, was widely believed to reflect on a microcosmic level the macrocosmic divine structure.[10] The royal palace with its associated temple housing the state palladium (the Buddha image known as *Phra Bang*) stood at the ritual centre of the kingdom, symbolically representing the world axis above which the Buddhist heavens are said to be located. The more closely the microcosm resembled the macrocosm, the more firmly assured was the harmony

[8] See Charles Archaimbault, "La Fête du T'at à Luang Prabang," in idem, *Structures Religieuses Lao* (Vientiane: Editions Vithagna, 1973), pp. 20–62.

[9] For popular ideas about merit, see B.J. Terwiel, "A Model for the Study of Thai Buddhism," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 35 (1976), pp. 391–404; and L.M. Hanks, Jr., "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order," *American Anthropologist*, 64 (1962), pp. 1247–61.

[10] For a discussion of this conception in relation to kingship, see Robert Heine-Geldern, "Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia," Southeast Asia Program Data Paper no. 18 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1956).

and happiness of the former. In this conception of things, *Dhamma* played a regulatory role. It was the Truth whose power regulates and orders the macrocosm-microcosm relationship, keeping under control especially those potentially disruptive demonic forces which can so easily provoke famine or disaster. In the Lao context, this was symbolized by the submission of the Naga (snake) king to the Buddha, in recognition of the latter's higher spiritual attainments. Buddhism thus claimed—and was accorded in Lao eyes—a superior power over natural forces, and was seen to exercise this power for the public good.

It is possible from this brief sketch to perceive the essential structure of the Lao-Buddhist world view. At one level, the king owed his right to rule to his inheritance as descendant of the guardians of the Lao state and of the great kings of the past. But a higher legitimation was provided by his relationship to a higher truth—the *Dhamma* of the Buddha and his *Sangha*, of which the monarch was both conduit and embodiment. Position within the social hierarchy was equally the result of merit gained through the action of *karma*, with additional support provided for the aristocracy by the myth of an origin distinct from that of the mass of the Lao people. The crucial factor in determining the social hierarchy was thus not birth alone, but birth as a result of possession of merit, and thus of fulfilment of *Dhamma*. Below the aristocracy came the Lao peasantry, whose rank above the *Kha* was determined both by origin, and by the fact that the Lao sought merit while the *Kha*, as non-Buddhists, did not.[11] This ordering of society legitimized the right of the aristocracy, with the king at its head, to wield temporal power—except over the *Sangha*, which, as an independent hierarchy apart from and yet part of society, served as the guardian of Truth (*Dhamma*). The *Sangha* thus enjoyed a mutually supportive relationship with the government of the state: it provided legitimation in return for a monopoly over religious office and orthodoxy.

In the traditional Lao state, the world view sketched above provided legitimation for the exercise of political authority, but it did not guarantee the exercise of that authority. The political structure which depended on this Lao-Buddhist world view contained certain inherent weaknesses. This structure took the form of what Tambiah has termed a "galactic polity"—that is, it consisted of a hierarchy of dependent territorial units, each the domain of a subordinate ruler bound to the king by ritually reinforced ties of allegiance.[12] But the strength of

[11] The *Kha*, not being Buddhists, did not share in the Buddhist legitimation of the Lao social order. For the *Kha*, therefore, the legitimacy of lowland Lao governance was considerably weakened, and rested on little more than reciprocal benefits and recognition of power.

[12] See S.J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (Cambridge, London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), especially chapter 7.

allegiance was a function of the military and administrative power of the centre, and the boundaries of adjacent domains fluctuated in accordance with the relative power of each. The system was thus unstable to the extent that ambitious princes might set themselves up as alternative focusses of both power and authority. No centralized bureaucracy tied outlying provinces to the centre; no rigid feudal hierarchy defined the extent of territorial holdings. If the centre proved weak, the *karma* of a provincial lord might lead him to expand his domain. Every prince saw himself as potentially a *cakravartin*—a universal ruler, or "world conqueror." In practice, this meant extending rule, first, over the Lao, then, if possible, over non-Lao neighbours—various tribal groups, or Khmer or Thai princelings on the circumference of their respective central polities. Thus a rationale for ambition always existed, posing a potential threat to the stability of the state—especially at a time of dynastic transition before a new king had established his power, and especially since political expediency permitted, even encouraged, alliances with neighbouring states. The economic and administrative autonomy of the village was such that it could transfer its allegiance (and thus its taxes) as a unit. Shifting allegiances were seen as a natural accommodation to political circumstances—and, in all probability, as temporary. In this "mandala" system of international relations, the enemy of one's enemy was one's friend—but only until one's enemy was vanquished.[13]

The Weakening of the Traditional State

The history of the traditional Lao state was one of fluctuating central power and shifting external allegiances. Until the end of the seventeenth century, the kingdom of Lan Xang held its own in the face of pressure from the Thai, Burmese, and Vietnamese. But after the reign of Souligna Vongsa, the state split into three separate principalities: Luang Prabang in the north, guarding a tenuous independence; Vientiane in the centre, first under Vietnamese and later under Thai suzerainty; and Champassak in the south, owing allegiance to the Thai court. Civil war in Vietnam and a resurgence of Thai power brought the principality of Vientiane a degree of independence, but attempts to assure this through war against Bangkok led to the destruction of Vientiane. Lao territories on the east bank of the Mekong were systematically depopulated, while the west bank was annexed by the Thai state.

Historically the division of Laos into three principalities, and the loss of most of the trans-Mekong territories to Thailand, seriously undermined any universalist pretensions Lao princes might have had—at least insofar as they might hope to govern all ethnic Lao. The imposition on mainland Southeast Asia of the European system of nation-states within fixed boundaries, in place of the shifting frontiers of the "galactic

[13] See A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 127.

polity," preserved what remained of the Lao principalities in a single French-created Lao state; but it also precluded the possibility of re-establishing Lao jurisdiction over the ethnic Lao of northeast Thailand. In becoming the border of French Indochina, the Mekong lost its potential of serving as the central artery of a pan-Lao state of similar extent to the kingdom of Lan Xang. French intervention thus had the effect both of saving Laos from extinction at the hands of its more powerful neighbours, and of permanently reducing it to the status of a dependent and minor power.

A serious long-term impact of the reduction of Lao territory and the depopulation of the west bank of the Mekong was that it permanently altered the ethnic balance in what remained of the Lao principalities. No longer were the *Kha* a negligible minority vis-à-vis the Lao. And, with the continued migration of Sino-Tibetan-speaking mountain tribes out of southern China (the Hmong, Yao, etc., now known as the Lao Soung, or Lao of the mountain tops), the balance was further tilted against the ethnic Lao.[14] Neither the *Kha* tribes nor the Lao Soung were ready to accept a racial status permanently inferior to the Lao Loum.[15] By the end of the nineteenth century, when the French arrived on the scene, ethnic Lao comprised not much more than fifty per cent of the racially divided and politically unintegrated population of those territories which became incorporated into the French protectorate of Laos.

French colonialism further weakened the position of the ruling dynasties in the remaining Lao kingdoms of Luang Prabang and Champassak. (The royal family of Vientiane had been destroyed by the Thai.) Although the French attempted to conserve the traditional order by administering the country where possible through the existing aristocracy, the choice of Vientiane as the seat of colonial administration divorced actual political authority from the supposed source of traditional authority in the person of the king in Luang Prabang, or the prince of Champassak.[16] If the king of Luang Prabang ruled only through the benevolent permission of the French Résident, then the rituals legitimizing his rule in terms of established descent and religious rights and duties were in danger of becoming a charade.[17] As a result, rituals began to lose their sacred character and become devalued to the

[14] For a history of these movements and of their impact in Laos, see Jean Larteguy and Yang Dao, *La Fabuleuse Aventure du Peuple de l'Opium* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1979).

[15] It was Chao Anou's suppression of a *Kha* revolt in southern Laos in 1819 which won for his son the governorship of Champassak, and encouraged him to seek independence from Bangkok. See Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 20.

[16] For the effects of French rule in Laos, see Alfred W. McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos, 1893–1945," in Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, eds., *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 67–99.

[17] Cf. the remarks of Prince Boun Oum in his "Afterword" in Charles Archaimbault, *The New Year Ceremony at Basak (South Laos)*, Southeast Asia Program Data Paper no. 78 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1971), pp. 45–9.

level of entertainment in the eyes of those younger members of the imperial clan and provincial nobility eager to share in the economic benefits and political perquisites of French rule. French colonialism, though maintaining the courts of Luang Prabang and Champassak intact, destroyed the legitimizing function of myth and religion because it usurped political authority. The king ruled only because the French permitted him to.

The French presence also threw into question the reciprocal relationship between the monarchy and the *Sangha* by relegating Buddhism to a marginal position in colonial society. The *Sangha* lost not only its *raison d'être* as state religion in colonial Laos, but also its monopoly over education, at least in the centres of power. Only in the countryside did the *Sangha* retain its traditional authority. In the towns, in line with their "*mission civilisatrice*," the French offered the Lao elite the benefit of a French secular education, with its promise of access to the new power structure. The Lao elite eagerly accepted the new education and, with it, the French philosophical tradition with its distinction between temporal and spiritual powers. As a result, the organic connection between the political and the religious order was destroyed for the Lao ruling class, and many lost faith in their own traditional form of government.

This weakening of traditional authority was not reversed in the post-colonial period, despite the fact that the new constitution established Laos as a constitutional monarchy, and restored Buddhism to the position of official state religion. Members of the traditional aristocracy were not averse to manipulating the constitution in order to claim effective political authority. However, by relegating the king to a ceremonial head of state, the ruling elite deprived themselves of much of the legitimation which their administration might have obtained through a return to the traditional order. Instead they drew what right they had to exercise authority primarily from a written constitution, which held little meaning for a people who had never undergone the historical experience of popular revolution, or laid claim to a political philosophy of government "by the people, for the people." In any case, as coup followed coup, political power was seen to be exercised not on behalf of the people, but for the profit of a few powerful and wealthy families whom the king was powerless to control. Under these circumstances, respect for the monarchy could only continue to decline.

During this period, the traditional world view was further weakened as a result of the ambivalent status of the Buddhist *Sangha.* Buddhism was left with no clear political or ideological role to play in the new Lao state. Crude attempts to involve the *Sangha* in the cause of anti-communism only further undermined its standing. Rather than strengthening Buddhism as an independent source of legitimation of government—its traditional role—government policy had the effect of

compromising the independence of the *Sangha*. Reluctantly, the Buddhist hierarchy permitted monks to become involved in government-sponsored economic development programs—a move which only led to intense debate within the *Sangha*, and a corresponding increase in divisive political activism on the part of young monks on both the political right and left. Both the authority and prestige of the *Sangha* suffered from this compromising descent from its traditional position of religious detachment.[18]

As for the tribal peoples, both during the period of French rule and after independence, little or no effort was made to integrate them into the political life of the nation. Major tribal revolts against the French showed clearly the failure of French policy in this regard;[19] while the Royal Lao government at times seemed almost unaware that the minorities presented a political problem at all. With respect to the hill tribes, the partial return to traditional patterns of legitimation of political authority represented by the Royal Lao government proved particularly inappropriate. Buddhism as the state religion provided for inclusion in the Lao social order only those few tribal peoples—such as the Lu and some Tai groups—which had previously been converted. For the rest, Buddhism stood only for ethnic Lao cultural superiority. In the truncated modern Lao state, the tension that remained unresolved in the traditional world view—between ethnic Lao political dominance and the need for tribal participation to ensure the welfare of the Lao state—was greatly exacerbated, both by the increased relative proportions of tribal peoples to ethnic Lao, and by the strategic position of tribal territories. It was a tension the Royal Lao government was unable to resolve, but which the Pathet Lao (the Lao Communist movement) addressed with considerable success.

From 1954, the Pathet Lao provided an alternative focus of political authority in Laos, backed by an alternative historical perspective and world view. The continual existence and political success of the Pathet Lao placed in doubt the very legitimacy of the Royal Lao government. The Pathet Lao's class analysis and historical critique of the development of Lao society provided the basis for a new, more equal partnership between tribal peoples and ethnic Lao. Not surprisingly, recruitment came predominantly from the tribal groups, both into the Lao Patriotic

[18] For a discussion of these developments, see Martin Stuart-Fox and Rod Bucknell, "Politicization of the Buddhist Sangha in Laos," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 13 (1982), pp. 60–80. By comparison, note the "use" made of Buddhism in Thailand in, for example, Charles F. Keyes, "Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 30 (1971), pp. 551–67; and Frank E. Reynolds, "Civic Religion and National Community in Thailand," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 36 (1977), pp. 267–82.

[19] These occurred both among the *Kha* in southern Laos—see John B. Murdoch, "The 1901–1902 'Holy Man's' Rebellion," *Journal of the Siam Society*, 62 (1974), pp. 47–66—and the Hmong in the north (the rebellion of Tiao Pha Patchay, 1918–22).

Front (Neo Lao Hak Sat) and into the Lao People's Liberation Army. Only after formation of the coalition Provisional Government of National Union was this policy of ethnic integration extended to the whole country.

The Lao Marxist World View

With the collapse of the political right in Laos following communist victories in Kampuchea and Vietnam, the Pathet Lao moved to consolidate their political power. This process culminated in the declaration of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) in December 1975. All political power in Laos was henceforth to be exercised by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), which was also responsible for propagating its own official version of the Marxist-Leninist world view.

The LPRP is the sole arbiter of Marxist orthodoxy in Laos. Party structure is similar to that in other communist states. At the apex of the party hierarchy stands the secretary-general—in Laos, Kaysone Phomvihane, who is concurrently prime minister in the government. The locus of political decision-making is the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the LPRP, which in turn is nominally elected by the Party Congress.[20] Immediately below the Politburo stands the permanent Secretariat of the Central Committee, responsible for the daily running of party affairs; and below that again, stands the full Central Committee with its lateral commissions dealing with party organization, military affairs, security, economy and finance, and propaganda. There are thirteen provincial committees and numerous district and village committees. The party thus operates as an integrated hierarchy reaching throughout Lao society, and is ideally constituted to act as the ideological source for the legitimation of its own exercise of power.

The LPRP is asserted to be "the sole faithful representative of the interests of the working classes, the working people of all Lao nationalities [ethnic groups] and the entire Lao people."[21] As such, not only is it the directing force and spearhead of the socialist revolution, but it is also responsible for propagating the Lao Marxist world view. The principal elements of this world view derive from Soviet and Vietnamese Marxism. Notably, they include the laws of dialectical and historical materialism.

The legitimacy of political authority in a Marxist-Leninist state rests ultimately on the concepts of class struggle and the dictatorship exer-

[20] An enlarged Central Committee but the same Politburo was elected at the Third Party Congress in April 1982. See Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (LPDR), *Bulletin de Nouvelles*, no. 24, 1 May 1982.

[21] Kaysone Phomvihane, "Report to the Joint Session of the Supreme People's Assembly and Council of Ministers, 17 February 1977," broadcast over Radio Vientiane 17–20 February 1977 (*Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, Special Supplement, 11 April 1977, p. 21).

cised by the party on behalf of the proletariat—or, in the case of Laos, on behalf of the worker-peasant alliance of all ethnic groups of the "multinational Lao people."[22] The LPRP believes that there is an inevitable world historical progression towards socialism, which operates through the more or less violent struggle between classes. The overthrow of the "feudal" ruling elite in Laos was an essential step in this process. This explains why so many Lao fled as refugees, and why the party must exercise power as tightly as it does. Those who left were bourgeois class enemies; and the refusal of these enemies of the worker-peasant alliance to accept the finality of their overthrow makes it necessary for the party to guide the masses until they are in a position truly to exercise their own "collective mastery." Rule by the party—dictatorship on behalf of and for the good of the proletariat—is thus legitimized as a temporary expedient demanded by historical circumstances.

The party alone stands as embodiment of those revolutionary forces which will lead the country inexorably towards the future communist utopia. To this end, all Lao of every ethnic group must work and struggle. No malingering is permissible: nothing but unswerving dedication to the service of the party and the state. In particular, no criticism of party policy is permitted, for the party acts as the sole arbiter of Truth. Individual party members may adopt wrong policies, but the party as a whole is infallibly correct in the direction it imparts to the Lao revolution, for it is the concrete expression of what is claimed to be the highest Truth known to man—the scientific social laws of Marxism.

In the international context, the LPRP sees Laos as the "advance post" of socialism in Southeast Asia, "a part of the continent to which the forces of imperialism and international reactionism are desperately clinging."[23] Laos is locked into the world-wide conflict between socialism and capitalism. It is a prodigious struggle, but one from which socialism will inevitably emerge triumphant, because it is supported by three great revolutionary currents—the socialist states, Third World liberation movements, and the proletariat in capitalist states.

Internally, the party is leading the country directly to socialism, bypassing the stage of capitalism. This it is doing, "according to the law of the revolution, passing immediately to the accomplishment of the historic mission of the dictatorship of the proletariat,"[24] by simulta-

[22] This account of Marxist-Leninist ideology as it applies in Laos is taken primarily from Kaysone Phomvihane, *La Révolution Lao* (Moscow: Éditions de Progrès, 1980). This represents the official line, however, and should not be taken as implying the absence of all ideological differences within the LPRP. Some of these differences between Politburo members are discussed in Martin Stuart-Fox, "Reflections on the Lao Revolution," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 3 (1981), pp. 41–57.

[23] Kaysone Phomvihane, *La Révolution Lao*, p. 192.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 189.

neously pursuing the "three revolutions"—the revolution in relations of production, the scientific and technical revolution, and the cultural and ideological revolution. Of these three, the first is assigned "the role of guide" in determining the direction of development of the revolution, but the second is seen as the "key" to the economic changes necessary for the construction of socialism. At the same time, the cultural and ideological revolution has to be "one step in advance," in order to prepare the way for acceptance of the necessity to pursue the other two.[25] This third revolution has the goal of supplanting feudalistic and capitalistic modes of thought by a commitment to the principles of Marxism-Leninism. It seeks, therefore, to legitimize the exercise of political power. Only if the mass of the Lao people wholeheartedly embraces the communist world view will the order and security of the state and government—and thus the leading role of the party—be assured.

Theoretically, the LPRP acts as the promoter and the guardian of ideological purity: state power is exercised by the government and bureaucracy. In practice, however, the party makes policy decisions which the government then executes. In practice, also, the overlap in membership between the party and government[26] ensures that power rests in the hands of the party. In other words, in the LPDR—as in any communist state—there is no radical separation (such as existed in the traditional Lao order) between the exercise of state power and its ideological justification or legitimation.

Buddhism and Marxism: Differences and Similarities

The world view of Marxism-Leninism could hardly be more different from that of Theravada Buddhism. However, structural comparison of the two systems, their beliefs, and the institutions by which they propagate and reinforce them, brings out certain interesting similarities as well as differences. These, in turn, go some way towards accounting for policies adopted by the LPRP towards Buddhism since 1975 in effecting a transfer of political legitimation. Such a study also indicates possible areas of accommodation which the socialist regime in Laos may be prepared to pursue further.

Structural similarities are most striking between the *Sangha* as the guardian of *Dhamma*, a hierarchy separate from (though in part overlap-

[25] For a discussion of these "three revolutions" as they apply in Laos, see *ibid.*, pp. 200–10.

[26] The relation between party and government and their overlap of membership in Laos is discussed in Chou Norindr, "Political Institutions of the Lao People's Democratic Republic," in Martin Stuart-Fox, ed., *Contemporary Laos: Studies in the Politics and Society of the Lao People's Democratic Republic* (St. Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland Press/ New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), pp. 39–61.

ping with) the ruling aristocracy, and the LPRP as the repository of the truth of Marxism-Leninism, a hierarchy separate from (though largely overlapping with) the government and its bureaucracy. Both organizations have attempted to penetrate all levels of Lao society, with varying success. The *Sangha*, despite its missionary efforts at various times, failed to convert the majority of tribal peoples in Laos, though it did penetrate to the village level throughout most of lowland Laos among the ethnic Lao. The LPRP has attempted to establish cells at the village level throughout the country, including among tribal minorities. In this it has been only relatively successful, and more organizational work remains to be done.[27] The strength of Buddhism among the ethnic Lao stemmed from the fact that virtually all Lao males entered the *Sangha* at some point in their lives. Only a small minority, however, have become members of the LPRP, and its secretive workings remain a mystery for most other Lao.

Insofar as an ideology in its broadest sense forms an integral part of the world view of a particular society, Buddhism and Marxism see man's relation to his fellow men and physical environment in very different ways. Buddhism sees history as a stage for the spiritual victory of each individual in escaping from the cycle of rebirth; Marxism sees history as dialectically giving rise to new modes and relations of production through the revolutionary resolution of social conflict. Salvation for Buddhism is other-worldly, through change of consciousness brought about by meditation and insight into the nature of one's own mind. For Marxism, salvation is this-worldly, through change of consciousness effected by changing economic conditions.

Considered as providing legitimation for the exercise of state power, both Buddhism and Marxism provide support for specific social structures, political institutions, ways of controlling ideological differences and protecting the established order, and modes of relating man to his environment. Each of these factors provides a basis for comparison of the two systems of legitimation. Buddhism had the effect of institutionalizing class and ethnic distinctions; Marxism sees class distinctions in terms of historic and social conditioning. In any historic period, Marxism designates one class as progressive, to which political power should accrue. The political structure legitimized by each ideology relates to what each conceives as the dominant social class—for Buddhism a hereditary aristocracy into which anyone with sufficient merit may be born; for Marxism, the worker-peasant alliance whose class conscious-

[27] This has been admitted frequently by Lao communist leaders: see the criticisms contained in the "Political Report of the Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party presented by Comrade Kaysone Phomvihane, General Secretary, to the Third Congress of the Party, (27–30 April 1982)," *News Bulletin of the Embassy of the LPDR* (Canberra, 1 August 1982), p. 8; and pp. 9–13, on how to improve matters.

ness anyone may approximate, through political re-education and physical labour. For both Buddhism and Marxism, the path towards social prestige (and power) lies through their respective institutions—the *Sangha* or the party.[28] But, while Buddhism legitimizes social and economic inequalities, Marxism legitimizes their suppression.

Both Buddhism and Marxism have recourse to authority in combating ideological heterodoxy—to the Buddhist scriptures, or to the works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Both claim for themselves absolute orthodoxy, despite the need for periodic reform. Both seek to transcend divisive differences in defending their established orders—a defence which extends to the identification of enemies of that order. But Buddhism is far more tolerant than Marxism of those who, as yet, do not embrace its beliefs: there is time in later existences for each individual to come to a realization of the Truth. Marxism has not that luxury: it seeks its enemies with despatch. And while the tolerance of Buddhism can be both a weakness (in the face of an assertive alternative ideology) and a strength (in that it alienates no-one), Marxist intolerance can also be both a weakness and a strength. Its strength lies in the sense of belonging and the conviction it brings to the believer; its weakness lies in the fear and opposition it generates among those who differ from the current orthodoxy on one point or another.[29]

Finally, Marxism sees the material world as open to illimitable productive transformations through human labour. Science will progressively enable men to control all natural forces and to shape their environment to their own ends: the responsibility lies with mankind. In the meantime, disasters can only be accepted. Buddhism, on the other hand, claims to regulate those natural forces under demonic influence through the cosmic dimension of *Dhamma*, a claim which Marxism may ridicule, but which it cannot match.[30]

The Legitimization of Marxism: Phase I (1975–79)

In Laos political power came not, as in Vietnam and Kampuchea, from conclusive military action. It was the result of a more leisurely transitional process which sought to minimize political opposition and

[28] In Thailand the *Sangha* often serves as an entry to government service. See S.J. Tambiah, "Sangha and Polity in Modern Thailand: An Overview," in Smith, ed., *Religion and Legitimation of Power*, pp. 111–33.

[29] Much of the outflow of Lao refugees to Thailand, many of whom were well qualified and initially eager to work with the Pathet Lao, has been due to fear of groundless denunciation and of being sent to remote re-education camps for prolonged periods. For a discussion of the effect this has had, see Martin Stuart-Fox, "Reflections on the Lao Revolution," pp. 44–6.

[30] The serious floods and droughts which beset Laos from 1976 to 1978 caused the Lao peasantry to doubt the capacity of the new regime to control the malevolent powers which most Lao peasants believe are only awaiting an occasion to interfere with the natural harmony of existence.

distrust, and to mobilize popular enthusiasm and energy for the task of national construction. The effectiveness of the program clearly depended on obtaining maximum popular acceptance of the right of the Pathet Lao to exercise full political authority. During 1975, therefore, the Pathet Lao mounted a concerted campaign to undermine any remaining basis of legitimation of the Royal Lao government, and to substitute for it legitimation of their own socio-political system. With the abolition of the monarchy, emphasis shifted to the consolidation of political power. Whether or not most Lao recognized the authority of the new regime to exercise that power was of less immediate importance. By 1979, however, popular opposition to government policies—especially over the cooperativization of agriculture—had forced a reassessment of priorities, and the Seventh Resolution of the Supreme People's Assembly of the LPDR ushered in a new phase in the legitimization of Marxism in Laos.

In one respect the transition to power of the LPRP was facilitated by Pathet Lao participation in the Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) set up in April 1974: in another respect, however, the very success of the coalition made it difficult for the Pathet Lao to justify its eventual revolutionary overthrow. The Pathet Lao were largely responsible for formulating what became known as the coalition's "eighteen-point political program."[31] This was promulgated by the PGNU, but was drawn up by the National Political Consultative Council, meeting under the chairmanship of Souphanouvong. As Souphanouvong was concurrently president of the Lao Patriotic Front, the "eighteen points" were widely taken as the Pathet Lao blueprint for Laos in the areas of both domestic and foreign policy.

The first point in the political program stated the government's aim "to build a peaceful, independent, neutral, democratic, united and prosperous Kingdom of Laos." Thus monarchy was expressly endorsed. A wide range of democratic rights and freedoms was also guaranteed; and respect for Buddhism was declared official policy. In fact, there was little in this document to which any Lao could take exception. Its contents became widely known, its appeal was immediate, and it received the enthusiastic endorsement of the Buddhist *Sangha*. Young activist monks propagated its provision through their contacts with lay followers. The effect overall was to make the Pathet Lao appear far more moderate and positive than they had been painted by rightist propaganda—and to gain for them popular recognition of their political role in

[31] For the text, see *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 5 (1975), pp. 251–5. For a discussion of the "eighteen points" as Pathet Lao policy, see MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff, "Laos 1979: Coalition Government Shoots the Rapids," *Asian Survey*, 15 (1975), pp. 174–83. Early opposition to the new regime called for a return to the programme of the "eighteen points"; see John Everingham, "Rebels with a Sacred Mission," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 April 1976, pp. 22–3.

government. It also made it more difficult for the Pathet Lao to abandon either the "eighteen points" or the coalition without losing much of the popular acceptance they had achieved.

The Pathet Lao response to this dilemma was to attack the corruption of the political right, and to bring popular pressure to bear in order to force the latter out of the coalition. At the same time, support was sought for Pathet Lao policies by appealing to Lao nationalist sentiments and the desire for a new start to heal the wounds of war and reconstruct the country. To spread their message, the Pathet Lao relied on their own party cadres, leftist sympathizers outside the party, and the Buddhist *Sangha*.

Throughout 1975, the new regime made effective use of Buddhism to generate ideological support and provide legitimacy for the LPRP's increasingly monopolistic exercise of political power. In doing so, the Pathet Lao drew upon the good will many monks had towards the revolutionaries as upholders of traditional Lao cultural values against the materialism and corruption of the West.[32] Monks either volunteered or were prevailed upon to attend political re-education seminars, where they were encouraged to adopt "progressive" attitudes and prove themselves by communicating the policies and decisions of the Pathet Lao leadership to the mass of the people. They were also urged to purge Buddhism of such superstitions as belief in the existence of demons, or of life after death in one of the Buddhist heavens or hells. The accumulation of religious merit was downplayed; and *karma* was denounced as leading to fatalism and pacificism.[33]

The use of monks by the Pathet Lao to spread a political message had a twofold effect: in the short term, the impact of socialist ideology was enhanced by virtue of the traditional respect accorded to monks, especially in rural Laos; but, in the longer term, use of the *Sangha* led to a decline in its prestige and social standing.[34] Increasingly the *Sangha*

[32] For a discussion of the welcome given to the Pathet Lao by monks in Southern Laos, see Mahacanla Tanbuali, *Santhāna Phra-Phuttha-sāsanā nai Prathēt Sāthāranarat Prachāthipatai Prachāchon Lāu* ["The State of the Buddhist Religion in the Lao People's Democratic Republic"] (Bangkok: Khama Sāsanikachan, 1977), pp. 41–6.

[33] The Pathet Lao critique of *karma* has been indirect for the most part. Apart from denouncing the belief that "people should not fight because fighting has bad karmic consequences" as "defeatist" (*ibid.*, p. 67), the Pathet Lao approach has been to ridicule some of the less rationally defensible features of Buddhist cosmology—such as the existence of tiered heavens and hells. The existence of life after death is discounted as mere superstition, as is merit-making to ensure good *karma*. See Stuart-Fox and Bucknell, "Politicization of the Buddhist Sangha," p. 70. The Pathet Lao seem to have seen belief in *karma* as in some way undermining Marxist attempts to mobilize the population in support of the material transformation of Lao society. Even though *karma* entails the notion of moral responsibility and therefore cannot be taken as a doctrine of fatalism, in popular parlance reference to *karma* justifies something happening and precludes the need to inquire further into why, or whether, it could be prevented from happening again.

[34] For a discussion of this effect, see Mahacanla, *Santhāna*, pp. 32–5.

came to be seen as little more than a mouthpiece for the government, and many monks reacted by fleeing to Thailand.

Nevertheless, during 1975 Buddhism was a major vehicle for popularizing socialist ideas in the LPRP. In the process, however, its specifically religious content was both reduced and modified. The party argued that Buddhism and socialism had much in common:[35] both taught equality, promoted communal values, and sought to end human suffering. The Buddha was portrayed as a man with a social conscience. But it was also emphasized that, as Buddhism had adapted to a variety of social systems over time, so it had to adapt to socialism—in the way the party directed.[36] This included both a reorganization of the *Sangha*, and a change of emphasis in Buddhist teaching from other-worldly to this-worldly concerns. In effecting these changes, the Pathet Lao effectively laid the groundwork for acceptance of a Marxist world view, and hence for a new notion of legitimacy of state power.

By mid-1975, the collapse of the political right was complete. The pretence of the coalition was still maintained, but effective power lay in the hands of the Pathet Lao. Moreover, while it is safe to say that most educated Lao did not recognize the right of the LPRP to monopolize political power,[37] nevertheless, they were still prepared to accept the Pathet Lao political program (still at that time the "eighteen points") as a blueprint for the reconstruction of the country. By the end of the year, the detention of thousands of military officers and civilian bureaucrats had created the political conditions for the Lao revolutionary elite to dispense with the coalition, and to proclaim a People's Republic.

The abolition of the monarchy constituted the most radical break with the former Lao traditional order. However, the appointment of Souphanouvong as first president of the Lao People's Democratic Republic mitigated the impact of the change. As a prince of the royal clan, and half-brother of the highly respected Souvanna Phouma (prime minister in the PGNU), Souphanouvong already enjoyed considerable prestige among lowland Lao. Though not in direct line for the throne, Souphanouvong was credited with previous religious merit which gave him considerable standing within Lao Buddhist society. In addition, he could draw upon his charisma as nominal leader of the Lao revolution,

[35] This was in accordance with the Pathet Lao policy of "seeking a common front while preserving differing points"; see *ibid.*, p. 24.

[36] These arguments are advanced in Khamtan Thepbuali, *Pha Song Lāu kap kān Patiwat* ["The Lao Sangha and the Revolution"] (Vientiane: Neo Lao Haksat Press, 1975). A summary and review of this work have been provided by Saveng Phinith in *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, LXIV (1977), pp. 317–23. See, also, Khamtan [Thepbuali], *Kān muang kap Sāsanā Phut* ["Politics and Buddhism"] (n.p.: Neo Lao Haksat Press, 1976), p. 27.

[37] This is certainly true if interviews with refugees are to be accepted. The very number of refugees who fled is in itself an indication of their attitude to the regime.

selflessly dedicated to the cause of national independence. To reinforce Souphanouvong's position, former king Savang Vatthana was appointed supreme counsellor to the president. By abdicating to become chief adviser to the new head of state, the king in effect subordinated his office of kingship to that of the presidency, and transferred something of the remaining magico-religious legitimacy of his person to Souphanouvong, the nominal source of authority in the new regime.

This contrived transfer of legitimacy was extended to include the next two most prestigious figures in the former regime. Crown Prince Vong Savang was given a seat on the Supreme People's Council (SPA), nominally the locus of popular power in the Lao Marxist state, but in reality a chamber meeting annually to ratify without dissent the policy decisions of the LPRP. And former Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma was named councillor to the government. Souvanna's standing in Laos derived not only from his personal integrity and high office, but also from his relationship to the royal family. His willingness to serve the new regime was another important factor in legitimizing the transfer of power.[38]

The Congress of People's Representatives which met in Vientiane in December 1975 set up the principal institutions of a communist state. Power is wielded by two parallel and overlapping hierarchies: that of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP)—as the Communist Party is now known in Laos—and that of the government and its bureaucracy. Other institutions function at the mass level without having any substantial independent political influence: the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), and various mass organizations such as the farmers', womens' and youth associations. In addition, there is the army. The action program of the new government retained much in common with the "eighteen points," but the differences were also striking. Five of the six characteristics of the new Laos remained: but "neutral" was replaced by "socially progressive." Some of the previous rights and freedoms were conspicuously absent; and Buddhism was not mentioned by name.[39]

With the consolidation of Pathet Lao political power after 1975, official attitudes towards Buddhism hardened. The LPRP was no longer

[38] The above appointments can be seen as both symbolic and transitional. In March 1977, the ex-king and his son were arrested in Luang Prabang, denounced as representatives of feudalism and reaction for allegedly lending support to anti-government insurgents, stripped of their government posts, and placed under house-arrest near Viengsai, the former Pathet Lao headquarters in Sam Neua province, close to the Vietnamese border. By that time, both had served their purpose: their deportation provoked no popular demonstrations of discontent. Souvanna continued in his position as adviser to the government. Former political detainees from Viengsai and Xieng Khouang claim that both the king and the crown prince are dead—the former of natural causes, the latter trying to escape. There has been no confirmation of these reports from the Lao authorities.

[39] See "Documents du Congrès National des Représentants du Peuple" (Vientiane: Edition Lao Hak Sat, 1976), pp. 59–80.

content simply to use the *Sangha* as it existed to propagate socialism. It moved to bring the *Sangha* under direct party control by replacing its traditional hierarchy with one of the LPRP's own choosing. The ceremonial fans of senior monks were (symbolically) broken, and, under close party supervision, the *Sangha* (previously divided into two major sects) was restructured as a single Union of Lao Buddhists, with office-holders appointed only with party approval. By 1977, the Lao Buddhist *Sangha* had been transformed from an independently organized hierarchy—"the only permanent *vertical functional organization* which [reached] into the Lao rural population"[40]—into a pliant instrument of party policy. Representatives of this "official Buddhism" have subsequently participated in state functions, attended international conferences, and ritually denounced United States imperialism and Chinese "international reactionism."[41]

Pathet Lao strategy towards Buddhism during this period can be summed up as follows: it was designed "(a) to subordinate Buddhist *Dhamma* to the socio-political ideology of the LPRP, and (b) to reduce the independence of the *Sangha* in order to enable the party to monopolize social and political influence."[42] This dual strategy operated by taking advantage of the traditionally high status of the *Sangha* in Lao society to propagate the principles of socialism, while at the same time restructuring the *Sangha* into an association under party control, similar to those of farmers, women, youth, etc. Monks were urged to purge their scriptures of "backward" content,[43] propagate socialist morality, teach the illiterate to read and write, and provide traditional herbal remedies for the sick. Monasteries functioned as cooperatives.[44] Monks received a rice ration for their teaching and health work. But they were expected to grow vegetables, and be otherwise self-sufficient, so as not to have to depend on gifts from the faithful.

Pathet Lao policy towards Buddhism represents what might be termed the negative aspect of the quest for legitimacy: the need to undermine and destroy whatever contributed to the authority of the former regime. By contrast, policy towards the hill tribes represents the

[40] Vonsavanh Boutsavath and Georges Chapelier, "Lao Popular Buddhism and Community Development," *Journal of the Siam Society*, LXI, 2 (July 1973), p. 15.

[41] These developments are examined at length in Stuart-Fox and Bucknell, "Politicization of the Buddhist Sangha."

[42] *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

[43] See Pierre-Bernard Lafont, "Buddhism in Contemporary Laos," in Stuart-Fox, ed., *Contemporary Laos*, pp. 148–62.

[44] This role was made quite explicit by Phoumi Vongvichit, Minister of Education, Sports and Religious Affairs, in his address to the closing session of the Buddhist teachers [monks] training course held in Vientiane in October 1976; broadcast over Radio Vientiane in Lao, 18 October 1976, and translated by *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, 28 October 1976, p. I1.

positive aspect: the need to legitimize the new political order in the eyes of the whole population, lowland Lao and mountain tribes alike.

Long before the Pathet Lao seized full political control of Laos in 1975, the Lao communist movement had developed a set of progressive policies aimed at integrating the tribal peoples within a multi-ethnic Lao state. Pathet Lao leaders did not envisage setting up autonomous areas, as had been done in the People's Republic of China and North Vietnam.[45] Instead, they offered tribal peoples the opportunity of social and political equality with the lowland Lao, and, through recruitment into both the LPRP and the Lao People's Liberation Army, the right to administer their own affairs in those areas where they constituted a majority of the population.

During the thirty-year war of liberation prior to 1975, tribal groups together probably provided a majority of both party cadres and guerrillas.[46] From its earliest days the Lao Patriotic Front made a point of opposing "all schemes of sowing discord amongst the nationalities [tribal groups]," and of pursuing a "policy of national union, thus helping the various nationalities to live on an equal footing."[47] The government promised to improve the standards of education, health, and welfare of the tribal peoples, once the liberation struggle was won.

If official policy statements are an accurate guide, the government's failure to live up to earlier promises after 1975 reflected not its lack of commitment, but deteriorating economic conditions countrywide. The termination of Chinese aid, especially of consumer goods into northern Laos, was particularly devastating. By 1978, there were reports of growing dissatisfaction among some minority groups.[48] Lao Prime Minister Kaysone Phouvihane accused the Chinese of inciting insurgency among the northern Lao hill tribes.[49] In November 1979, Souphanouvong personally appealed to the Hmong not to take up arms against the government, and he promised increased economic assistance.[50]

The new regime could rightfully claim, however, to have gone further than any previous government in integrating tribal minorities

[45] Autonomous areas were officially abolished in Vietnam in December 1975, soon after national unity had been achieved.

[46] See Gary D. Wekkin, "Tribal Politics in Indochina: The Role of Highland Tribes in the Internationalization of Internal Wars," in Mark W. Zacher and R. Stephen Milne, eds., *Conflict and Stability in Southeast Asia* (Garden City, New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1974), pp. 139–40.

[47] Action Program of the Neo Lao Hak Sat, adopted at the Second National Congress, April 1964; reprinted in Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), appendix VI.

[48] See Nayan Chanda, "A New Threat from the Mountain Tribes," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1 September 1978, pp. 8–11.

[49] Particularly the Hmong and Yao. For Kaysone's accusations, see his speech to the Supreme People's Assembly, 26 December 1979 (translated in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, 8 February 1980, p. 1).

[50] *Khaosan Pathet Lao, Bulletin Quotidien*, 21 November 1979, p. 2.

into the national community. Tribesmen had been recruited into both the LPRP and the army in considerable numbers, and filled many positions in the bureaucracy, especially at the local level in tribal areas. Both the party and the army provided avenues of social mobility for politically ambitious tribesmen such as never existed under the Royal Lao government, and a number of minority representatives have risen to positions of authority in the new regime.[51] That said, however, it was evident that political power still rested with the lowland Lao; in this respect, the LPDR was still open to the charge that it continued the traditional pattern of ethnic Lao domination of tribal minorities.

Such criticism struck at the heart of LPRP attempts to develop a firm basis for the legitimation of the political authority of the new regime among minority groups. The Pathet Lao argued that all who live in Laos are of Lao nationality, because all have an equal historical claim to the territory of present-day Laos.[52] This argument rejected the historical sequence enshrined in traditional mythology: a prior *Kha* occupation of the land and ethnic-Lao usurpation, followed by ethnocentric superiority and domination. Exploitation of tribal groups was properly explained, according to the Pathet Lao, in terms of class, not of race: historically, both Lao commoners and tribal minorities suffered equally from the exactions of feudal lords. Both the ethnic Lao peasantry and the minorities thus stood to gain from the revolution. In the new Laos, so it was claimed, class solidarity would triumph over the baseless racial antagonism which had been encouraged by the ruling elite for their own ends. So went the argument; but, to be convincing, it had to be supported by something more than official rhetoric. There was still a long way to go before real equality was attained in practice.[53] But the very fact that racial equality was the oft-stated goal—one which would be pursued even more vigorously, it was claimed, once conditions permitted—gave the tribal minorities a greater stake in the Pathet Lao regime than they had ever had in the past. And it thus provided a greater degree of legitimacy for the government among most minority groups than any previous regime had enjoyed.

The policies of the LPRP towards both Buddhism and the country's minority groups were part of an overall program of political education. The goal of this national program was to produce "new socialist men" who would unquestioningly accept the legitimacy of the regime's political power. To this end, all organs of propaganda and all means of

[51] For an overview of these effects of positive Pathet Lao policies towards minorities, see Gary D. Wekkin, "The Rewards of Revolution: Pathet Lao Policy towards the Hill Tribes since 1975," in Stuart-Fox, ed., *Contemporary Laos*, pp. 188–9.

[52] Interview with Dr. Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, December 1980.

[53] Just how far, is evident from Jacqui Chagnon and Roger Rumpf, "Education: The Prerequisite to Change in Laos " in Stuart-Fox, ed., *Contemporary Laos*, pp. 163–80.

education were directed. Everyone was obliged to attend innumerable "seminars" where the party line was reiterated to the point of utter boredom. Attendance was compulsory, unlike the *bouns*, or festivals, which served as a principal means of reinforcing the Buddhist world view, and which everyone attended with enthusiasm. Artistic troupes, short plays, film evenings, etc., were also used to communicate the communist message; but, because performers and equipment were in short supply, the wearisome "seminars" carried much of the burden of propaganda. Those whose class background predisposed them not to accept the new ideology had to combine political instruction with physical labour in remote re-education camps.[54] But, despite this national program of political education, by 1979 government policies had succeeded in alienating large sectors of the population, had undermined the regime's claims to political authority, and had forced a rethinking of methods and priorities.

The Legitimization of Marxism-Leninism: Phase II (since 1980)

On 26 December 1979, the Supreme People's Assembly passed without amendment the political report of Prime Minister Kaysone, which became known as the Seventh Resolution.[55] This document amounted to a substantial reversal of the political line previously in force. In place of the rapid socialization of the means of production, the new policy provided for a greater degree of private participation in the economy, and a relaxation of restrictions on personal movement and small-scale trading. It also signified a readiness on the part of the LPRP to take more account of popular reaction to government policies, and a recognition that social attitudes would take more time to change than at first envisaged.

This change in direction followed the failure of the accelerated program of agricultural cooperativization begun in May 1978. After announcing the rapid formation of almost two thousand cooperatives in the first year of the scheme, the government began to admit the extent of popular opposition. Lack of proper preparation, poor organization and support, and the counter-productive use of coercion, resulted by late 1978 in widespread discontent, including the slaughter of animals and burning of crops. Some peasants even left their land and moved into the towns, or crossed the Mekong to Thailand. Production fell, and anti-

[54] For a survey of these camps, see Amnesty International, *Political Prisoners in the People's Democratic Republic of Laos*, Report ASA 26/02/80, March 1980.

[55] For the text, see Kaysone Phomvihane, "Report to the Supreme People's Assembly, Vientiane, 26 December 1979," broadcast over Radio Vientiane, 27 December 1979 (*Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, 18 January, and Special Supplement of 8 February 1980).

government insurgency gained momentum. In July 1979, the program was abruptly suspended—but not before it had cost the government much popular support among the peasantry.[56] At the same time, the government relaxed its unpopular programs to curtail the slash-and-burn methods of agriculture used by tribal minorities, and to settle some of the minorities permanently at lower altitudes.

The effects of the Seventh Resolution were felt in a number of areas not directly covered by its provisions. In particular, more tolerance was evident in official attitudes towards both Buddhism and the animistic cultural practices of minority groups. Attendance picked up at Buddhist temples, at least in Vientiane; and other ethnic groups were free to practise their religions.[57] A further effect was that the party hierarchy became more accessible to those Lao civil servants and intellectuals who continued to serve the regime but who had not fought with the Pathet Lao during the liberation struggle.[58]

It is too early yet to determine whether these developments amount to more than a tactical retreat from an orthodox emphasis on the primacy of economic transformation in the socialization of Lao society, or whether they signify a new commitment to building a specifically Lao form of socialism. While the former might seem more likely, much evidence suggests that the latter alternative is still a possibility. Despite the close relationship between Laos and Vietnam and the degree of support this has within the LPRP, there are those in Laos who are well aware of the threat this poses to an independent Lao identity. In stressing the need for Laos to build its own particular form of socialism, some Lao argue that this must take into consideration the historical reality of the Lao cultural identity—and that this cannot be divorced from Theravada Buddhism.[59]

Recent decisions and actions by the LPRP suggest that those who argue this line within the Party are not without some influence. Certainly Buddhism does not appear to be under the same pressure as it was in 1976 and 1977. Buddhist festivals are no longer strictly controlled and are even encouraged as examples of popular culture. Another indication of a change in official attitudes is that the traditional Lao dress (the *sinh*)

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[56] For a detailed discussion of the cooperativization program, see Martin Stuart-Fox, "The Initial Failure of Agricultural Cooperativization in Laos," *Asia Quarterly*, no. 4 (1980), pp. 273–99.

[57] The author witnessed both a Chinese religious festival and spirit worship in Laos in December 1980.

[58] This was made clear to the author in interviews with a number of young intellectuals in Vientiane in December 1980.

[59] It is interesting to note that the LPRP at its Third Congress specifically recognized that "the vast majority [of Lao] are Buddhist believers" and that strength lay in national unity. See "Political Report . . . to the Third Congress of the Party," *News Bulletin of the Embassy of the LPDR* (Canberra, 1 July 1982), p. 2.

is now freely worn, after being all but banned in the early years of the revolution. Lao traditional culture has an honoured place in Vientiane's National Museum of the Revolution. Even more surprisingly, the memorial to the guerrilla fighters who died in the 25-year revolutionary struggle takes the form of a Buddhist monument in the traditional Lao style.

Too much should not be made of all this. Buddhism has been forced to undergo considerable change in order to conform to the requirements of Lao Marxism, and it is still on the defensive. Meanwhile the legitimation of political authority by the LPRP is being actively pursued—in the schools, in the media, and throughout Lao society. The economic liberalization that has been introduced has, after all, been under the auspices of the party: those who take advantage of it do so in accordance with party instructions. But recognition of the power of the party to issue such instructions is one thing; acceptance of its unique authority to do so is another. Those who maintain that recognition by the mass of the Lao people of that authority requires that it be exercised in the form of a specifically Lao Marxism still have a case to argue. At present, the evidence suggests that the dialogue remains open.

Concluding Assessment

In commenting upon the LPRP's seizure of power in Laos, Souphanouvong is reported once to have remarked that it had come five years too early. Implicit in this comment was a belief that the party needed more time to press its claim to wield state power, not simply on behalf of those who had fought for the Pathet Lao, but on behalf of the entire population. In 1975, preparations for a transfer of allegiance to the Pathet Lao, for acceptance of the legitimate right of the party to exercise political power, were incomplete. The party was faced with the need not only to establish its own legitimacy, but also to undermine belief in the traditional order. More than seven years have now passed, and it is possible to make some assessment of the success of the new regime in legitimizing its political authority.

The leaders of the LPRP have been patient and careful in laying the basis for the legitimacy of the regime. The mistakes which were made in Kampuchea, which turned the mass of the Kampuchean people irrevocably against the Khmer Rouge, were not made in Laos. The replacement of the monarchy by a republic was accomplished remarkably smoothly, in full recognition of the use which could be made of what remained of traditional notions of legitimation. The party's attitude towards Buddhism, though firm, was not punitive: Buddhism was used to promote the transition to Marxism-Leninism.

There is, of course, a considerable gulf between the exercise of political power by the LPRP by virtue of its monopoly of the means of

social coercion, and popular acceptance of the party's legitimate right to power. Insofar as the latter involves a thorough-going conversion to the Marxist-Leninist world view, it is unlikely to be a rapid process, even given the regime's virtual monopoly of sources of information, education, and the means of communication and propaganda. Deeply-held beliefs are not easily modified in adults who have come to think in fixed ways; the conceptual leap from a cyclic, and thus historically static, world view to a progressive and dynamic one is not easily accomplished by peasants whose experience is primarily with the repetitive cycle of the seasons.

At the individual level, the regime is—not surprisingly—concentrating most of its efforts on convincing the young. Youths are urged not to attend Buddhist ceremonies or join the *Sangha*. At the institutional level, structural similarities in the systems of legitimation have permitted the replacement or subordination of one set of institutions by another: the party has supplanted the *Sangha*. But this has not necessarily resulted in popular acceptance of the new world view that the LPRP is propagating.

In Laos, popular acceptance of the legitimacy of the regime has been delayed by circumstances—some due to party errors, others beyond the party's control. Among these circumstances should be mentioned the economic collapse which followed withdrawal of Western—particularly American—aid, and the further deterioration in the economy due to the massive loss of skilled technicians and managers, largely through fear of forced political re-education. In addition, the disastrous decision to co-operativize agricultural production alienated many peasants, while forced re-settlement of tribal people at lower altitudes in order to protect virgin forests has done the same for some ethnic minority groups.

Overly close political ties with Vietnam, the presence of thousands of Vietnamese troops in Laos, and the personal contacts many leading Lao communists have with Vietnam (by descent, marriage, or education) has had the effect of compromising Pathet Lao nationalist credentials, and has caused widespread popular suspicion and resentment. This has diminished popular acceptance of the regime, and provided a sensitive nerve on which resistance groups, and Chinese or Thai propaganda, can play. Doubt over the wisdom of current Lao foreign policy, and fear of cultural as well as political domination by Vietnam, has prevented some educated and otherwise sympathetic Lao from fully accepting the legitimacy of the present regime.

All this is not to say that the present leadership, let alone Marxism-Leninism as such, is in danger of being overthrown. Resistance groups are still largely ineffective, and the control exercised by the government and party remains unassailable. On the other hand, though much of the traditional order may have been destroyed, Buddhism still has a deep

hold, and belief in spirits and natural powers is widespread. Party members may shrug off drought and flood as natural phenomena, but the suspicion remains among many Lao that these are portents of disharmony which traditionally have thrown into question the fitness of those who govern. Marxism-Leninism may have a firm political and institutional hold in Laos, but it is safe to say that it by no means constitutes the popularly accepted world view of the mass of the Lao people.

There is still the possibility of a genuine mutual accommodation between Marxism and Buddhism in Laos. The first Lao Five-Year Plan and the Third Congress of the LPRP both confirmed the moderate line adopted in the Seventh Resolution.[60] If this continues, it could provide the conditions for development of a uniquely Lao form of socialism[61] that would draw upon traditional Buddhist cultural values in order to reinforce Lao national identity—especially vis-à-vis the Vietnamese. For this development to occur, Lao Buddhism itself might have to undergo further change[62]—but so, too, would Lao Marxism. If such an accommodation between Marxism and Buddhism proves impossible, however, two alternatives present themselves. Either a resurgent Buddhism may prove sufficiently tenacious to coexist with Marxism, as Catholicism has done in Poland; or Buddhism in Laos will lose all resemblance to its traditional form and disappear in all but name. In the latter event, Marxism would provide the sole source of legitimation for the exercise of political power in Laos. It would not be an identifiably Lao Marxism, however, but rather the dominant regional form of Marxism—that of Vietnam.

University of Queensland, Australia, April 1983

[60] See Kaysone Phomvihane, "Speech to the Supreme People's Assembly, 6 January 1981 (the Eighth Resolution outlining the First Lao Five-Year Plan)" (translated by *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, 26 January, 2 February, and 13 February 1981). For Kaysone's speech to the Third Party Congress, see *Khaosan Pathet Lao, Bulletin Quotidien*, 28 and 29 April 1982 (mimeo English translation, Vientiane, April 1982).

[61] An intriguing suggestion that Laos represents a unique situation is contained in Kaysone Phomvihane, "Speech on the Occasion of the Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the LPDR," *Khaosan Pathet Lao, Bulletin Quotidien*, 3 December 1980.

[62] But whether this has the effect of making Lao Theravada Buddhism evolve towards a form of Mahayana, as Lafont suggests, seems doubtful. See Pierre-Bernard Lafont, "Buddhism in Contemporary Laos," in Stuart-Fox, ed., *Contemporary Laos*, p. 160.