Marxist Regimes

Laos

Politics, Economics and Society

Martin Stuart-Fox

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Editor's Preface

The interaction between the traditional values of Theravada Buddhism and Marxism in contemporary Laos is unique in the world-wide context of Marxist adaptations. This, the first full analysis of politics, economics and society in Laos since the communist victories in Indo-China in April 1975, provides the reader with a comprehensive assessment of both the background and current socialist developments in that country.

This book is based on material gathered primarily during the author's field trips to Laos which also involved conducting extensive interviews with government and party officials, among others. First-hand experience with Laotian socialism has allowed the author to give a lucid account of the evolution of social and political structures in Laos as well as a rare insight into the complexities of current developments in one of the most under-developed, secretive and unknown contemporary Marxist regimes. The publication of this book coincides with the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the passing of the first decade of its coming to power. This work should prove indispensible for an understanding of the future course of events in one of the most strategically important countries of South-east Asia.

In addition this work also raises a number of very important questions about the appraisal of Marxist adaptations in the developing countries. The study of Marxist regimes has commonly been equated with the study of communist political systems. There were several historical and methodological reasons for this.

For many years it was not difficult to distinguish the eight regimes in Eastern Europe and four in Asia which resoundingly claimed adherence to the tenets of Marxism and more particularly to their Soviet interpretation—Marxism-Leninism. These regimes, variously called 'People's Republic', 'People's Democratic Republic', or 'Democratic Republic', claimed to have derived their inspiration from the Soviet Union to which, indeed, in the overwhelming number of cases they owed their establishment.

To many scholars and analysts these regimes represented a multiplication of and geographical extension of the 'Soviet model' and consequently of the Soviet sphere of influence. Although there were clearly substantial similarities between the Soviet Union and the people's democracies, especially in the

initial phases of their development, these were often overstressed at the expense of noticing the differences between these political systems.

It took a few years for scholars to realize that generalizing the particular, i.e. applying the Soviet experience to other states ruled by elites which claimed to be guided by 'scientific socialism', was not good enough. The relative simplicity of the assumption of a cohesive communist bloc was questioned after the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Communist Information Bureau in 1948 and in particular after the workers' riots in Poznań in 1956 and the Hungarian revolution of the same year. By the mid-1960s, the totalitarian model of communist politics, which until then had been very much in force, began to crumble. As some of these regimes articulated demands for a distinctive path of socialist development, many specialists studying these systems began to notice that the cohesiveness of the communist bloc was less apparent than had been claimed before.

Also by the mid-1960s, in the newly independent African states 'democratic' multi-party states were turning into one-party states or military dictatorships, thus questioning the inherent superiority of liberal democracy, capitalism and the values that went with it. Scholars now began to ponder on the simple contrast between multi-party democracy and a one-party totalitarian rule that had satisfied an earlier generation.

More importantly, however, by the beginning of that decade Cuba had a revolution without Soviet help, a revolution which subsequently became to many political elites in the Third World not only an inspiration but a clear military, political and ideological example to follow. Apart from its romantic appeal, to many nationalist movements the Cuban revolution also demonstrated a novel way of conducting and winning a nationalist, anti-imperialist war and accepting Marxism as the state ideology without a vanguard communist party. The Cuban precedent was subsequently followed in one respect or another by scores of regimes in the Third World who used the adoption of 'scientific socialism' tied to the tradition of Marxist thought as a form of mobilization, legitimation or association with the prestigious symbols and powerful high-status regimes such as the Soviet Union, China, Cuba and Vietnam.

Despite all these changes the study of Marxist regimes remains in its infancy and continues to be hampered by constant and not always pertinent comparison with the Soviet Union, thus somewhat blurring the important underlying common theme—the 'scientific theory' of the laws of development of human society and human history. This doctrine is claimed by the leadership of these regimes to consist of the discovery of objective causal relationships; it is used to analyse the contradictions which arise between

goals and actuality in the pursuit of a common destiny. Thus the political elites of these countries have been and continue to be influenced in both their ideology and their political practice by Marxism more than any other current of social thought and political practice.

The growth in the number and global significance, as well as the ideological political and economic impact, of Marxist regimes has presented scholars and students with an increasing challenge. In meeting this challenge, social scientists on both sides of the political divide have put forward a dazzling profusion of terms, models, programmes and varieties of interpretation. It is against the background of this profusion that the present comprehensive series on Marxist regimes is offered.

This collection of monographs is envisaged as a series of multi-disciplinary textbooks on the governments, politics, economics and society of these countries. Each of the monographs was prepared by a specialist on the country concerned. Thus, over fifty scholars from all over the world have contributed monographs which were based on first-hand knowledge. The geographical diversity of the authors, combined with the fact that as a group they represent many disciplines of social science, gives their individual analyses and the series as a whole an additional dimension.

Each of the scholars who contributed to this series was asked to analyse such topics as the political culture, the governmental structure, the ruling party, other mass organizations, party-state relations, the policy process, the economy, domestic and foreign relations together with any features peculiar to the country under discussion.

This series does not aim at assigning authenticity or authority to any single one of the political systems included in it. It shows that depending on a variety of historical, cultural, ethnic and political factors, the pursuit of goals derived from the tenets of Marxism has produced different political forms at different times and in different places. It also illustrates the rich diversity among these societies, where attempts to achieve a synthesis between goals derived from Marxism on the one hand, and national realities on the other, have often meant distinctive approaches and solutions to the problems of social, political and economic development.

University College
Cardiff

Bogdan Szajkowski

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I would like to express my thanks to all those who aided me in obtaining the information which made it possible for me to write this book. Many of these people cannot be named, for fear that they may be held accountable for what I have written. Their assistance was given at all times in the sincere belief that in doing so they contributed to furthering international understanding of and sympathy for the Lao People's Democratic Republic through making its political system, economic problems and social structure more widely known. One who can be named who assisted me throughout both the research and writing of this book is Elisabeth Stuart-Fox. Were it not for her linguistic skills, part at least of the field research would not have been completed. Were it not for her continuous support, the writing would have been far more of a burden.

On the production side, I would like first to thank Mary Kooyman for her always cheerful expertise in transforming my all but illegible manuscript into the finished product of the word processor. The series General Editor Bogdan Szajkowski and Heather Bliss, editor for Frances Pinter (Publishers), have both been most understanding over unavoidable delays in meeting my manuscript submission deadline. To both I extend my thanks for their helpful suggestions for improvement of the final presentation of this book, and for enabling it to appear in this valuable series.

Preface

Much information that is readily available in most other countries is surprisingly difficult to come by in Laos. Many policy documents are circulated only within the still semi-secret Lao People's Revolutionary Party, and are never made public. No official notification is given of administrative changes, even of such major significance as a rearrangement and increase in the number of provinces. Changes of personnel, even at ministerial or vice-ministerial level, are not gazetted. As a result, one of the games played by Western embassies in Laos is to try to determine who holds what position in what ministry. The only way to discover who has been reappointed, demoted, sent for ideological education in Vietnam, or purged for some reason, is either to note some change in designation or surprise omission in the list of dignatories welcoming a visiting delegation or to ask innocent questions at diplomatic gatherings.

Even apparently non-political factual information can be all but impossible to obtain. For example, ever since its inception in 1975, the government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic has proclaimed itself the representative of all sixty-eight 'nationalities', or ethnic groups, in the country. The number 'sixty-eight' has been repeated time and again as an official figure; yet it is quite impossible to discover what these 'nationalities' are. No list of sixty-eight ethnic groups is available in Vientiane, either from the Nationalities Commission charged with supervising ethnic affairs, or from the Ministry of Culture, which has a special ethnological research unit. In an interview with the Chairman of the Nationalities Committee, it was revealed that the magic number 'sixty-eight' did not include such ethnic groups as resident Vietnamese, Chinese, Indians or Thais, many of whom have Lao nationality. Nor apparently does it include the most primitive of all ethnic minorities, the extremely shy nomadic, jungle-dwelling Phi Tong Luong, known to inhabit certain remote parts of Sayaboury province. Further probing did, however, reveal a possible reason for the secrecy surrounding the number 'sixty-eight': the basis of classification—linguistic or cultural—is in question: there may not be sixty-eight 'nationalities' after all. In the meantime, there seems to be no one with either the competence or the authority to decide one way or the other.

This kind of difficulty and consequent frustration meets the researcher at

every turn. Information officers have no information—every question has to be referred to some higher authority. Even a question on which foreign languages were currently being taught at the Dong Dok Teachers Training College was referred to a member of the Politburo to answer. 'Delicate' questions are not even asked in the LPDR, let alone answered. For example, nobody asks questions about the Lao People's Army. After some hesitation the author was eventually accorded the first interview in the ten years the regime has been in power with a spokesman for the Ministry of Defence. Written questions were submitted, with embarrassing ones omitted. Replies and the interview itself remained at the level of propaganda and generalities. Questions as to structure and personnel were artfully parried; questions as to troop levels and deployment were not even asked.

So extraordinary is the degree of unavailability of often even the most basic information in Laos that the phenomenon itself needs explaining. It is, of course, a characteristic of communist regimes to control information as a means of maintaining the Party's monopoly of political power. In Laos, information is restricted on a need-to-know basis. No encouragement is given to any kind of intellectual curiosity, or to the pursuit of knowledge as a means of improving the quality of life. The National Library is not open to the public; the country's two bookshops contain nothing but Eastern bloc magazines, the works of Marx and Lenin and a few 'acceptable' novels translated into Lao. Rare indeed is it to see anyone reading, and intellectual discussion (at least with foreigners) is definitely discouraged. Nothing that might lead to a questioning of the Party line is permitted; the Chinese embassy is as isolated as is the American.

In restricting information, of course, the Lao authorities are acting in accordance with communist example to protect their own power and authority. They have undoubtedly learned much from the Soviets and Vietnamese. The Lao Planning Commission, where Soviet influence is strongest, has consistently refused to make the country's first five-year plan available to officials of the United Nations Development Programme in Laos. How dozens of UNDP projects fit into the overall plan remains unclear. A confidential World Bank Report admitted that not only did Bank officers have no contact with top decision-makers in Laos, they could not even obtain information on the process by which decisions were made. Bank officers did not know the departmental responsibilities of the vice-ministers of finance or the vice-chairmen of the State Bank Committee. They did not even know the names of the three directors of the Bank for External Trade. The same secrecy surrounds Vietnamese and Soviet activities in Laos. The Vietnamese embassy's information officer was unwilling to name even one important

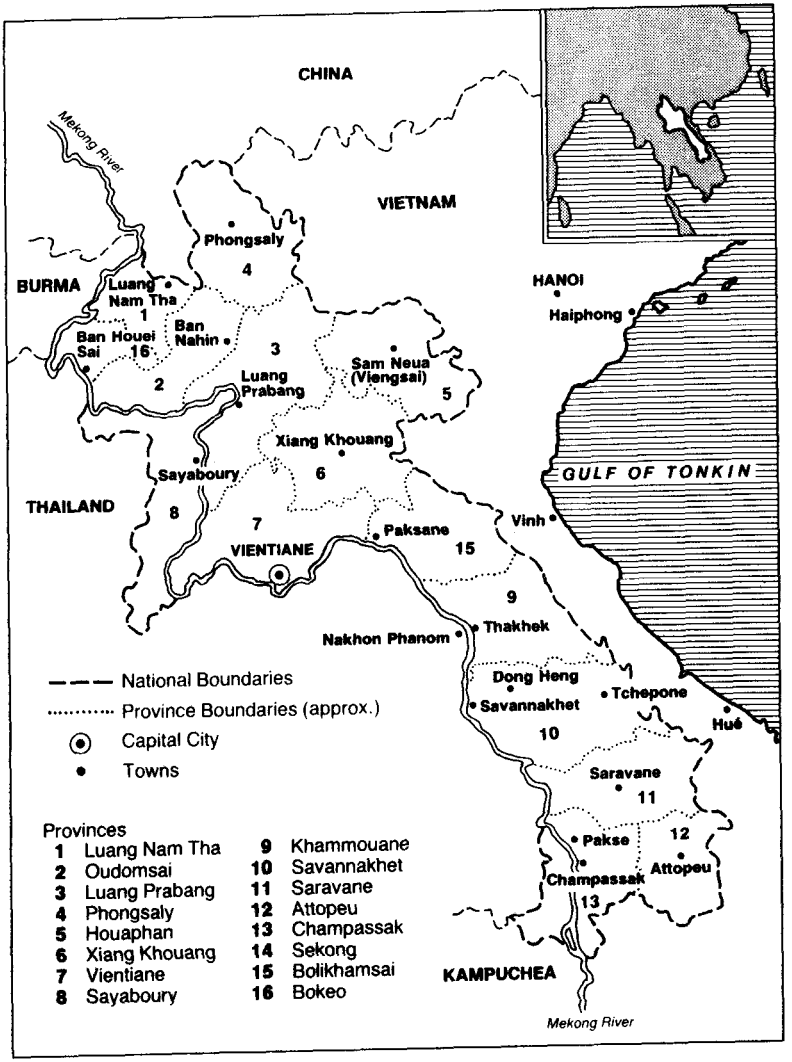
Vietnamese aid programme in Laos, let alone confirm or deny any cost estimate of total Vietnamese assistance broadcast over Radio Vientiane. In fact no cost estimate of any Soviet or Vietnamese aid project in Laos has been revealed to any competent authority.

What, however, apart from communist example, are the reasons for the obsessive secrecy and control of information in Laos? One is simply the shortage of trained personnel. So great has been the loss of educated refugees fleeing Laos that the government does not have the necessary cadres to obtain the information it needs. Statistics are inaccurate because there is no adequate systematic collection of data. This does not prevent the Lao authorities from providing whatever figures foreign governments and international organizations might want, even though such 'statistics' often amount to little more than informed guesses.

Another reason for the reluctance to provide information is that lower level cadres and civil servants are fearful even of being seen talking to a foreigner, let alone taking the decision to provide information. So politicized has Lao society become, so concerned are most Lao to keep their political noses clean through adhering to the line of the Party, that few take the risk of communicating what could possibly be considered 'sensitive information'.

A further reason for the regime's reluctance to provide information has to do with its continuing, almost paranoic, concern over security. Thirty years of revolutionary war has induced a fear of betrayal, an obsession with possible enemies, that has resulted in far too many arrests for no good reason. Differences of opinion are treated as indictable offences against the security of the state. Anyone seeking information is suspect because he, or she, could possibly use it to undermine the confidence of the masses in the regime, by criticizing the Party line or by 'sabotaging' Party directives.

The present study is based on available written sources, plus research and interviews conducted in Laos over a five-week period during July and August 1985. Ten interviews were conducted with ministers, vice-ministers or ministerial spokesmen. Two sets of answers to written questions were also provided. Four other interviews requested on agriculture and cooperatives, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, government and local government and reorganization of the Prefecture of Vientiane were regrettably not forthcoming. This study can only be the poorer as a result. Whatever strengths it has are due to assistance provided by friends and acquaintances, officials and representatives, both inside and outside Laos, with whom I have discussed various aspects of contemporary Lao politics and society. Its weaknesses are due to my own shortcomings—and to the scarcity of information available in the Lao People's Democratic Republic.


CHINA
VIETNAM
Mekong River
Phongsaly
4
BURMA
Luang Nam Tha
1
Ban Houei Sai
16
Ban Nahin
3
2
Luang Prabang
Sam Neua (Viengsai)
5
Xiang Khouang
6
Sayaboury
THAILAND
8
7
VIENTIANE
Paksane
15
9
Nakhon Phanom
Thakhek
HANOI
Haiphong
GULF OF TONKIN
Vinh
Dong Heng
Tchepone
Savannakhet
10
Huế
Saravane
11
Pakse
12
Attopeu
Champassak
13
KAMPUCHEA
Mekong River
National Boundaries
Province Boundaries (approx.)
Capital City
Towns
Provinces
1 Luang Nam Tha
2 Oudomsai
3 Luang Prabang
4 Phongsaly
5 Houaphan
6 Xiang Khouang
7 Vientiane
8 Sayaboury
9 Khammouane
10 Savannakhet
11 Saravane
12 Attopeu
13 Champassak
14 Sekong
15 Bolikhamsai
16 Bokeo

Laos

Basic Data

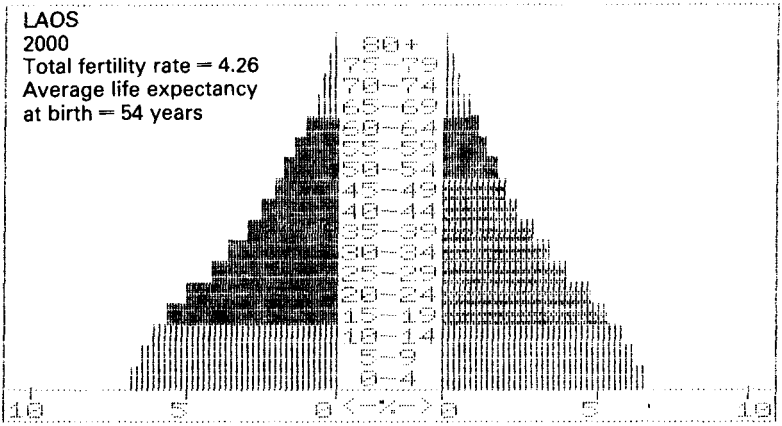
Official name	Lao People's Democratic Republic (Sathalanalat Pasathipatay Pasason Lao)
Population	3,584,804 (1985 census) (47% below the age of 15; 47% aged 15–60; 6% over 60)
Population density	15 inhabitants per sq. km.
Population growth (% p.a)	2.9 (birth rate 46 per 1,000; death rate 17 per 1,000)
Urban population (%)	15
Total labour force	1.5 million
Life expectancy	46 years
Infant death rate (per 1,000)	118 (1985)
Ethnic groups	Approximate percentages: Lao Loum (includes Hill Tai as well as lowland Lao, 56%; Lao Theung, 34%; Lao Soung, 9%; others, 1% (Vietnamese, Chinese, Indians, etc.)
Capital	Vientiane
Land area	236,800 sq. km. (91,100 sq. miles) of which 4% is cultivated; 4% grassland, 47% thick forests, 17% open savannah and woodland; much of the remaining area is covered by secondary growth after being used for slash-and-burn agriculture
Official language	Lao
Other main languages	Tai dialects, Hmong, Lao Theung dialects
Administrative division	16 provinces, plus the autonomous prefecture of Vientiane; 112 districts (*muong*); 950 sub-districts (*tasseng*); 11,424 villages (*ban*).
Membership of international organizations	UN since 1952; IMF since 1961; World Bank and ADB; Conference of Non-aligned Nations

Foreign relations	Diplomatic relations with 52 states; 27 diplomatic missions represented in Vientiane.
Political structure	
Constitution	Not yet drafted (as of January 1986)
Highest legislative body	Supreme People's Assembly
Highest executive body	Council of government
Prime Minister	Kaysone Phomvihane
President	Souphanouvong
Ruling party	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
Secretary General of the Party	Kaysone Phomvihane
Party membership	43,000 (1985) (less than 3% of adult population)
Growth indicators (% p.a.)	
National income	(GDP) 1980–1, +6.6%; 1981–2, +1.9%; 1982–3, −3.3%; 1983–4, +8.1%
Industry	
Heavy	none
Consumer	14% (1981–4) last production still below 1974 level
agriculture	(rice) 11% (1977–84)
food production per capita	350 kg
Trade and Balance of Payments	
Exports	US$42.8 million (1983)
Imports	US$135.1 million (1983)
Exports as % of GNP	7.45 (1983)
Main exports	Electricity, timber, forest products (benzoin, sticklac, etc.)
Main imports	Fuel, vehicles and spare parts, machinery and equipment, consumer goods
Destination of exports	Vietnam, Thailand, Soviet Union
Main trading partners	Vietnam, Soviet Union, Thailand, Japan
Foreign debt	US$400 million (of which US$140 million to convertible area and balance to Socialist Bloc)
Main natural resources	Hydroelectricity, timber, tin, gypsum (plus unexploited iron ore and other minerals)

Food self-sufficiency	Self-sufficient in food production. Paddy production 1.3 million tonnes (1985)
Armed forces	53,700 (Army 50,000; River Navy 1,700; Air Force 2,000)
Education and health	
School system	11 years (ages 6–17): 5 years primary; 3 years 1st cycle secondary; 3 years 2nd cycle secondary
Primary school enrolment	85%
Secondary school enrolment	23%
Higher education	2.5% (more than half studying abroad)
Adult literacy	85% (UN estimate, 1985; regime claims 100%)
Population per hospital bed	400 (1985)
Population per physician	8,576 (1985)
Economy	
GNP	26,580 million kip (1984)
GNP per capita	US$184 (IMF estimate January 1985); other estimates run as low as $98
State budget: expenditure	8.0 billion kip (1984)
: receipts	4.5 billion kip (1984) (balance from foreign aid)
Monetary unit	Kip
Main crops	Rice, maize, cassava, coffee, tobacco, cotton
Land tenure	No land redistribution carried out, so where land not collectivized, private holdings vary from 0.5 to 10 hectares, but average 1.5 hectares per family
Main religions	Theravada Buddhism, Animism
Rail network	Nil
Road network	Approximately 1,300 km. asphalted; 5.300 gravelled; 3.900 dirt (1982)

Population Forecasting

The following data are projections produced by Poptran, University College Cardiff Population Centre, from United Nations Assessment Data published in 1980, and are reproduced here to provide some basis of comparison with other countries covered by the Marxist Regimes Series.



Projected Data for Laos 2000

Total population ('000)	5,728
Males ('000)	2,878
Females ('000)	2,850
Total fertility rate	4.26
Life expectancy (male)	52.0 years
Life expectancy (female)	55.1 years
Crude birth rate	31.8
Crude death rate	12.6
Annual growth rate	1.92%
Under 15s	37.89%
Over 65s	3.44%
Women aged 15–49	24.97%
Doubling time	36 years
Population density	24 per sq. km.
Urban population	25.1%

Glossary

Administrative divisions

ban	village
tasseng	sub-district; groups five to ten villages
muong	district of canton
khoueng	province

Educational institutions

pathom	primary school covering the first five years
mathanyom	junior high school, years 6 to 8
udom	senior high school, years 9 to 11
mahavitanyalay	university

Ethnic groups

Hmong	name by which the opium-growing Lao Soung tribe of northern Laos, often called Meo, call themselves; means 'free'
Khmer	dominant ethnic group in Cambodia/Kampuchea
Lao Loum	inclusive term for all peoples of Tai stock living in Laos, including lowland Lao and upland Tai peoples
Lao Phuan, Lao Yuan	Laoized Tai groups
Lao Soung	Lao of the mountain peaks; ethnic groups speaking Tibeto-Burman languages, traditionally living at high altitudes in northern Laos
Lao Theung	Lao of the mountain slopes; ethnic groups speaking Austronesian languages, traditionally living at medium altitudes, farming by slash-and-burn methods
Lu (or Tai-Lu)	Tai peoples inhabiting the Sip Song Panna area of southern China and northern Laos
Tai	generic term for all ethnic groups speaking T'ai languages
T'ai	the language group spoken by Tai peoples
Tai Dam	Black Tai (upland Tai tribe)