Political Culture and Power in the Lao People's Democratic Republic

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This article attempts to explain recent political and social developments in the Lao PDR by reference to Lao political culture, in particular to how political power is understood and used. I begin with some preliminary theoretical considerations before going on to outline some of the factors contributing to the construction of Lao political culture. I then discuss how political culture shapes social behavior, in the context of the present structure of Lao political institutions, and how it influences contemporary Lao politics. I conclude with some suggestions about the likely direction of political change in Laos.

I. Theoretical considerations

The concept of political culture has had a checkered history. As an explanatory variable in political science, the concept dates back to 1963

when Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba defined political culture as the set of 'orientations towards specifically political objects [and events]' on the basis of which people act in certain ways. Other definitions emphasized shared norms and values, shared meanings (linguistic and symbolic), political institutions and social identity, and ideology (Gibbins 1989). Criticism focused on difficulties encountered in operationalizing the concept for either comparative or explanatory purposes, and interest faded in the 1970s. The concept was revived in the 1980s (Gibbins 1989), and by 2000 Richard W. Wilson was able to claim not just that there had been a resurgence of interest in political culture, but that it had become "an enduring feature of political studies" (Wilson 2000, 246).

The fact remains, however, that the concept of political culture has proved remarkably difficult to grasp and define. Wilson (2000) identified five different approaches to political culture studies, which he grouped into two 'traditions'. The anthropological tradition comprises the hermeneutic/interpretive approach focusing on "the symbolic dimension of politics", plus the 'culture theory' approach, which emphasizes the effect of social group membership on political behavior; while the psychological tradition comprises the social character, social (or better, cultural) learning, and cognitive epistemological approaches, all of which variously prioritize the role of individual psychological factors, including personality, political values and morality, and core beliefs inculcated through socialization during the course of cognitive development.

Not only have political culture studies been theoretically fragmented, they have suffered from the controversy surrounding Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996). For Huntington, religion is the most significant defining feature of

a culture or civilization, for in his view religion determines how members become socialized into accepting politically significant views of justice, social order and authority, in the light of which they judge relations between their own and other societies. Religion (reinforced by language) is thus above all else responsible for transmitting the defining features of cultures and civilizations from generation to generation. There is some truth in this, for religion certainly does shape worldview; but so do other factors, including history. So Huntington is wrong to suggest that since religions in their most fundamentalist guise are incommensurable, conflict between civilizations is inevitable. Huntington has been heavily criticized for essentializing culture and failing to take account of such influences for change as modern technology and globalization. So while Huntington brought culture back into mainstream political discourse, he did so in a way that tended to discredit it. The Asian values debate that followed did nothing to rehabilitate the concept of political culture.

What is needed is an entirely new approach to political culture that is theoretically robust and integrates both social and individual dimensions. My own view is that culture must be understood in evolutionary terms, as a population phenomenon that evolves through a process of selection and retention of variation (Campbell 1965) of beliefs and the behavior they give rise to. Variation is a product of individual cognition, whose developing hierarchical structure both constrains its own further elaboration and sets probability gradients for behavioral responses to given situations. Selection of behavior depends on how environmental pressures are conceived in relation both to worldview (the structure of cognition) and desired outcomes of behavior (reflecting personal preferences tempered by ethical commitment). Once performed, behavior

is subject to real-world material and social forces, which frequently distort its intended effect. Each new situation created must be reconceived and behavior modified accordingly; so continuous interaction goes on between mind and reality.

The mind constructs a model of the world, both material and social, structured by the relationships conceived to exist between categories, whether of material entities or abstract concepts. Much of the study of category formation has focused on child development. The consensus, as one leading child psychologist puts it, is that "the conceptual system is categorical from its inception", and that its structure is hierarchical (Mandler 2002, 315). Sub-categories are nested within more general categories. This is born out by neuroscientific research demonstrating that: "general-to-specific hierarchical organization of information-processing units represents a general organizing principle throughout the brain" (Tsien 2007, 58). Processing of data presented by the senses entails its connective embedding in relation to existing cognitive structure. Categories are encoded as distributed connective networks linked to other categories: like definitions in a dictionary, one necessarily leads to another.

In the nested hierarchy of categories, higher order categories are more inclusive than lower ones, as for example in the ever more inclusive categories of cat, mammal, and vertebrate, animal. Animals plus plants fall within the higher category of living things, which with non-living things such as rocks and mountains comprises the natural (or material or physical) world. This stands as what I call an ultimate category. Other ultimate categories are the social world (always distinguished from the natural); the unseen world of powers and forces (commonly anthropomorphized as supernatural gods and spirits); and the self as conceived in relation to the

other three. The relations between these ultimate categories shape both individual and communally shared worldviews. Their defining features are deeply embedded in cognitive structure, and exert supervenient influence on lower-level categorical relations — not just semantically, but on the likelihood of their expression as behavior. While cognitive development is highly flexible in the young, cognitive structures are in general less open to modification as people age.

Individual structure of cognition (or worldview) develops over time through social transmission of knowledge, values and principles from parents (vertical), teachers (oblique) and peers (horizontal). The structure so formed is hierarchical, with higher level categories more deeply embedded, and so more impervious to modification (though if social pressures are strong enough, radical reorganization is possible — as in religious conversion). Cognitive structure biases behavioral responses to situations: it does not determine them. Whether or not a certain behavior is performed depends on the conception of how likely it is to produce a desired outcome. Once performed, a behavior inevitably has a cultural impact: it contributes to creating culture, which we can define as consisting of the sum of all those behaviors (including linguistic behavior) resulting from social learning. But it is also subject to selective pressures, which determine whether or not a behavior will be repeated. Cultures evolve when the frequencies of behaviors change in response to selective pressures. In this evolutionary perspective, the whole cultural system is dynamic. The model of the world constructed in mind is continuously modified in response to personal experience, within the constraints imposed by its hierarchical structure; while culture as the cumulative effect of individual behaviors evolves as the frequencies with which

behaviors are performed change over time.

To reiterate: worldview comprises the model of the world constructed in semantic memory as a result of social learning and personal experience. In detail it is always a work in progress, but cognitive relationships between higher categories become deeply embedded during the socialization of a child into the community of which it is a member. In any society socialization entails the transmission of knowledge about the material world, about social relationships and group identity, and about the powers and forces believed to influence our lives. Also imparted are norms and values, which serve to orient the individual in choosing (from imagined alternatives) how to respond to encountered situations. Worldview is structured by the relationships conceived to exist between ultimate semantic categories. But this provides only one determinant of behavior. The others are the way the encountered situation is interpreted and individual motivation (including associated desires, emotions and values). Worldview, interpretation and motivation together provide the meaning that underlies behavior, which others must interpret to understand why it was performed. Power functions as a selective pressure on two levels: as a conception at the cognitive level, influencing choice of behavior; and as a force on the social level influencing whether or not behavior will be imitated and repeated.

Political culture refers to the dimension of this process of cultural evolution that both reflects and impacts upon the way in which power is conceptualized and exercised. It thus comprises two interacting components: one individual and cognitive, colored by values and emotion, which not only legitimizes some forms of power and delegitimizes others, but also motivates behavior; the other social and

political, in the form of selective pressures on behaviors that result in their repetition, modification, or suppression. Political culture, in other words, comprises neither a fixed state of mind nor a set of habitual political behaviors, but rather the dynamic process through which power as the capacity to exert selective pressure is first conceived by members of a social group, and then impacts upon their political behavior. Individuals are socialized into conceiving of power in ways that characterize the society of which they are members. Their political behavior reflects both worldview and prevailing circumstances, notably in modern nation states the institutions responsible for imposing what Gramsci referred to as the hegemonic ideology of the ruling elite and Foucault called the 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1980) that legitimizes it. As selective pressures change, so worldview may be modified, thereby changing political behavior, and so also political culture. Bear in mind, however, that conceptual change and accompanying preferences will only translate into change in behavior provided selective pressures permit. Political culture is not unchanging, but it often does have remarkable continuity, due both to the cognitive embeddedness of worldview and to the constraints imposed by existing institutions of social power.

II. Lao political culture

An analysis of Lao political culture must begin with a discussion of those factors that shape the Lao worldview. These are imparted from an early

age, initially primarily within the family, subsequently by teachers (especially those to whom parents defer) and peer group attitudes and values. The principal influences that shape worldview derive from religion, history and the prevailing social structure.

1. Buddhism

A dynamic concept of Lao political culture must take account of both embedded elements of worldview and the selective pressures exerted by political institutions and other forms of social power, for it is a product of the relationship between the two. By Lao political culture, I refer to the political culture of the politically dominant ethnic Lao and closely related Tai minorities who according to the 2005 census make up almost two thirds of a population that now numbers six million. The remaining third comprises over fifty minority groups. While the Lao and Thai are Theravada Buddhists, the minorities are mostly animists of one kind or another.

Theravada Buddhism shapes the worldview of all but the most Westernized Lao (including some committed Marxists). For Lao Buddhists the real world is not, as Hinduism teaches, an illusion: rather it is characterized by the so-called 'three signs of being.' The first of these is *dukkha*, usually translated as suffering, but encompassing also all the sorrows and disappointments of life, from which none can escape. The second sign, *anicca*, means impermanence, which applies equally to individuals, social relationships, political institutions, and even the material world: everything, as Heraclitus would have agreed, is in a state of flux. Finally *anatta* encapsulates the Buddhist belief that what we take to be a

permanent self or soul has no enduring essence. Human beings, like everything else in the universe, are constantly changing — our bodies, our feelings, our minds. The idea that there is something permanent behind all this change is just that — an idea, with no basis in reality.

What links these three 'signs' are the concepts of karma and rebirth. Karma acts as a natural moral law, as universal as gravity: one's deeds will inevitably be rewarded or punished, if not in this lifetime, then in some future one, whether on earth or in one of the Buddhist heavens or hells. In Thai Buddhist cosmography (and Lao too), karma "gives order and regularity to the physical universe" (Reynolds 1976, 209). More importantly for political culture, karma has significant social and political implications. If rebirth is in accordance with karma, then social position has been earned through meritorious deeds in previous existences. In that case the rich and powerful have a moral right to their wealth and power — until such time as they have exhausted their accumulated merit through sinful and corrupt behavior. Those with a lesser store of merit are born into poorer families. Belief in karma thus explains social inequality. It also reinforces gender inequality. In popular Buddhist belief, women are not considered equal to men. Buddhist nuns are not accorded the same status as monks, though they do have a good chance of being reborn male. So by undermining any principle of social equality, karma reinforces acceptance both of a social hierarchy dominated by the powerful and wealthy, and of patriarchal gender relations.

Karma, to reiterate, underwrites the stability of social structure, for the circumstances of rebirth depend solely on one's personal accumulation of karma throughout innumerable previous existences. Theravada Buddhists believe that to accept one's lot and to live in accordance with the precepts

of Buddhism will improve one's chances for a better future rebirth. Karma not only explains one's own position in life, but importantly legitimizes the exercise of power by those at the apex of the social pyramid, for the perquisites of power are the just deserts of those either born to it or who attain it. Karma thus traditionally reinforced the hereditary principle underlying monarchy, and today still underwrites popular acceptance of political leadership, notably among those Lao who have had least contact with Western ideals of equality and democracy.[1)]

In the Theravada tradition the ultimate goal of all existence is to enter into the supernatural state of being known as nirvana (Pali: nibbana; Lao: nipphaan). But this will take innumerable lifetimes. Rapid enlightenment of the kind sought in the Chan/Son/Zen tradition is limited to when a Buddha descends from the Tushita heaven to teach the Dharma and inaugurate a new era. In the meantime the best anyone can do is to accumulate good karma, in the form of merit (Lao: *boun*), which can be thought of as moral capital. The term is applied to both merit and the occasions on which it can best be gained (through participation in the series of religious festivals that punctuate the Lao Buddhist year). Those possessing wealth and power are believed to possess more *boun* than the poor and powerless. They can also generate more *boun* by giving generously to the Sangha, the Buddhist monastic order. In popular belief, the benefits of *boun* can be transferred to someone else (though there is no textual support for this). The significance of *boun* is that it is the source and marker not just of spiritual progress, but also of political and

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social power.

It is but a short logical step from belief that merit is the means to improve one's karma and that karma determines the social circumstances of rebirth to belief that to be in a position of social power reflects merit accumulated during past existences. For if karma is a cosmic law, and accumulated merit legitimizes power, anyone exercising power has earned the right to do so. That power may be used for good or ill does not in any way diminish the karmic basis of its legitimacy. So leaders whose actions are immoral do not thereby lose their legitimate right to power, for they are still presumed to possess accumulated merit.

The political effect of karma derives not just from this acceptance of social hierarchy, but also from the value accorded to social harmony and order, which tends to take priority over individual rights in Theravada Buddhist countries. Social order is prized by Buddhists for the opportunity it provides for individuals to pursue their own spiritual improvement through making merit, which is why Buddhist kings were expected to promote harmony and order within their realms. Social harmony minimizes the expression of harmful emotions. Lao children are socialized to avoid social conflict, and most Lao are reluctant to challenge anyone clearly possessing status or power. Those who threaten to disrupt the social order for what are deemed to be their own selfish interests suffer social condemnation.

Disruption of the social order signals some failing on the part of leaders — in traditional Theravada Buddhist societies, the fault lay with the king, who was expected to rule in accordance with Buddhist precepts. The ideal social order was, of course, a just order, but the individual could call upon no abstract rights. The eruption of evil in the form of

lawlessness, war or famine had to be borne stoically until social order could be restored. In present-day Laos the need for social order and harmony figures prominently in political rhetoric.

A remarkable aspect of Lao Buddhism that deserves separate mention is its coexistence with ancient animist beliefs in a wide variety of spirits (Lao: *phi*, pronounced pee) (Holt 2009). Some of these are territorial, having jurisdiction over areas of land. Every village has its *phi ban*, whose propitiation is the responsibility for a particular person or family. So does every district and province. Other *phi* inhabit significant natural features, such as cliffs, caves and ancient gnarled trees; and those passing by do well to acknowledge their power with a small offering. Certain kinds of *phi* cause sickness by taking possession of a human body, including the spirits of those for whom funeral rights have not been properly conducted. They can be induced to leave, or driven out, through performing appropriate rituals invoking the superior moral power of Buddhism. What characterizes all these spirits is their unpredictability. The Lao live in a world where fortune can easily change. Denunciation of *phi* worship as superstition when the Lao People's Revolutionary Party seized power did little to curtail the practice, and today most Party members take the precaution of propitiating the *phi*[2].

2) For the important place Buddhism has in the LPDR, and for other aspects of Lao political culture, see the excellent study by Evans (1998).

2. History

History is important in shaping Lao political culture in two ways. The more obvious is the way in which content is taught, as an ideological tool to reinforce Party rule. The second way is more subtle: history defines the heritage that constructs identity, and so the parameters of what it is to be Lao.

The history that Lao children learn is imparted not just in school texts, but also in stories and cautionary tales, through family instruction and temple festivals. They listen to stories telling of the mythological origins of their race as recounted in the Nithan Khun Borom, the story of King Borom, who, after the peoples of Laos had been born from giant gourds, was sent by the celestial gods to rule over them. They learn a history that purportedly reaches back to migrations from China in the distant past, and more recently (perhaps the 8th century CE) from the region of Dien Bien Phu in the highlands of northwest Vietnam down fast-flowing tributaries to the Mekong valley.

Children are told how Lan Xang was once a great kingdom, stretching over all of what is now northeast Thailand (where almost ten times as many Lao now live as in Laos)[3]. They are told how succession disputes weakened the kingdom and split Lan Xang into contending principalities early in the 18th century, allowing the Siamese (Thai) to impose their hated hegemony. The failure of the Lao to resist Thai domination reflected the failure of 'feudalism', but the lesson is that division results in weakness. The last desperate attempt by the Lao to regain their independence (in

3) For this history, see Stuart-Fox (1998).

1825-26) was ruthlessly crushed with a savagery the Lao have never forgotten. Children learn how the Lao territories were left prostrate and powerless under Siamese rule, allowing Laos by the end of the century to fall prey to French imperialism. Both Siamese and French domination are portrayed as dark times for the Lao. Only the valiant resistance of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) freed the Lao first from French colonialism, then from American imperialism. This historic victory of the Party gives it the right to lead the Lao people in the present. So history legitimizes the right of the Party to continue to guide the country on behalf of, and for the benefit of, the 'pluri-ethnic' Lao people.

Democracy figures nowhere in this highly misleading account of Lao history. The Royal Lao government that ruled the country from independence in 1953 until the communist seizure of power in 1975 is dismissed entirely as a puppet regime, even though it strove heroically to preserve Lao neutrality and held multi-party elections under difficult conditions. The 'feudal' monarchy is treated as an embarrassment, or ignored completely. Only after communism collapsed in Russia and Eastern Europe and the socialist economic model was abandoned did the Party resort to nationalism to bolster its legitimacy. In December 2002, the Party erected a large bronze statue of King Fa Ngum, founder of the Kingdom of Lan Xang, overlooking a busy intersection in Vientiane. There has never been any official mention of the last king, who died in communist custody in 1977, even though his palace in Luang Phrabang is a state museum, frequented by many thousands of Lao visitors.

The lessons of Lao history are varied. On the one hand history portrays a nation threatened by more powerful neighbors who covet the country's natural riches, and from whom there is no escape. As a Lao

proverb says: flee from the elephant and meet the tiger; flee from the tiger and meet the crocodile. The only resort is to be flexible and clever. A favourite Lao story is the *Sin Xay*, an epic poem whose eponymous hero ("he who triumphs through merit") overcomes all obstacles through just such means, thanks to the power of his *boun*. The Lao must be neutral, friendly to all, but ever wary. On the other hand history reveals a tradition of resistance — to Burmese, Siamese, French and Americans. A situation may be dire, but it will change in time.

There is a subtler message, however, that has to do with power and political institutions. For all the Marxist rhetoric about 'the mastery of the masses', Lao history contains no tradition of popular struggle against established power within the Lao body politic. There are no figures in Lao history who defied kings in the name of popular sovereignty, or whose writings championed individual freedoms: no Paine or Voltaire. Succession disputes pitted one aristocratic faction against another. Commoners followed the decisions of their lords. The institutions of political and social power were never challenged.

3. Socialization and the understanding of power

How power is articulated is understood implicitly by anyone growing up in Laos. Hierarchies of power are apparent in everything from use of language to customs of deference and respect. They function within the family, and within every aspect of society. Socialization ensures that everyone understands how power is exercised, and so how to behave in relation to the holders of power. Students who spend years at university

abroad encounter a different conception of how power functions within an alternative political system. But on return they have no alternative but to re-adapt to Lao patronage politics.

The socialization to which Lao children are subjected in the family, the Buddhist vat (temple), and in school prepares most to accept a conception of society whose political dimension entails an understanding of power as something personal and patrimonial. Power is a mysterious resource that inheres in individuals as a result of their karma. It is built up through patron-client relationships that draw clients into political networks. Payments in return for favors done by the powerful channel wealth upwards into the hands of political patrons. Thus wealth and power reinforce each other.

There are two words in Lao commonly used to translate 'power'. One is *amnaat*, which refers to possession of sources of power (wealth, position, family status, patronage network), which allow the possessor to exercise authority, and be obeyed. The other is *kamlang*, which refers more to the means by which power is exerted in a coercive way: it is the power to be able to make people do things. One who has *amnaat* does not need to exert *kamlang*; however, as one of his clients will ensure that his commands are acted upon. The signs of *amnaat* are evident to all: the trappings of wealth, large house, government car, underlings and clients in attendance, the attention of attractive women; in a word, social status. One who has *amnaat* is a *phu yai*, a 'big man' in a metaphorical sense. He has the right to exercise authority by virtue of the *boun* (merit) he possesses, the source of which, however, always remains mysterious, both because it is hidden in the past and because it reflects the inexplicable natural law of how things are. A *phu yai*, no matter how

immoral and corrupt, still possesses *boun*, though he may exhaust his supply and fall from power. But none can tell when this might happen, in this lifetime or another. So his authority goes unchallenged until it becomes clear, from external signs, that someone else has greater *boun* —at which point clients may transfer their allegiance to a new and upcoming patron.

The separation between power and morality is characteristic of the Theravada Buddhist worldview. Monks have high social status, not least because they adhere to strict monastic rules embodying moral principles. But they do not possess *amnaat*. Political leaders possess *amnaat*, but do not necessarily lead moral lives. The ideal of Buddhist kingship was (and still is in Thailand) to rule in accordance with the ten kingly virtues. But being immoral in no way threatened a king's right to rule, for he still possessed *amnaat*. And the same applies to all power holders, including the leaders of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

Power is measured both by one's position in the political hierarchy and the extent of one's patronage network. Advantage is gained through the favor of someone in a superior position in the social and political hierarchy, while those in superior positions increase their social power and wealth through expanding the network of those on whose loyalty and political support they can depend. This is still how power is largely understood in the Lao PDR. One gains power not as a result of a position competitively won in an institution or organization, but through one's relationship to a powerful patron. The more powerful one's patron, the greater one's own power and prestige.

Patronage works through the construction of networks of loyalty and obligation in exchange for possible benefits. At the apex of the network

stands some powerful figure with below him his immediate family, extended family, principal allies and clients and their families, each with their own clients, and so on in a spreading fan. Any benefit desired by a member of the network will be sought through personal appeal to someone more highly placed within it, who in turn has access further up the hierarchy, and so on. Any benefit obtained entails a reciprocal obligation, which is usually financial in the form of presents or payments.

For a patron to build a power network, he must have resources to disburse. Patronage may take many forms, but all depend ultimately on access to the resources and power of the state, which facilitate the accumulation of personal wealth. Examples of patronage range from intervention to secure a job or win a court case to the bestowal of monetary benefit in the form of access to resources, award of contracts, reduction of taxes, provision of loans, and so on. One important form of obligation takes the form of political support when this is required (during intra-party power struggles, at elections.) Because the transparent and impartial operation of political or financial processes threatens to eliminate sources of patronage, moves to introduce transparency tend to be resisted.

4. Political institutions

From the earliest times, Lao political organization took the form of chiefdoms, known as *meuang*[4], a structure common to all Tai-speaking peoples (Lao, Thai, Shan, etc.). *Meuang* were of variable extent, in both population and area. Smaller *meuang* were nested within larger *meuang*,

a variable set of which eventually constituted *Meuang Lao*, the *mandala* that from the mid-14th century on comprised all *meuang* that accepted the king of the Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang as their overlord.

A clear social distinction existed between aristocrats and commoners (the *phrai*, or peasantry) who were tied to their rulers by reciprocal bonds of loyalty and protection. Each *meuang* was presided over by a *chao meuang*, or prince, drawn from the leading aristocratic family. He was supported by three other officials (the *uparat*, or viceroy, the *raxavong* and the *raxabut*, in that order), all drawn either from the ruling family or a collateral branch of it. All four officials fulfilled both civil and military tasks, depending on circumstances. Given the hierarchical social structure of the *meuang*, even the most talented commoner could not expect to be appointed to one of these positions. The only possibility was for a commoner to become a monk, rise through the Sangha hierarchy, and leave the Sangha to become a court adviser.

What held each *meuang* together as a political structure were personal relationships. In return for taxes in kind and corvée labor, and military service as and when demanded, the *chao meuang* ensured both protection and social order. He was responsible for administering and enforcing customary law within the *meuang*. A minor *chao meuang* signified his loyalty to a superior prince, who in turn would swear of allegiance to the king by publicly taking an oath and drinking consecrated water. Each *meuang* provided tribute in the form of luxury trade goods and military

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4) This term is used by historians of mainland Southeast Asia to refer to the political structure of Hindu/Buddhist kingdoms, where power radiated out from a ritual centre to more or less ill-defined frontiers. As that power varied, so frontiers could shift.

levees, so the power of a mandala was measured by how effectively it concentrated political, economic and military resources.

In the strictly hierarchical, and highly personalized, political order of the *meuang*, loyalty was the supreme quality. Obligations were reciprocal, but obligations did not entail rights: lords could reward, or not, as they wished. Political patronage was as unpredictable as the activities of the spirits. Lords of lesser *meuang* owed tribute to lords of larger *meuang*, and brought contingents to fight in their armies. Tribute concentrated wealth at the centre, from where it would be disbursed in two ways (after the costs of the court had been met) — as gifts to temples to increase the king's store of merit, and in the form of patronage, including endowed appointment to high office at court, which allowed opportunities to amass more wealth and social prestige.

In essence, therefore, the *meuang* constituted a patrimonial system in the Weberian sense. Power lay in the hands of the *chao meuang*, who disbursed his patronage as he saw fit. The arbitrary exercise of power was limited by traditional constraints of morality and reciprocity, and by the opportunity, given the availability of land, for farmers to move beyond the *meuang*, either to farm independently, or to pledge themselves to another patron in a neighboring *meuang*. Chao *meuang* too could shift their allegiance if power balances changed, in which case the entire population of the *meuang* changed allegiance too, though not through any decision of their own. In such a system, administration was directly controlled by the *chao meuang*, and all who served were his clients: no centralized bureaucracy was appointed on the basis of merit or ability.

The right of each *chao meuang*, and ultimately the king, to exercise power depended on three sources of legitimization: on hereditary descent

(in the case of the king of Lan Xang, in direct line from the mythical first Lao ruler, Khun Borom); on the 'consent' of the spirits of the land (*phi meuang*), which required recognition and propitiation; and on Buddhism (particularly the notion of karma, as we have seen). Monks taught that the king had the right to rule, by virtue of his karma; which he demonstrated by generous gifts to the Sangha.

The political culture of the *meuang* continued undiluted throughout the period of Siamese domination (1779-1893), and was hardly undermined by French colonialism (1893-1953), which favored the pro-French Lao aristocracy[5]. Even when Laos obtained independence, Lao social structure continued to be hierarchical, underpinned by belief in karma. Politics was the preserve of members of powerful families. Even the term *meuang* continued to be used for 'district', a number of which made up a province (*khoueng*). Administrative heads bore the titles of *chao khoueng* and *chao meuang*, and continued to disburse patronage to favored clients. The more extensive the patronage network, the greater the power of the patron. Yet among the educated elite three key concepts crucial for a democracy did begin to take root: that the state should be governed by the rule of law, applied equally to all; that political leaders should be elected; and that there should be a free press. All three shriveled and died when the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) seized power in 1975.

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5) For the French period in Laos, see chapter two of Stuart-Fox (1997).

III. The political environment in the Lao PDR

Since the formation of the LPDR in December 1975, all political power has been monopolized by the LPRP: the diktat of the Party became the law of the land. All political dissent of even the most limited kind (in the form of study groups, or small peaceful public demonstrations) was quickly suppressed, using the full coercive power of the State. Anyone with political ambitions, therefore, has no alternative but to join the Party. The Party is not the only avenue of political (and social) advancement, but it is by far the most important one. The Buddhist monastic order still provides a traditional avenue to social status, while wealth accumulation provides another. It should be noted, however, that the Party keeps a close eye on the Sangha (the monastic order), and that anything more than a small-scale economic enterprise requires the proprietor to seek political support, usually through the patronage of a prominent Party member.

The Party proclaims its ideology as Marxist-Leninist, but even more so than in China and Vietnam, this is now little more than lip service[6]. In fact Marxism-Leninism always had shallow roots in Lao soil. Most senior Lao cadres studied their Marxism-Leninism in Vietnam, and relatively few texts have been translated into Lao. Laos is now best seen as an authoritarian one-party state, in which the Party presides over a relatively free market economy. The Party still has control of a number of State-owned enterprises (SOEs), for reasons of national security. As the

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Party maintains the regulatory system for private enterprise, however, it also keeps close watch on the private economy. All substantial Lao-owned businesses in Laos have close political ties with the ruling Party.

The Party permeates and controls the four key institutions in the country: the government, the bureaucracy, mass organizations, and the military. Party cells operate in all institutions, and there is active recruitment of promising young personnel into the Party, membership of which is by invitation only. Laos is remarkable for the degree of overlap of the government and the Party. Ministerial appointments are decided by the Party, and endorsed with minimal discussion by the National Assembly. As all policy is decided by the Party, the government merely acts as its executive arm. Policy is decided in the interests of the Party, rather than the nation or society or the economy; that is, they are designed to maintain the power base of Party leaders and the pervasive political power of the Party itself.

The bureaucracy functions as the administrative arm of the Party. Party cells operate within every ministry, and within provincial administrations. Active involvement in the Party assists promotion within the bureaucracy. Anyone who is not a Party member fears the scrutiny of those who are. Civil servants at all levels are reluctant to take decisions without referring matters to their superiors. Doing nothing can be passed off as wisely studying a proposal: making decisions opens one to criticism and censure. As a result relatively minor decisions are left to relatively senior officials. As a result the civil service in Laos is sluggish and unresponsive: the way to get things done is through personal contacts with senior Party members, for which payment will be required. This may be made under-the-table, or it may take the form of gifts at the wedding of a child, or at a *baci*, a

traditional Lao ceremony performed on auspicious occasions. The functioning of the bureaucracy, therefore, depends upon the oil of politics, personal relationships, and compensatory payments. As transparency in decision-making would undermine this system, it is strongly opposed.

The only mass organizations permitted in Laos are those directed by the Party. These number just four: the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), official trade unions gathered together under the banner of the Federation of Lao Trade Unions, the Lao Women's Union, and the Revolutionary Youth Union. Local peasant associations are also permitted. Of these mass organizations, the LFNC has the largest countrywide membership, though it has seen its influence decline as its purpose becomes less clear. Whereas its predecessor, the Lao Patriotic Front, had the urgent task of mobilizing the 'pluri-ethnic' Lao population for revolutionary struggle, the LFNC does little more than promote social cohesion in the name of the Party, and keep a lid on any popular dissatisfaction. In some respects the LFNC has become a sort of safety valve absorbing the energy and activity of those not privileged to be members of the Party, in particular ethnic minorities for whom participation in the Front is supposed to compensate for their declining representation in the Party. The LFNC still goes through the motions: it holds meetings and national congresses every five years. Its leaders enjoy titles and some official perks. But nothing can hide its declining political relevance.

The Lao trade union movement is tightly controlled by the Party. Its principal purpose is to monitor the growing Lao industrial labor force and to keep wages at a level low enough to encourage foreign investment in such industries as textiles and light manufacturing. No free, worker-organized unions are allowed to operate. Probably the most active mass organization

is the Lao Women's Union (LWU), which holds meetings and workshops for women across the country. In a country still overwhelmingly male dominated, the LWU provides the only opportunity for women to organize and press for recognition. In this it operates as the closest thing Laos has to a genuine pressure group bringing women's issues to the attention of the Party. This is particularly necessary since women are so poorly represented in the upper echelons of the Party. Women are more influential in Lao society than their political representation would indicate, however. The wives of a number of senior Party officials are active in the LWU, and wives in particular have always served as a conduit for those seeking political favors. Finally the Revolutionary Youth Union (RYU) is active in schools, where it serves as a recruiting ground for the Party. Though it does organize youth activities, it serves principally as a means of political indoctrination of young Lao.

If the overlap between the Party and government is all but complete (only one minister is reportedly not a member of the Party), so too is the overlap between the Party and the Army. Eight out of eleven members of the Politburo elected in 2001 were former or serving military officers. This was reduced in 2006, but the dominance of the military at the highest level of the Party still remains. On the other hand, Party control of the military is pervasive: almost all officers are Party members. Party control over military and the police, provides it with its monopoly of coercive power and guarantees that Laos is, and will continue to be, a one-party state.

Pathet Lao leaders brought with them two components of their modus operandi during the revolutionary struggle that contributed to the new political environment they introduced. One derived from the structure of the revolutionary movement, the other from its method of operation. The

Pathet Lao was a communist movement, hierarchically structured and tightly disciplined along Leninist lines. At its core the LPRP provided direction for both the broad Lao Patriotic Front and guerrilla operations. Strict top-down discipline was justified not just by the circumstances of war, but also by communist ideology in the name of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and 'democratic centralism'. This whole structure was in fact most undemocratic, but it did mirror, and so both build upon and reinforce, traditional attitudes towards hierarchical political and social relationships. In addition, the Pathet Lao enforced a high level of secrecy. Information was communicated on a strictly need-to-know basis, and cadres were required to accept and act upon instructions without question. Non-transparent, topdown decision making and obsessive secrecy (non-transparency) were two elements that the Pathet Lao brought with them into government.

Even so, it appeared at first that the Lao revolution might herald the end of both the patronage-based political culture of the *meuang* and the influence of the powerful aristocratic families making up the old political elite. The structure of the LPRP, open to all, though supposedly favoring workers and peasants, promised to introduce a modern, institutionalized approach to politics that would replace traditional Lao political culture. During the revolutionary struggle, the Party had encouraged participation by ethnic minorities in a way the Royal Lao regime had never done (but for some token Hmong), and proclaimed its concern for their welfare. In part this was a matter of necessity, as the Pathet Lao controlled mainly the mountainous parts of the country, but it did give rise to expectations for a new and more inclusive political order. After 1975 recruitment into the LPRP concentrated on the lowland ethnic Lao population, however. Many

of these new members were opportunists: none had been honed by years of revolutionary struggle. They brought with them traditional Lao attitudes to authority and ways of accommodating power.

Once it had assumed power, the Party soon came to be perceived as the principal avenue of social mobility for the ambitious and Party leaders as sources of patronage. Personal contacts became more important than actual qualifications or talent in obtaining not just Party or government positions, but also such benefits as government contracts, scholarships for children or relatives, and support in court cases. As debts for such assistance had to be repaid, political power offered opportunities to accumulate wealth. Party officials became the new patrons. Because communications were poor in the so-called 'liberated zone' during the 'thirty-year struggle' (1945-1975), Pathet Lao provincial and district leaders enjoyed a high degree of autonomy in decision making. This encouraged regionalism. Moreover the hierarchical structure of the LPRP paralleled the traditional social and political hierarchy of the *meuang*. Regionalism has always been strong in Laos, and it is not surprising that provincial Party leaders should continue jealously to guard their power. Even the inclusion of all provincial Party secretaries (later governors) in the Party Central Committee has not been enough to prevent the plunder by provincial officials of state revenues that should be channeled to the central government.

As the regime became established, senior Party members increasingly dispensed patronage in the traditional Lao way, rewarding extended family members and loyal retainers with favors and jobs, for which they are often poorly qualified, in order to build a political support base. This was a system those who had experienced the former regime well

understood. Remaining members of former elite families moved to cement relations with powerful Party members, for example, through marriages between their children. Thus a new political and social elite began to take form, an alliance of new power with old wealth and social standing, which used the Party to promote family interests. This was reinforced in the next generation, as sons of senior Party members who had been given the advantage of an overseas education returned either to take up positions in government, or to go into business using their political contacts. Ironically this process of political-economic elite formation was powerfully assisted by the introduction of the economic reforms of the late 1980s, known as the New Economic Mechanism (NEM). These were a political necessity, to address the deteriorating economic situation as the Soviet Union (the Lao PDR's principal aid donor) imploded, but an unforeseen outcome was to allow some memberes of the Royal Lao elite to re-establish their economic influence.

The example of patronage and corruption set by senior Party members, both in Vientiane and in the provinces, was soon adopted at all levels. Party members with access to the resources of the state appropriated some for themselves while dispensing others as patronage in the traditional Lao way. But whereas under the Royal Lao regime, powerful families competed for political influence and there was at least some residual notion of a bureaucracy in the service of the state, rather than of the ruling political party, in the Lao PDR the LPRP alone exercised political power and the bureaucracy functioned as a highly politicized arm of the Party. With no tradition of bureaucratic administration (as in China and Vietnam), politics in Laos reverted to networks of influence and patronage (of the kind elsewhere described as clientelism, or crony politics).

A negative side effect not often remarked upon is that as the political system has increasingly been influenced by ethnic Lao political culture, so the political influence of minorities has declined. Minority cadres may cultivate political patrons within the Party, but they lack the family links with powerful, predominantly ethnic Lao, senior politicians, and they lack social links with the ethnic Lao economic and commercial elite. (One exception has been the Hmong, at least those clans that supported the Pathet Lao during the 'thirty-year struggle' (1945-75). Hmong have significant representation in the upper echelons of the Party, especially by comparison with the Khamu, the largest of the Lao Theung tribes).

The ethnic Lao population adjusted quickly to the new political environment, for as networks of influence and political patronage took shape within the Party, people soon recognized a system they understood and could operate within. As the system clearly works in the interest of powerful and wealthy families, members of the new social-political elite have little incentive to change it. Criticism comes mainly from a few intellectuals and those whose interests have suffered. Acceptance by the mass of the population of the prevailing political system derives from belief in karma and rebirth. But acceptance should not be taken as commitment and legitimization. For change is inevitable, and will happen when the karma of new political actors gives them the power to alter the political environment.

IV. Conclusion

In summary, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party has not replaced the political culture of patronage and hierarchy: rather it has incorporated it. The structure of the Party is hierarchical; so is its mode of operation (democratic centralism). But within the Party competition for power draws on patronage networks that centre on key figures, members of the Politburo and Central Committee. Positions within the Party apparatus, the government, the judiciary and the bureaucracy are allocated as a result of negotiation between leaders of powerful networks that combine family, region and revolutionary relationships. The power even of top officials, such as ministers or departmental heads, depends not on the office alone, much less on formal statements of responsibilities (job descriptions) or personal qualifications, but rather on where occupants fit within patronage networks, which determines who they can call upon for political support, for instance for promotion, or to back decisions that might conflict with the interests of others.[7)]

Patronage requires resources. These came at first mainly from diverting the resources of the state for private purposes and from payments for services rendered to clients. For example taxes would be diverted, or loans extracted from state banks never to be repaid; while clients would pay a percentage of their salaries to the patron who obtained the positions for them. Tenders for construction projects paid for

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7) I have discussed the Lao case more fully in Stuart-Fox (2005).

with aid funds were awarded to Lao companies with no expertise or equipment, which then took a hefty commission and passed the projects on to companies actually capable of doing the job. As the Lao economy opened up to foreign investment in the 1990s, new resources became available. Foreign businessmen were charged fees and commissions, and encouraged to make payments under-the-table. As a result, over the last two decades corruption has become endemic in the Lao PDR.

The interaction between patronage and corruption is self-reinforcing. Powerful patrons provide a model for others to follow as they too gain clients and use their power for their own benefit and that of their extended family and patronage network. As the network expands, so does the demand for resources and the opportunities for corruption to feed that demand. And since all political power rests with the Party, the only political patrons are Party members. The Party controls the political environment through its monopoly of coercive power, which it uses to oppose all activities (behaviors) that might threaten its interests. In doing so it permits only those responses to circumstances that reinforce the system — for example, seeking to become part of a patronage network and then behaving accordingly.

When it seized power in 1975, the revolutionary motivation that had driven Party cadres throughout the 'thirty-year struggle' was replaced by a determination to benefit from the perquisites of power for which they had fought so long. Powerful individuals seized whatever opportunities were available, thereby presenting a model for others. Instead of introducing a new revolutionary political culture, Party leaders were thereby seduced into accepting traditional Lao patrimonialism as a means of building their power base and protecting their interests. At the same time the Party

replaced the legal system with its own 'revolutionary justice', curtailed personal freedoms, and imposed draconian social controls. In other words, it created an environment which made it impossible for anyone from outside the Party to oppose the adoption of elements of traditional political culture. Criticism could only come from within the Party, but that was always tempered by the balance of power within the Politburo. No high-ranking Party official has ever been made an example of in Laos, as has happened in China and Vietnam.

Lao political culture feeds on the institution of patronage, which is reinforced by the legitimacy provided by Buddhist notions of karma and merit, by socialization into Lao concepts of social hierarchy and power, and by the historical socio-political institution of the *meuang* with its relationships of loyalty and dependency. The hold of Lao political culture is reinforced by the selective pressures exerted by a political environment manipulated and controlled by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party through a combination of inculcation of an historical narrative that portrays the Party as the embodiment of Lao nationalism, backed by monopolization of the means of coercion, which is used to crush any alternative views about how the country might be governed. As a result corruption has become endemic, to the growing anger and disgust of the population, and politics have been reduced to a competition for personal gain, at the expense of any vision for the country. Meanwhile Lao resources are plundered by powerful neighbors, and Laos falls further behind fellow ASEAN member states in the development stakes.

Any understanding of the reform process in Laos, especially of the implications and outcomes of new policies and laws, has to begin with an understanding of Lao political culture and how this shapes political

interaction, both between persons with unequal access to political power and between individual citizens and the institutions of the state, as this is currently constituted in the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

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Political Culture and Power in the Lao People's Democratic Republic

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This article attempts to explain recent political and social developments in the Lao PDR by reference to Lao political culture, in particular to how political power is understood and used. I begin with some preliminary theoretical considerations before going on to outline some of thefactors contributing to the construction of Lao political culture. I construe that Lao political culture is constructed in its present form through deep-rooted Buddhism, historical experiences, particular understanding of power and the way political institutions were formed. I then discuss how political culture shapes social behavior, in the context of the present structure of Lao political institutions and how it influences contemporary Lao politics. Particularly, I describe the way LPRP(Lao People's Revolutionary Party) has governed Laos and how its government since the birth of Lao People's Democratic Republic has been unchecked due to unique Lao political culture. I conclude with some suggestions about the likely direction of political change in Laos.

Keywords: Lao PDR, political culture, Lao People's Revolutionary Party, Buddhism, patronage.