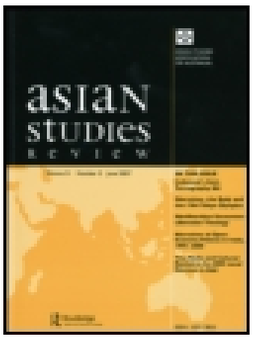

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Prospects for Democracy in Laos

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By any analysis, the likelihood that Laos will move towards a multiparty democratic system in the near future must be counted as slight. The Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) remains a single-party communist state in which political power is monopolised by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), the only legal political organisation in the country. Both in word and deed over the past three years since the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the LPRP has made it abundantly clear that it has no intention of allowing any individual or organisation to challenge its hold on power. Nor is there much prospect that any will be in a position to do so—so long as the party can draw on the international support provided by its two most powerful neighbours, China and Vietnam. Should the Marxist regimes in these two countries give way to multiparty systems, however, Laos would almost inevitably follow suit.

The LPRP maintains that the political system in force is already democratic. Lao leaders point to the country's constitution with its provisions for regular elections, and indeed elections do take place. But Lao democracy takes the form of democratic centralism of a carefully circumscribed kind. Elections to the National Assembly in December 1992, the first held under the 1991 constitution, elected 85 members out of 154 candidates all of whom had been screened by the party. According to the government, 99.37 per cent of eligible voters went to the polls—and in one constituency the turn out was 100 per cent. Thirty out of 34 central level officials were elected, but only 55 out of 120 local officials. In other words, no-one who did not already serve the government or party in some capacity stood for election. Eight women out of 16 were elected, while 51 elected members were described as "intellectuals". Just over one-third of those elected were from ethnic minorities. (*Khaosan Pathet Lao News Bulletin*, 26 January 1992).

All this on the face of it was quite encouraging—were it not for the way the elections were organised and controlled. None but the mildest criticism of government policy was permitted; nor was any suggestion made that the political process should be liberalised. In the run-up to the election, the authorities sent a clear message to all candidates as to what was and was not permissible by

sentencing three former government officials, two of them former deputy ministers and the other a senior member of the Justice Ministry, to fourteen years imprisonment each for having publicly advocated introducing a multiparty political system. The three were ringleaders of a group of "social democrats", many of them Western-educated, who were critical of the new constitution which the party was about to introduce. Perhaps the most contentious article in the constitution, and certainly the one which generated most debate both inside and outside the party, concerned the constitutional position of the party itself. In the original draft, article one enshrined the leadership of the party in the Lao state. In the final constitution only article three mentioned the LPRP, which was described as the "leading nucleus" of the political system.

Though all three men were arrested in October 1990, they were held for two years before being sentenced. The timing of the sentences, coming as they did in November 1992, may have served an additional purpose. By then state and party president Kaysone Phomvihan was seriously ill. He died on 21 November 1992. The party may have feared that Kaysone's death would provide the occasion for some form of popular demonstration against the party, and wanted to make it quite clear that this would not be tolerated. If this was a reason for the stiff sentences, then they were effective. The transition period following Kaysone's death was negotiated without difficulty, and policies have remained unchanged. Though discontent over the state of the country and role of the party is widespread, no-one in Laos today is openly agitating for multiparty democracy. In fact some Lao who are not party members believe that such a move would be premature. What they object to is the calibre of cadres and the level of corruption, not the single-party system *per se*.

There are several reasons for the lack of any concerted popular movement for democracy in Laos, apart from the obvious fear of retribution. One is demographic. When the Pathet Lao, the revolutionary communist movement that had been fighting the Royal Lao government for almost thirty years, seized power in 1975, this provoked a massive exodus of those who had supported the former regime! Tens of thousands of Hmong (or Meo) who had fought in the CIA-funded and led "secret army", fled in fear of reprisals. So too did most of the educated urban middle class. At least 10 per cent of the population crossed the Mekong river to Thailand from where the majority have been resettled in the United States, France, Australia and Canada. More significantly, however, this 10 per cent included fully 90 per cent of former technically qualified civil servants and managers. The loss was devastating—so much so that Laos has yet to recover. Even today a shortage of trained personnel is the principal reason why the country finds it difficult to absorb and put to best use the approximately US$80 110 million it receives annually in foreign aid from all sources. As a result of this haemorrhage of population, few remain who remember the former

political system with much affection, or appreciate the benefits of a multiparty democracy.

A second reason for the absence of a pro-democracy movement has to do with the way democracy functioned in Laos, and the way in which political power was exercised under the former regime—and still is exercised. The previous political parties were little more than elite groups centred on one or more leaders representing powerful clans. They functioned not in terms of policy, but patronage. Governments were formed as coalitions of clan leaders whose principal concern was to further clan interests. Under the former regime, those interests were primarily pecuniary. Involvement in government was in order to obtain the largest possible share of whatever sources of wealth were available—in the form of both graft and nepotism in the bureaucracy.

The exception to this pattern from 1946 to 1975 was the Lao People's Party, forerunner of the LPRP, the only political organisation in the country to create a rural organisation and mobilise a mass base. Its appeal was not simply to the politically dominant lowland Lao (known as the Lao Loum), but also to the politically, and geographically, marginalised ethnic minorities comprising the Lao Theung (or Lao of the mountain slopes, Austroasiatic-speaking tribes farming by slash-and-burn methods) and Lao Soung (Lao of the mountain tops, the more recently arrived Sino-Tibetan-speaking tribes growing opium at higher altitudes as their principal cash crop). For the first time the party offered these groups, comprising as much as 40 per cent of the population, an opportunity to take part in the political life of the country. In return the minorities supported the revolution.

The victory of the Pathet Lao, the Lao revolutionary movement, in 1975, for the first time brought predominantly Lao Loum areas along the Mekong under the control of the party. The new government removed its seat of power from the caves of Vieng Say, near the border with northern Vietnam, to Vientiane, where the leadership of the party was soon besieged by those seeking favours and prepared to pay for them. Not only did opportunities for corruption increase: so too did lowland Lao influence. As the austerity and discipline of the war years declined, the business of government came to be conducted in the time-honoured Lao way—through personal contacts and family connections. Those who have missed out have increasingly been the minorities—since this way of exercising political influence effectively excludes them—except in the poorer and more mountainous provinces where their members control the party, and where they too operate in a similar way.

Of course this patronage system excludes those who do not have access to patronage dispensers. Under the former regime, powerful clans centred on aristocratic families. In the LPDR, powerful figures within the party fulfil the same role—and the Party Central Committee, while it does include several

members from minority groups, is overwhelmingly lowland Lao. The processes even of "democratic centralism" are thus effectively subverted.

A further, rather obvious reason why there is so little popular pressure for democracy in Laos is that what remains of the small educated middle class has been coopted by the party. The associations characteristic of civil society are virtually non-existent in Laos. Business is done by gaining the support of powerful party leaders. Businessmen are beholden to the party for favours, so business does not have any separate, independent voice. Moreover, many of those taking advantage of the more relaxed economic environment that has existed for the last three years are relatives of party members, if not members of the party themselves. Most foreign investment in Laos at present comes from Thailand, and Thai businessmen prefer to go into partnership with well connected Lao—well connected, that is, with powerful party leaders.

Finally, there is the coercive apparatus of the state—the military, the police, and the secret police—whose job it is to locate and neutralise any opposition to the regime. While the last of these hardly operates with the bureaucratic efficiency of the former East German *Stazi*, its activities are sufficiently feared to make people cautious about speaking their minds on political matters, at least in public. Both the police and army are loyal to the regime. The Interior Ministry is under the control of former Pathet Lao military commanders. As for the army, it is loyal to its former commander-in-chief, and former defence minister, Khamphay Siphandone, now elevated to prime minister and president of the party.

Many people in Laos believe that given the present state of the Lao economy and the development needs of the country, multiparty democracy is a luxury Laos can do without. They argue that what the country needs is unity and commitment to the common good rather than competing parties pursuing their interests at the expense of those of the nation. Some say that multiparty democracy should be introduced—but not yet: not until the level of education has improved to the point where electors are capable of assessing alternative policies and programs.

These two factors—education and economic development—are crucial for the future of democracy in Laos. Under the present regime, education was rapidly expanded to take in even the most remote villages. A crash program got underway in 1976 to improve adult literacy, and within a few years the government was boasting that illiteracy had been all but eliminated. The claim was, however, premature. Officials reported successes that were often more imaginary than real. Many who did learn to read soon reverted to functional illiteracy for lack of practice. Meanwhile virtually anyone who could read and write was pressed into primary education, since most of the former regime's qualified primary school teachers were fleeing the country. As a result, although the number of schools and pupils grew rapidly, standards plummeted. Moreover,

the quality of teacher-training declined. So low were educational levels that many Lao students who were chosen to pursue courses in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were unable to follow what they were taught in Russian, German, Polish or Czech.

There is common agreement among foreign experts sent to examine the educational requirements of Laos prior to loans for education from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank that it will take years, perhaps decades, before educational standards can be improved to levels comparable with those of other states in Southeast Asia. Programs are under way to upgrade the Dong Dok Teacher Training School eventually to university standard. At the same time, in-service programs have been started to improve the skills of teachers. School textbooks, all but non-existent in Laos, are being drafted and printed. However, it will be ten to twelve years before the next generation of students comes through the improved system—and a lot longer than that before the country has anything like an educated electorate.

Economic development is likely to be just as slow. Over 80 per cent of all Lao are still peasant farmers, with the manufacturing and service sectors and government employment making up the rest. Under recently relaxed regulations concerning foreign investment, a number of industrial plants, particularly textile and clothing factories, have been set up, principally by Chinese entrepreneurs from Taiwan and Hong Kong eager to take advantage of Laos's unfilled quotas on the US market. The timber industry is another source of employment, especially as the government has banned the export of whole logs in order to encourage investment in sawmills, plywood, and furniture factories.

As in China and Vietnam, the Marxist government of Laos has gone out of its way to attract foreign investment and assist private and joint state-private enterprises. While lack of infrastructure and a shortage of technically qualified workers, especially those possessing managerial and organisational skills, continue to hold back economic development, the gross domestic product (GDP) is forecast to grow at a rate of 6-7 per cent in 1993. Even so, annual per capita income of $170 per annum is the lowest in Southeast Asia, and it will be some time before any substantial improvement can be expected.

What this means is that the changes which have occurred in Thailand in association with its development to NIC (Newly Industrialising Country) status—in particular, the growth of an increasingly wealthy and well-educated middle class—are unlikely to occur soon in Laos. It has been from this class in Thailand, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, that pressures for more liberal democratic processes have come. In Laos at present, this class is minute, and will remain so.

Some agitation for democratic reform is coming from outside the country, articulated by members of the Lao communities abroad. The most active of these has been the MDL (*Mouvement pour la Démocratie au Laos*) based in

France and led by a former cabinet minister in the Royal Lao regime. The MDL was particularly encouraged by the role played by the international community in the Cambodian peace process, and has argued in a submission to the United Nations that a similar initiative should be undertaken with respect to Laos. The MDL claims that Laos, like Cambodia, is under Vietnamese domination, which the people of Laos are actively resisting. Therefore, UN forces should be sent to Laos to disarm all military and paramilitary forces.

Unfortunately for the MDL, however, the situations in Laos and Cambodia are not at all similar. The Lao resistance movement based in Thailand has posed little threat to the regime, and certainly cannot compare with the Khmer Rouge as a military force. In the past it has received limited Thai backing, but with improved relations between Bangkok and Vientiane this has been much reduced. Moreover, the previous Lao government was not overthrown, as was the regime of Pol Pot, by means of a massive Vietnamese invasion. The Lao and Vietnamese governments concluded a 25-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1977 under whose terms Vietnamese forces were stationed in Laos for the defence of the LPDR. These forces have since been withdrawn. In brief, there is no civil war in Laos to bring to a peaceful conclusion, and so no cause for UN intervention to create, as in Cambodia, a multiparty democratic political system as part of the settlement process.

Other sources of outside influence urging more democratic processes are those Western democracies with which Laos enjoys friendly relations, and other more or less democratic Southeast Asian states. Reluctance to interfere in the internal politics of states with which a country has diplomatic relations limits the influence of Western democracies such as Sweden, France and Australia, to name three of the more important Western aid-donor countries. The United States has recently upgraded its diplomatic representation in Laos to full ambassadorial level, but is still most interested in MIAs (missing-in-action) from the Vietnam war.

Probably, in the longer run, Laos may be led to introduce a more open democratic system through its own desire for closer integration with the states of the region, specifically with the member states of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Many Lao see joining ASEAN as desirable and indeed inevitable. A significant reason why English is replacing French in all three countries of former French Indochina is that English is not only the language of international commerce, it is the common language among the countries of ASEAN. Laos, along with Vietnam, has already signed the Bali declaration on interstate relations in the region. The next stage, however, will require agreement to move towards a more open economic and political system. The present Lao government would be reluctant so to commit itself, but as the positive benefits to be gained by joining ASEAN become more obvious, increasing pressure will be exerted on the government. In this regard, it is instructive

to note that the first bridge across the Mekong linking Thailand and Laos has just been completed (by Australia), and a second bridge is contemplated (probably to be built by Japan) which would join Thailand and Vietnam by road across southern Laos.

At present, however, the strongest international influence operates against democratic liberalisation, through the close relations Laos has with both China and Vietnam. The relationship is not simply on a state-to-state level. More important, especially in the case of Vietnam, are party-to-party and army-to-army relations. The revolutionary movements in both Laos and Vietnam trace their origins to the Indochinese Communist Party. Throughout the period from 1946 to 1975 the Vietnamese provided massive military, economic and organisational assistance to the Pathet Lao. The revolutionary elites of the two countries have close personal ties in both their respective Parties and army high commands. Throughout the "thirty-year struggle" and even after 1975, Laos has taken its ideological lead from Vietnam. Lao cadres underwent ideological training in Vietnam; Vietnamese advisers served in Laos; and the two sides exchanged countless delegations. Like the Vietnamese Communist Party, the LPRP is determined to retain the monopoly of power. It will obtain every possible support from the VCP to do so.

Relations with China were never as close, although China did provide assistance to the Pathet Lao during the revolutionary struggle. Despite attempts to remain neutral, Laos could not avoid being caught up in the Sino-Vietnamese conflict over Cambodia. Laos eventually sided with Vietnam, and not until three years ago did Lao-Chinese relations begin markedly to improve. The LPRP leadership was as flabbergasted as were the Chinese over what was happening in the Soviet Union. Moreover, both Laos and Vietnam were essentially applying the alternative Chinese model—*perestroika*, but not a suggestion of *glasnost*. Since then Chinese premier Li Peng has visited Laos, and just about every significant Lao leader has visited China. The Chinese and Lao are working on a border agreement; the Chinese are building and maintaining roads in northern Laos; cross-border trade has expanded rapidly; and Beijing has promised increased economic aid to Laos. The benefit for the Chinese is that they have been proved right in their ideological dispute with the Soviet Union, and have had the satisfaction of seeing both Laos and Vietnam recognise the superiority of the Chinese model.

In a real sense, then, the future of the present single-party political system in Laos depends on whether such systems continue in China and Vietnam. Both states draw upon the Confucian tradition of government, where the right to rule depended on maintaining social harmony and economic prosperity. When these collapsed, the "Mandate of Heaven" was lost. The social disruption of the "Cultural Revolution" posed a severe threat to the legitimacy of the regime. It is essential that the Chinese Communist Party work to assure maximum social

harmony and economic prosperity—and this it is doing, by dispensing with most Marxist economic dogma.

Taiwan and Korea have been spectacularly successful in achieving economic progress without democratic government. China, Vietnam and Laos are attempting to follow the same path. The ruling parties of all three states may thereby be creating the conditions for their own demise—but that will take time. In the meantime, neither China nor Vietnam looks likely to implode like the Soviet Union—at least not in the near future. The Lao People's Revolutionary Party therefore seems assured of retaining necessary international support.

In conclusion then, the prospects for greater democracy in Laos are not encouraging. The LPRP and the government it controls have indicated no intention to share power. Internal pressures for more political participation within the present system are not great, let alone for fully fledged multiparty democracy. External pressures from the Lao resistance and exile political organisations are weak to non-existent. No concerted pressure is being brought to bear on the Lao government by Western democracies. By contrast, the single-party regimes in power in China and Vietnam provide strong political support for the regime in Laos. Until this constellation of forces changes dramatically, the LPRP will continue to exercise a monopoly of political power, while presiding over an increasingly liberal free-market economy.

Listing of Theses and Articles

In past years a list of theses and articles covering the previous year has been included in the November issue of the *Review*. However, as the extent of Asian Studies in Australia has increased, so has the amount of related material, and it is now so extensive that it has outgrown these pages. This year, on a trial basis, a separate issue of the *Review* will be published containing this material. It will be available early in the New Year.