

## THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF THE LAOTIAN COMMUNIST REGIME: FROM “CZECHOSLOVAK SCENARIO” TO “CONSENSUS COMMUNISM”

Хиргис Д.Мөнх-Очир

Монгол улсын их сургууль, Нийгмийн шинжлэх ухааны сургууль, Түүхийн тэнхим.  
[khirqhis@yahoo.com](mailto:khirqhis@yahoo.com)

**Өгүүллийн товч утга:** “Лаосын коммунист дэглэмийн үүсэл, хувьсал: “Чехословакийн загвар”-аас “Зөвшилцлийн коммунизм” руу” хэмээх энэ өгүүлэлд хөндөж буй асуудал нь Дорно дахины ойрхи үеийн түүхийн гол асуудлуудын нэг болох Энэтхэг-Хятадын хойг дахь коммунизмын түүхийн хүрээнд багтана. Өрнөдийн түүх бичлэгт энэхүү бүс нутгийн ойрхи үеийн түүх гол төлөв Вьетнам, Камбожор төлөөлөгддөг нь Вьетнамын АНУ-тай хийсэн дайн ба Камбожи дахь Пол Потын яргалалтай холбоотой нь тодорхой билээ. Харин хүн амаараа харьцангуй цөөн, хөгжлийн хүчин чадал дорой, далайд шууд гацгүй /Меконг мөрнөөр дамжин гарах гарц бий боловч эх далайд шууд гарах боомт үгүй/, Буддын шашинт энэ орны коммунист дэглэм Умард Солонгос шиг хатуу чиг шугам хадгалаагүй, БНХАУ, Вьетнам шиг эдийн засгийн бодитой амжилтад хүрэхүйц шинэчлэл хийгээгүй, “дундаж” хэвшинжийг хадгалж үлдсэн нь судлаачдын анхаарал татаж байна. Үүнийг тайлбарлахын тулд Лаосын 1970-аад оны түүхийн гол гол үйл явдлууд болон энэ улс дахь коммунист хөдөлгөөний эх үүсвэрийг шинжилж үзвэл, 1948 оны Чехословакийн тайван замын коммунист эргэлт 1975 онд Азийн Лаост давтагджээ гэж үзэж болохоор байна. Түүгээр зогсохгүй, хаан ургийн хунтайж /Суфанувонг/ нь эргэлтийг гардан гүйцэтгэсэн нэгэн бүлэглэлийг толгойлж байсан ба хувьсгалын дараа тус улсын Ерөнхийлөгчөөр сонгогдон ажиллаж байсан байна. Энэ үзэгдлийн зарим тайлбарыг Бенедикт Керквлиетийн Зүүн Өмнөд Азийн төр, нийгмийн харилцааны талаар туурвисан бүтээлүүдээс олж болох бөгөөд түүний дэвшүүлсэн “Зөвшилцлийн коммунизм” хэмээх томъёолол Лаосын ойрхи үеийн түүхийн явцыг тодорхойлоход тохиромжтой гэж үзэж байна.

**Түлхүүр үгс:** Лаос, ЛАХН, “Чехословакийн загвар”, “Улаан хунтайж”, Энэтхэг-Хятадын хойг, шашин-төрийн харилцаа.

### Introduction: Uniqueness of Laotian Revolution

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) is one of the three states of the former French Indochina that since mid-1970s emerged as Communist regimes of varying orientations.<sup>1</sup> Despite having the same category of regime installed, Laotian state and politics nonetheless presented its specific characteristics compared to the two of its neighbors, Vietnam and Cambodia. Firstly, ever since the Communist seizure of power in 1975 Laos has remained “the hermit of Southeast Asia.” Secondly, and as a causal factor of the above-mentioned phenomenon, Laos, unlike Vietnam and Cambodia, did not experience that huge amount of turmoil and devastation during the civil war and, consequently, under Communist regime. Finally, these factors could be traced to the fact that the Communist takeover in 1975 was unlike the Vietnamese and Cambodian, as well as elsewhere; it was achieved through political crisis and pressure:

“Scholars have drawn parallels between what happened at that point and events in Czechoslovakia in 1948. In both cases, the Communists took power without violence (but not without threatening to use it)

<sup>1</sup> The Khmer Rouge instituted a Maoist-oriented regime in Kampuchea (Cambodia), but in 1978 a pro-Hanoi group led by Heng Samrin and Hun Sen took over the rule. The latter regime, despite its Communist control and loyalty to Vietnam and the USSR, has never been recognized as “the socialist country” by the rest of the block. Laos remained thoroughly loyal to Hanoi and Moscow and was recognized as “the fifteenth socialist state” of the world.

and were able to draw at first at least on widespread support.”<sup>2</sup>

Within this historical context, by this paper I attempt to interpret the political system and state-society relations that are still effective today. As a model, B.J.T.Kerkvliet's approach of the three interpretations of the political system is used herein. These are: the "dominating state" interpretation, the "mobilizational corporatism" interpretation, and the "dialogue," or "negotiating state" interpretations.<sup>3</sup> The paper will address the following two issues:

(1) Which interpretation can define the Laotian political system and state-society relations during the Cold War in Indochina?

(2) What are the current tendencies as Laos pursues moderate economic reforms while retaining the one-party rule?

### **Origins of the Regime: The "Red Prince" Phenomenon**

In 1930, the Communist Party of Indochina (CPIC) was established under Ho Chi Minh's leadership. Laotian Communist groups were initially a part of this broader region-wide political organization, as well as various Communist groups of Cambodia, that would later split between the Khmer Rouge and the People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea (pro-Vietnamese). The Laotian revolutionaries saw themselves as inseparable part of the Indochinese revolutionary movement aimed primarily at achieving liberation from colonization:

"This marked the turning point in the history of the revolutions in the three Indochinese countries. From then onwards, under the leadership of the genuine Marxist-Leninist Party and under the banner of nationalism and democracy, the revolutionary struggle of the Lao people of all ethnic groups entered a new period of sure new qualities." <sup>4</sup>

However, besides the CPIC, the Siamese Communist Party also shared the task of supporting "a few dozen members of Communist workers' unions, youth and sports groups, and an anti-imperialist league in Laos."<sup>5</sup> But the fact that most of the CPIC members were the so-called "Annamites", i.e. ethnic Vietnamese residing in what is the today's Laos, shaped the future orientation of Laotian Communist movement.

"In 1945, the Red Army of the Soviet Union defeated the German, Italian and Japanese Nazis, forcing them to surrender unconditionally, ending the Second World War. Our Party resolutely led the people's struggle in co-ordination with the August revolution of the Vietnamese people, seized administrative power from the Japanese fascists and the French

<sup>2</sup> Chandler, David P., Roff, William R. et.al. (1997): *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. University of Hawaii Press, p. 385.

<sup>3</sup> Kerkvliet, Benedict J. Tria (2001): "An Approach for Analyzing State-Society Relations in Vietnam," in *Sojourn*, No.2 (2001), pp. 242-245.

<sup>4</sup> Kaysone Phomvihane (1974): *Laos on the Glorious Path of the Era*, Lao Patriotic Front Publishing House. Extract from the article "Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity," released by the LPDR Embassy to the United States, 2001. Online version available at [URL: http://www.laoembassy.com/](http://www.laoembassy.com/)

<sup>5</sup> Brown, R. (1982): *Indo-Chinese Communist Movement*, RoutledgeCourzon, p. 18.

colonialists, and declared to the world the independence of Laos on 12 October, 1945."<sup>6</sup>

Kaysone Phomvihane mentions the events of March-October, 1945, when the struggle among various elite fractions intensified. As a matter of fact, "the political history of Laos since 1945 has been dominated by the efforts of various Lao and foreign groups to construct a political entity named "Laos" where none existed before."<sup>7</sup> This struggle left its marks on the Communist movement, which was influenced by elite families and even royalty. Most significant factor in Laotian revolutionary movement was, that its leadership comprised of the people with close ties with Vietnam, such as Kaysone Phomvihane, a half-Vietnamese (various sources disagree whether he was a Vietnamese mestiz from paternal or maternal side), and Nouhak Phoumsavan (married to a Vietnamese).<sup>8</sup> But interestingly, the royal family was brought into the two sides of political struggle.

In March 1945, the Japanese instructed Sissavangvong, the Lao king at Luang Prabang that Laos can become an independent country. Prince Savangvatthana, the heir apparent refused and declared the Laotian loyalty to French colonial rule, a move that upset the pro-independence members of the court led by the Viceroy, Prince Phetsarath, the senior of the other royal line closely related to the king.<sup>9</sup> Prince Phetsarath had two brothers: a full brother, Prince Souvanna Phouma, and a half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong. These three men were destined to take active parts in the struggle for independence and then play crucial role in shaping the future Communist regime that would establish itself three decades later. The brothers persuaded their king to declare independence in October 1945; this was the event that Kaysone praises in his writings as the first important victory of the Communists. This had created a complicated situation, when the French authorities needed about half a year to reoccupy Vientiane. Until April 1946, acting on behalf of the king Sissavangvong's name, the Lao Issara ("Free Lao") group led by the brother princes, formally controlled much of the Central Laos.

When in 1946 the French took over Vientiane with collaboration of Boum Oum, the hereditary prince of the southern entity called Champassak, king Sissavangvong has nonetheless maintained his title and nominally named the ruler of all Laos, including Champassak. Phetsarath, his two brothers, and his entourage, had no choice but to flee the country.<sup>10</sup> However, the French administration became increasingly willing to negotiate the issue of gradual granting the independence to Laos, drew many Lao Issara leaders, including Prince Souvanna Phouma, back from their exile in Thailand.<sup>11</sup> But his two brothers at this stage were already separated on the other sides of political battle. Phetsarath, who fell out of the favor of the court, did not enter the country until 1957. Souphanouvong by this time had joined and became one of the prominent leaders of the Pathet Lao ("The Lao Nation"), a leftist-revolutionary group fought a military struggle against the French with Viet Minh support. Pathet Lao had later become the nucleus of the Laotian Communist movement. On January 20, 1949, with active participation of Souphanouvong, the Lao

---

<sup>6</sup> Kaysone Phomvihane (1979): *Some Main Lessons and Some Basic Problems Concerning the New Directions and Tasks of the Lao Revolution*. The Printing House of the Lao PDR. Extract from the article "Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity," released by the LPDR Embassy to the United States, 2001. Online version available at URL: <http://www.laoembassy.com/>

<sup>7</sup> SarDesai, R.R (1989): *Southeast Asia: Past and Present*. Westview Press, p. 383.

<sup>8</sup> Tarling, Nicholas (ed.) (1998): *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*. Volume Four. *From World War II to the Present*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 297-298.

<sup>9</sup> Chandler, David P., Roff, William R. et.al. (1997): *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. University of Hawaii Press, p. 383.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 384.

Issara Unit was set up, splitting from the royalist Lao Issara, which later became the Lao People's Liberation Army.<sup>12</sup> Souphanouvong thus earned a title of "the Red Prince."

On August 13, 1950, the National Congress of the Lao Resistance Front agreed to set up the Neo Lao Issara ("Free Lao Front"), instituted the 12-point political program, and set up a resistance government with Souphanouvong as Prime Minister and Kaysone Phomvihane as Minister of National Defense. The resistance movement reached a new level, when in February 1951 CPIC, which had been officially dissolved at the end of 1945 but which had continued to operate clandestinely, was reconstituted in the form of separate national parties for the three states of Indochina.<sup>13</sup>

In 1953, the armed forces of Pathet Lao in collaboration with the Vietnamese volunteer army launched a series of battles, which liberated vast areas of the country. By early 1956, they liberated the northern Phongsaly province and most of Luang Prabang province. Following the Viet Minh victory over French in Dien Bien Phu, France signed the 1954 Geneva Accord to restore peace in Indochina and recognized the independence of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, an organization, which organized itself into a party and guerilla forces, is traced from three distinct origins: Vietnamese Communists, which constituted the strongest influential link in the form of the Pathet Lao and the People's Revolutionary Party of Laos; Laotian aristocratic elite as the Lao Issara movement, the large portion of which has joined the Pathet Lao; and much less influential Thai Communist group which practically diminished during the following years. The Laotian revolutionary organization emerged as one based upon some type of compromise between the classes, with primary goal of achieving the independence.

The independence of Laos, as well as increasing influence of such radical groups, as the Pathet Lao, began to warn the U.S. government about the Communist takeover of the entire Indochina. As a preventive measure, the United States and France signed a U.S.-France joint communiqué in Washington on September 29, 1954, as a legal basis for direct U.S. assistance. "The document also allowed the U.S. to take over from the French in training the Royal Army of the Kingdom of Laos, and the armies of South Vietnam and Cambodia."<sup>15</sup>

"For the remainder of the 1950s, the United States sought persistently but with little success to assemble and shore up governments in Vientiane capable of preventing a Communist victory in Laos. Some of these governments were more pro-American than others, but none captured more than fleeing loyalty from the predominantly rural population of the country."<sup>16</sup>

In 1962, an agreement was signed in Geneva between the three antagonist fractions led by the three princely leaders – Souvanna Phouma for the neutralists, Boum Oum for the right and Souphanouvong for the radical left. It enabled to form a

<sup>12</sup> Christie, Clive J (1998): *Southeast Asia in the Twentieth Century: A Reader*. Tauris Readers, p. 223.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart-Fox, Martin (1986): *Laos: Politics, Economics and Society*. Frances Pinter (Publishers) and Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity*. (2001): LPDR Embassy to the United States. Online version available at URL: <http://www.laoembassy.com/>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Chandler, David P., Roff, William R. et.al. (1997): *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. University of Hawaii Press, p. 384.

brad coalition with Souvanna Phouma, who became the head of government for the third time since 1951 and 1956.<sup>17</sup> However, the Vietnam War undermined the efforts for building the coalition government and restoring peace. Prior to and during the war, the Vietnamese increased their support for the Laotian Communists and used the Pathet Lao-controlled territory after 1965 to transfer men and material to the south. Though suffering from the ongoing war, by early the 1970s Laos was still nominally a nation-state with a neutral government.<sup>18</sup>

Following the Paris Peace Talks between the United States and Vietnam in 1973, Vietnam instructed the Pathet Lao to cease-fire. For the following two years, Laos was relatively free from full-scale warfare.<sup>19</sup> By this time, the non-Communist government and the institution of monarchy proved their inefficiency and were losing popular support. Meanwhile, the Laotian Communists have evolved from a largely revolutionary movement into a more organized political institution. This had forced the Royal Government to sign the peace agreement with the Pathet Lao in Vientiane on February 21, 1973.<sup>20</sup> A new coalition government was formed. As Pathet Lao security contingents arrived to Vientiane and Louangphrabang, the opposing forces were neutralized. The agreement, which was strictly between the Laotians, allowed the formation of the neutral government with proportional representation of both Royalists and Communists.

The Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU), Laos's third experiment with coalition government, was finally constituted on April 5, 1974, following one last desperate coup attempt by rightist officers in exile against Souvanna Phouma. Cabinet posts were assigned, with a vice-premier and five ministers from each side plus two chosen by mutual consent. Under each minister was a vice minister from the other side. The makeup of the National Political Consultative Council was similarly balanced.<sup>21</sup>

But from the very beginning, despite the balanced representation in all branches of government and formal leadership of Souvanna Phouma as the premier, the National Political Consultative Council, so far the most representative body of all political fractions, fell under the chairmanship and influence of Souphanouvong.

Behind all of these events were the figures of Laotian elites, including Princes Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong, and Phoumi Vongvichit, a member of another aristocratic clan. But the coalition government would last for only two years, until the Communists seized power in 1975 in a non-violent manner.

### **The Communist Seizure of Power: The Czechoslovak Scenario**

Starting in March-April 1975, "a campaign of intimidation against rightist members of the PGNU and military officers gathered momentum in Vientiane."<sup>22</sup> The Communists under the umbrella of various mass movements organized large demonstrations, using inflation and other popular grievances to mobilize support for the eighteen-point program of the National Political Consultative Council. Souvanna Phouma gave in and sided with their aims.

---

<sup>17</sup> Stuart-Fox, Martin (1986): *Laos: Politics, Economics and Society*. Frances Pinter (Publishers) and Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., pp. 27-28.

<sup>18</sup> Chandler, David P., Roff, William R. et.al. (1997): *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. University of Hawaii Press, p. 385.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 384.

<sup>20</sup> *Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity*. (2001): LPDR Embassy to the United States. Online version available at URL: <http://www.laoembassy.com/>

<sup>21</sup> *Country Study: Laos* (1994): US Library of Congress Publication. Online version available at URL: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

"The May Day holiday provided the pretext for the largest demonstration to date followed a week later by a demonstration against the rightist army and police. Four rightist ministers, including the defense minister, Sisouk na Champasak, fled. Another minister, Boun Om, was assassinated in the capital.

Elsewhere, takeovers of government offices and orchestrated demonstrations led to the entry of Pathet Lao troops into Pakxe, Savannakhet, Thakhek, and other towns during May "to secure their defense." People's revolutionary committees surfaced to seize administrative power from the remnants of the RLG. Officials and military officers who chose not to flee were summoned to "seminars." On August 23, the Pathet Lao completed its seizure of local power with the takeover of the Vientiane city administration by a revolutionary committee. The Pathet Lao announced that military units had requested Pathet Lao "advisers," thereby facilitating the integration of the army."<sup>23</sup>

Throughout this time, the most prominent communist leaders disappeared from the public only to return by October when Kaysone Phomvihan, in a speech in Vieng Xay on declared, "the revolution will speed up."<sup>24</sup> As the situation advanced more in favor of the Communists, elections were held to the parallel representative body, the National Congress of People's representatives, the candidates to which were screened by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (the Lao People's Party was renamed in 1972) but nonetheless elected on a list of the Lao Patriotic Front. On November 28, demonstrators demanded the dissolution of the PGNU and the National Political Consultative Council as duplicated and inappropriate to the situation. The next day, Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong flew to Louangphrabang and persuaded the king to abdicate.<sup>25</sup>

"It took 20 years of struggle against U.S. imperialism before the Lao people of all ethnic groups could rid themselves of the yoke of foreign domination, abolish backward feudalism, and proudly and gloriously establish a new regime - the regime of Lao people's democracy on December 2, 1975."<sup>26</sup>

The National Congress of People's Representatives met on December 1. Sisana Sisan delivered the opening speech on behalf of the preliminary committee for convening the National Congress of People's Representatives. So far only the Lao Patriotic Front and other front organizations and delegations from the various provinces were listed as attending among the 264 delegates. Prince Souphanouvong, named to the presidium of the National Congress, said in his speech that the congress would "study" the king's abdication, the dissolution of the PGNU and the National

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> *Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity*. (2001): LPDR Embassy to the United States. Online version available at URL: <http://www.laoembassy.com/>

Political Consultative Council, and the political report on abolishing the monarchy and establishing a people's democratic republic.<sup>27</sup>

Kaysone Phomvihane presided at the December 2 session. He proposed the motion to establish the Lao People's Democratic Republic, which was passed by acclamation. Immediately after that, Souphanouvong was elected both President and the head of the Supreme People's Assembly. Phomvihane was elected to lead the executive government.

Thus, the first days of the formation of the LPDR showed some similarity to previous compromise-based political solutions. Though at this time a veteran revolutionary, Souphanouvong was prince by origin and half-brother of the deposed premier Souvanna. He, nonetheless, was elected to serve as the head of the state of "proletarian dictatorship." But soon the new state took all the attributes of the typical Communist regime:

"Officially the party played no role in the National Congress. But it began making its public appearance immediately thereafter in indirect ways; for example, banners carrying revolutionary slogans and messages of congratulations from North Vietnamese, Soviet, and Chinese leaders began to appear. With power firmly in its grasp, the LPRP no longer had any reason to hide its identity. For the first time, the party publicly identified the seven members of its Political Bureau (Politburo). From this point, the party alone made decisions in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Gone were the "democratic freedoms" that had been extolled in the National Political Consultative Council's eighteen points. The Neutralist Party and other noncommunist parties disappeared, leaving a one party regime."<sup>28</sup>

The Communist takeover in 1975 thus resembled not the revolutionary path of its neighbors, Vietnam and Cambodia, but that of Czechoslovakia in 1948, when the crisis of multiparty constitutional system was used by the Communists to instigate peaceful but illegitimate seizure of power.

#### **Nature of the Regime: The "Compromise Communism"?**

Interestingly, in the years following, the Laotian new elite has never eliminated the aristocratic elements within itself; the "Red Prince", President Souphanouvong, although serving as a figurehead of the regime, maintained both his posts until 1985, when he left the country without vacating the office. Phoumi Vongvichit, another aristocrat, was then named acting President until 1991, again, without formally taking the presidency from the former. The very foundations of the Communist movement and regime in Laos, that emerged the struggle-consensus dilemma, thus caused the Laotian Communist rule to maintain its leaders of upper-class origin who, in other Communist systems would be easily singled out and purged, despite their contribution to the revolution. But more interestingly, Souvanna Phouma, deposed ex-Premier, was allowed to live quietly in Vientiane until his death in January 1984 and for the first few years of the new regime he had even held a position of the government adviser. The new regime also allowed the former king Savang Vatthana to live quietly in the

<sup>27</sup> *Country Study: Laos* (1994): US Library of Congress Publication. Online version available at URL: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html>

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

royal palace as a private citizen with the title of adviser to President Souphanouvong until 1977. But later, fearing that he would become a symbol of popular resistance, the regime had imprisoned him along with Queen Khamboui and Crown Prince Say Vongsavang. All three died within three years between 1978 and 1981, most probably from starvation.

"According to an eyewitness, all were buried in unmarked graves outside the camp's perimeter. No official announcement was made. More than a decade later, during a visit to France in December 1989, Kaysone confirmed reports of the king's death in an innocuous aside that attributed it to old age."<sup>29</sup>

Despite this fact, the regime remained relatively favorable to both its class enemies and, unlike in Cambodia, to the Buddhist clergy as well. The party did not abolish the Buddhist cleric community (*sangha*), of which the king had been the supreme patron: "As an institution, the Buddhist *sangha* seems to have operated more openly in Laos than in Cambodia."<sup>30</sup>

It did, however, attempt to reshape the *sangha* into an instrument of control. In March 1979, the Venerable Thammayano, the eighty-seven-year-old Sangha-raja of Laos, the country's highest-ranking priest, fled by floating across the Mekong on a raft of inflated car tubes. His secretary, who engineered the escape, reported that the Sangha-raja had been confined to his monastery in Louangphrabang and was forbidden to preach.<sup>31</sup> As a result of these pressures, the number of monks in Laos decreased sharply after 1975. In an attempt to adjust the *sangha* into the Marxist doctrine, the new regime encouraged monks

"... not only seek solely their personal salvation, the aim of Theravada Buddhism, but instead to try to save other human beings and thereby has led Lao Buddhism to turn in a direction that may make it evolve little by little towards a form of the Mahayana. This is the sense in which it seems the Lao revolution has most influenced the Lao Buddhism so far."<sup>32</sup>

In the sphere of social and economic development, the state socio-economic control by means of the Constitution and laws has been exercised in all aspects of the Lao society:

"The Party leads and manages and the people are the masters of the nation" with five tiers of administration - central, provincial and municipality, district, tasseng, and Ban."<sup>33</sup>

After the promulgation of the Constitution on August 15, 1991, the Party's policy and principles have been used to determine the role and power distribution among each organ of the state. Whereas in Vietnam the tendency during the latter half of the 1980s and the 1990s was to differentiate the prerogatives between those of

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Chandler, David P., Roff, William R. et.al. (1997): *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. University of Hawaii Press, p. 384.

<sup>31</sup> *Country Study: Laos* (1994): US Library of Congress Publication. Online version available at URL: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html>

<sup>32</sup> Lafont, Pierre-Bernard (1982): "Buddhism in Contemporary Laos," in *Contemporary Laos*, ed. Martin Stuart-Fox. University of Queensland Press., p. 160.

<sup>33</sup> SarDesai, R.R (1989): *Southeast Asia: Past and Present*. Westview Press.

the party and those of the state, in Laos the process underwent the similar direction albeit using the same rhetoric to "increase the Party's leadership role, and improve and strengthen management of the state organizations."<sup>34</sup>

According to the 1991 Constitution, the first one since the 1975 Communist takeover institutes the executive branch formerly called the Council of Ministers, as "the Government." The local administration has been reduced to three levels: the provincial and prefecture, the district and the Ban level. Province Governors, and the municipality by a mayor run the administration; each district has a chief administrator, and each village a chief. Currently there are 16 provinces, one municipality (Vientiane), and a Special Zone. The judicial branch has been streamlined and for better functioning. The Bar Association has been created, and sector staff numbers increased considerably, to ensure social justice.<sup>35</sup>

At the apex of the Laotian political system there is the LPRP, still a party guided by Marxist ideology. When its leaders came to power in 1975 they launched a campaign to create a "new socialist society and a new socialist man."<sup>36</sup> The party declared its twin economic goals as the achievement of "socialist transformation with socialist construction."<sup>37</sup> The LPDP asserted that in establishing the LPDR in 1975, they had completed the "national democratic revolution" and claimed that it had won the national democratic revolution by winning a "people's war" with a "worker-peasant" alliance, under the secret leadership of the LPRP working through a national front.<sup>38</sup> In the context of foreign policy agenda, the LPDP:

"... proclaimed a commitment to "proletarian internationalism" and the "law of Indochinese solidarity" and at the same time defined Vietnam and the Soviet Union as friends and the "unholy alliance" among United States imperialism, Chinese "great power hegemonism," and Thai militarism as enemies."<sup>39</sup>

By the late 1970s the short-lived collectivization efforts lost any chances to succeed, and at its plenum in November 1979, the Central Committee of the party launched a new softer line. By the late 1980s, as communism underwent drastic transformation in the USSR and Eastern Europe and gradually began to collapse, Kaysone and his colleagues on the Politburo still professed an adherence to Marxism-Leninism, but they emphasized the necessity for Laos to pass through a stage of "state capitalism." The Fourth Congress of the Party in 1986 launched the program for comprehensive renovation, ranging from concept and structure to economic management mechanism, organizational structure, and working methods.<sup>40</sup> In 1989, the LPDP leadership announced that state enterprises would be cut from central

---

<sup>34</sup> *Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity*. (2001): LPDR Embassy to the United States. Online version available at URL: <http://www.laoembassy.com/>

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Stuart-Fox, Martin (1986): *Laos: Politics, Economics and Society*. Frances Pinter (Publishers) and Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., p. 114.

<sup>37</sup> *Country Study: Laos* (1994): US Library of Congress Publication. Online version available at URL: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html>

<sup>38</sup> *Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity*. (2001): LPDR Embassy to the United States. Online version available at URL: <http://www.laoembassy.com/>

<sup>39</sup> *Country Study: Laos* (1994): US Library of Congress Publication. Online version available at URL: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html>

<sup>40</sup> *Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity*. (2001): LPDR Embassy to the United States. Online version available at URL: <http://www.laoembassy.com/>

subsidies and would be financially autonomous. This marked the beginning of the shift towards necessary market-oriented reforms that influenced not only the country's domestic policy but its foreign orientation as well:

“By the early 1990s, the party has continued to move internally toward more free-market measures and externally toward reliance upon the capitalist countries and the international institutions on which they depend for investment and assistance. The “law” of Indochinese solidarity has been amended, and the LPDR’s “special relations” with its former senior partner are no longer invoked, even though party spokesmen still insist that Laos retains a solid friendship and “all-round cooperation” with Vietnam.”<sup>41</sup>

As of the 1990s and today, the party still holds strong grip of the domestic polity and society. It mobilizes the society through various elements of national population and incorporates them into its political agenda. The party's umbrella organisation, the Lao Front for National Construction includes such mass organizations, as the Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union the Lao Women's Union the Lao Federation of Trade Unions etc. This situation is not uncommon in all countries that possessed or still possess Communist rule:

“Along with its own growth, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party at all times pays attention to mobilisation, education, organisation and guidance of the masses through the Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union, the Lao Women's Union, the Lao Federation of Trade Unions, and the Lao Front for National Construction. The pursuance of the mass mobilisation affairs informs the people of the Party guidelines and state policies, regulations, and laws. It also strengthens ties between the Party, administration and people, and encourages and unites the masses to put Party guidelines and state regulations and laws into practice.”<sup>42</sup>

To oppress its adversaries, the regime installed seminar camps, also called the “reeducation centers”. People identified as its former enemies were now presumed as saboteurs and subversives of the socialist phase of the revolution that was just getting under way. After its victory, the regime incarcerated and detained a huge number of people, estimated number of whom vary from source to source between 30,000 and 100,000.<sup>43</sup> The Lao Human Rights Council, based in the United States, released a statement in 1997 saying:

---

<sup>41</sup> *Country Study: Laos* (1994): US Library of Congress Publication. Online version available at URL: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html>

<sup>42</sup> *Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity*. (2001): LPDR Embassy to the United States. Online version available at URL: <http://www.laoembassy.com/>

<sup>43</sup> Esterline, John H. and Esterline Mae H. (1990): *How The Dominoes Fell: Southeast Asia in Perspective*. University Press of America, p. 134.

"From 1975 to 1979, more than 2 million Cambodian people were killed under the Khmer Rouge government (Pol Pot government). Similarly, since 1975, and this still going on today, the Communist Lao government has killed more than 300,000 people of Laos. Foreign policy makers and officials of the U.S. Department of State recognized the genocide in Cambodia. They should recognize and honor evidence, reports and information of the genocide and human rights violations in Laos today. Indeed, the "Killing fields" of Laos throughout the countryside have been going on for 22 years. The genocide and human rights violations in Cambodia during the period of the Pol Pot government and which have been going on in Laos since 1975 are "crimes against peace and crimes against humanity." These crimes are like the "Nazi genocide" against six million Jewish people in Europe during World War II."<sup>44</sup>

"If the U.S. government and the United Nations desire to truly respect and practice human rights and justice according to the Charter of the United Nations and other international human rights principles, then the U.S. government and the United Nations must also bring Khamtai Siphandon, Prime Minister; Nouhak Phoumsavan, President of Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR); and many other Communist leaders in Laos to face world trial, because they are committing "crimes against peace and crimes against humanity" in Laos, just as Hitler did in Germany and Pol Pot in Cambodia. The U.S. government must recognize that human rights violations and genocide are taking place within Laos too."<sup>45</sup>

It is clear that despite relative moderation of the nature of the Laotian regime, it maintains the rule by means of terror and oppression. But the general scheme of the regime's development presents a picture of "speeded-up" evolution of the Communist regimes, as if several decades of formation, forced collectivization, mass terror, and gradual liberalization were condensed into just ten-fifteen years of Laotian experience. Due to these temporal changes, the Communist regime in Laos experienced some "shortcuts" in the processes listed above.

#### **Conclusion: Elements of Negotiating State?**

Three aspects of relations between the state (the party regime) and components of society were briefly examined in this paper: the different classes, the *sangha*, and the mass population. The Communist regime traces back its origin from various groups, one of pro-Vietnamese Marxist origin, one of Thai revolutionary origin, and one of domestic elite origin, whose representatives were forced to split into different sides of the barricades but nonetheless all served to a common goal of achieving the independence. Pre-1975 Laotian politics was the politics of compromise and negotiation; this culture seems to preserve at least its small portion in the LPDP

---

<sup>44</sup> Vang, Pobzeb (1997): *Genocide in Cambodia and Laos*, Released by Lao Human Rights Council, Inc. Online version is available at URL: <http://home.earthlink.net/~laohumrights/laohd121.html>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

leadership style. The clergy, though adjusted and manipulated in accordance with LPDP doctrine, has never been subjugated and singled out as sources of an idea incompatible with atheist school. The mass population is mobilized through various segments of the socialist state structure and more than in neighboring Vietnam and Cambodia, retained economic autonomy.

“As heirs to an admittedly weak variant of the Asiatic mode of production, the new caste of rulers accordingly is inhibited in mobilizing the masses towards collectivist ends by enduring influences of the beliefs and ideology of the old regime.”<sup>46</sup>

The Laotian state, in its past and present relations with the society, remains the mobilizational corporatist model. More than that, elements of negotiating model presents in post-revolution Laotian polity.

### Bibliography of Sources

- Brown, R. (1982): *Indo-Chinese Communist Movement*, RoutledgeCurzon.
- Chandler, David P., Roff, William R. et.al. (1997): *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Christie, Clive J (1998): *Southeast Asia in the Twentieth Century: A Reader*. Tauris Readers.
- Country Study: Laos* (1994): US Library of Congress Publication. Online version available at URL: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html>
- Esterline, John H. and Esterline Mae H. (1990): *How The Dominoes Fell: Southeast Asia in Perspective*. University Press of America.
- Gunn, Geoffrey C. (1982): “Theravadins and Commissars: The State and National Identity in Laos,” in *Contemporary Laos*, ed. Martin Stuart-Fox. University of Queensland Press., pp. 76-100.
- Kaysone Phomvihane (1974): *Laos on the Glorious Path of the Era*. Lao Patriotic Front Publishing House. Extract from the article “Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity” released by the LPDR Embassy to the United States, 2001. Online version available at URL: <http://www.laoembassy.com/>
- Kaysone Phomvihane (1979): *Some Main Lessons and Some Basic Problems Concerning the New Directions and Tasks of the Lao Revolution*. The Printing House of the Lao PDR. Extract from the article “Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity” released by the LPDR Embassy to the United States, 2001. Online version available at URL: <http://www.laoembassy.com/>
- Kerkvliet, Benedict J. Tria (2001): “An Approach for Analyzing State-Society Relations in Vietnam,” in *Sojourn*, No.2/2001, pp. 238-78.
- Lafont, Pierre-Bernard (1982): “Buddhism in Contemporary Laos,” in *Contemporary Laos*, ed. Martin Stuart-Fox. University of Queensland Press., pp. 148-162.
- Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity*. (2001): LPDR Embassy to the United States. Online version available at URL: <http://www.laoembassy.com/>

<sup>46</sup> Gunn, Geoffrey C. (1982): “Theravadins and Commissars: The State and National Identity in Laos,” in *Contemporary Laos*, ed. Martin Stuart-Fox. University of Queensland Press., p. 96.

- SarDesai, R.R (1989): *Southeast Asia: Past and Present*. Westview Press.
- Stuart-Fox, Martin (1986): *Laos: Politics, Economics and Society*. Frances Pinter (Publishers) and Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
- Tarling, Nocholas (ed.)(1998): *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*. Volume Four. *From World War II to the Present*. Cambridge University Press.
- Vang, Pobzeb (1997): *Genocide in Cambodia and Laos*, Released by Lao Human Rights Council, Inc. Online version is available at URL: <http://home.earthlink.net/~laohumrights/laohdl21.html>