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January, 1966

# Laos, Future Prospects and Their Limitations

Joel Halpern

# ASIAN SURVEY

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VIETNAM: THE BROADENING WAR

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## LAOS, FUTURE PROSPECTS AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

JOEL M. HALPERN

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This article is not an attempt to assess the contemporary (1965) situation in Laos or to deal in detail with the politics of the immediate past.\* Our task is, rather, to outline briefly some of the most crucial factors which will play an important role in shaping the country's future.

Laos is a small, land-locked country sandwiched in between three large states: China, Vietnam, and Thailand. Each of these countries contain significant numbers of people ethnically similar to the people of Laos. The dominant group in the Kingdom of Laos, the valley Lao, are for all practical purposes very similar in both language and culture to the North-eastern and Northern Thai. The Mekong River, although an international boundary, promotes rather than impedes contacts between the Lao and Northeast Thai. Although in the North and East the terrain is mountainous, the same kinds of people, the tribal Tai, Meo and Yao, are found in both China and Vietnam. Thus, boundaries in this area are purely political; in no sense do they constitute ethnic or cultural frontiers. On the contrary, until recent times people traded and migrated freely across them. The significant point can be made that there is no ethnic group found in Laos which does not occur in larger numbers in one of the neighboring states.

Prior to the coming of the French in the latter part of the 19th century, Laos had been split into the petty princedoms of Champassak, Vientiane, Xieng Khouang, and Luang Prabang, although at times they had been united. During the 18th and 19th centuries, frequent invasions by Annam, by groups such as the Hô from China and by the Siamese, contributed to many divisions. The Lao princedoms paid tribute to such foreign elements as these. Indeed, at the time of the French expansion, the Thai had recently decimated Vientiane, and much of its population had crossed over into Siam. The only princedom surviving was that of Luang Prabang where the French were welcomed as protectors who would stand between the Lao and the Siamese, and to a lesser extent fend off menaces from the North. French control of Vietnam assured peace in the East.

This attitude of regarding the colonizers as protectors is still found among the older generation of Lao intellectuals who continue to consider themselves, "children of the French peace." It is only now dying off. Not a few of the offspring of the Lao elite have intermarried with the French and a number of prominent Lao officials continue to look to France as a kind of

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\* A comprehensive survey of recent Laotian politics now exists: Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict In Laos, The Politics of Neutralization* (Praeger, 1964).



second homeland. Many of the top leaders have received their university education there; French has been the language of instruction in the upper levels of the Laotian educational system, with Lao taught as a foreign language.

Although no accurate population statistics exist, approximately one half of the population of the country are non-Lao, belonging to various tribal groups, both those indigenous to the country and those like the Meo, Yao, and some of the Tai who have migrated south from China and north Vietnam over the past century. Many, if not most, of these peoples are also oriented primarily toward their tribal religions, a particularly significant fact since the official religion of the Laos is Buddhism. Further, most of these tribal peoples are mainly dependent on slash-and-burn agriculture and occupy the slopes and tops of the mountains, while the valley Lao subsist on rice grown in diked fields.

The Kingdom of Laos has few visible sources of economic viability, although there are tin mines, and some plantations have existed in the high lands in the South; while in the North there are teak forests that can be exploited, and some of the mountain peoples, notably the Meo, produce opium.

In brief, these are some of the main factors upon which the future of Laos will be built. Clearly, both Thailand and Vietnam will play a vital role in that future. The external influences of these two countries (and doubtless a growing role for China) will be decisive. These trends are already evident. Although it would be an oversimplification to say that the Communist Pathet Lao are controlled by North Vietnam or that the Royal Lao government is directed from Thailand, it is a clearly established fact that both of these countries have played a key role in recent Lao affairs, including the sending of troops, although the intervention, in the main, has tended to take place in a covert fashion, with the sending of advisors rather than whole units. This situation may well be undergoing a change. Excluded from this discussion, in any case, is the passage of troops from North Vietnam into South Vietnam through those eastern areas of the country controlled by the Pathet Lao. Nor is an attempt made to pass judgment on the frequent protests of the Lao government on the incursion of North Vietnamese military units, some of which charges appear to be better documented than others.

More significant for the long run development of Laos has been the re-establishment by the Pathet Lao of road networks linking Laos, through Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua, with North Vietnam and the sea. These are vital lines of communication which were originally built during the latter period of French colonization before the Second World War, and which had subsequently been destroyed in part or fallen into disrepair. This development raises the whole question of the possible extent of future reintegration of Laos into that former entity which was French Indochina. It would seem that current French policy is not unaware of the significance of this as a conceivable future development.

American policy on the other hand has directly, through its economic aid and training programs, fostered closer links between Laos and Thailand. These links include the construction of roads and the providing of ferries which link the political capital of Vientiane with the Thai railhead across the river and provide a direct route to Laos from the Bangkok wharves. At present, of course, Laos is deeply divided in a de facto sense, with a strip along the Mekong River plus a few enclaves in the interior under the control of the Royal Lao government and oriented toward Thailand, while the large interior portion is linked in the main to North Vietnam through the Pathet Lao. It should be stressed that the peoples of Laos, tribal as well as valley Lao, despite their ethnic ties in both directions have ambivalent feelings at best toward these neighboring states—when they bother to think about the matter at all. These feelings of ambivalence specifically extend to the leadership groups, although it is more manifest in the Royal Lao government attitude toward Thailand and less evident in the case of the Pathet Lao. It is abundantly clear, however, that the Pathet Lao leadership may well have serious reservations about their “elder brother,” the Vietnamese, just as in a different perspective, relations between the Vietnamese and Chinese are far from untroubled.

These competing sets of relationships comprise what might be called the manifest political dichotomy, but there is another set of relationships which must be resolved, whatever the nature of external economic and political orientations. Specifically involved is the way or ways in which the tribal people will be integrated with the valley Lao into a nation-state or, conceivably, into part of a nation-state. Although the valley Lao never effectively incorporated the mountain peoples into their princedoms in a political sense, very important ritual and trade relationships did exist. In fact, with some justification the point can be made that for many items, the hill tribes were less self sufficient than the valley Lao. A number of Lao villagers living along the Mekong and its tributaries have made at least a part-time specialization of trade with the hill peoples, often acting as intermediaries with the urban-based Chinese merchants. Groups such as the indigenous Khmu of Northern Laos have also come in large numbers to work in towns like Luang Prabang as well as crossing over into Thailand for wage labor in the teak forests. This migratory wage labor was noted by Western writers as long as 80 years ago. Just as the Lao were forced on occasion to pay tribute to their stronger neighbors, so the Lao forced the weaker tribal peoples to perform corvée work for them. A part of this resentment has been successfully exploited by the Pathet Lao.

There is an important point, however, at which as modern nation-states, the policies of Thailand, North and South Vietnam, and China all run parallel, namely, in the progressive incorporation of tribal groups into the national state by resettlement and the extension of services. In times of former strife, the hill peoples and often the valley Lao as well would simply retire further into the jungle, reverting where necessary to swidden agriculture. Today for the hill peoples of Laos as well as for the New Yorker and

Muscovite, there is literally no place to hide. In fact refugees are pouring out of the hills in Laos, approximately 150,000 by one count (between 5 and 10% of the total population of Laos). Many are being given emergency relief through the American aid program. The total of displaced persons may well be higher than these figures would indicate since a number of groups have been reestablished in new locations where they have begun to raise their own food. It does not seem likely that they will be willing or able in the future to make themselves remote from roads and modern medicine. The very fact that a number of messianic myths have circulated among the various tribal groups by which magical access to the cornucopia of goods available in the modern city would be assured, is in itself eloquent testimony to the strong desirability of the new way of life.

To provide services more effectively, as well as to control both tribal people and Lao villagers, a process of concentrating villagers in more accessible areas is being pursued on all sides. All governments appear to be discouraging the more extensive and semi-migratory slash-and-burn agriculture, and encouraging reliance on flood or irrigated rice. The nature of the ways in which these diverse cultures will blend is not yet clear, although leaders of tribal origin have appeared on both sides. The Communists in North Vietnam and Yunnan, of course, have established quite specific means of dealing with minority groups through the establishment of separate districts and regions for tribal groups where their own language is used in the schools (at least on the elementary level) and to a certain extent, in the administration. The Pathet Lao still appear to be in the stage of the "united front," appealing to all groups to struggle together against the common enemy and saying little about long term aims.

Several assumptions about the future would seem to be logical. First with regard to the towns, in the pre-war period and extending into the post-war period of national independence as well, the peoples of Laos were in a distinct minority in the towns of their own country. A considerable portion of the governing was done by the French and the Vietnamese, and much of the commerce and crafts was in the hands of the Chinese, Vietnamese, and a few Indians, with the Europeans serving as technicians and missionaries. After independence many of the Vietnamese departed, and the Lao became much more active in government, education, trades and commerce. Increasingly they have also taken over technical functions from the Europeans, although it should be noted that there are now more Americans alone than there were French before the war. This is in part because of the great desire for rapid modernization which Laos shares with all new nation states. Their presence is, of course, also related to the present war situation. Meanwhile, tribal peoples, discarding their colorful costumes, have become more active in town life. Many of the Lao and all of the tribal peoples are, of course, of rural origin, and their entry into urban areas has been facilitated by the two major avenues of social mobility in Laos, the schools, and even more importantly the army, the major source

of trained manpower in the country. The sangha or priesthood and the police have been other ways in which poor country boys have discovered life in the town. No large-scale industry as yet exists in Laos so the towns remain religious, trade, and governmental centers, although these latter two functions have greatly expanded in the past decade.

How power will be shared is as yet unclear, although the waning role of the hereditary elite seems evident. Though the Pathet Lao in their united front stance have not as yet directly attacked the monarchy, its future seems in doubt, particularly since the present king lacks the dynamic appeal of his colleague in Cambodia.

The basic tragedy of past American policies in Laos has been that our extensive economic aid and military assistance program have, by indirectly promoting drastic social change, undermined the basis for power of the traditional elite and their allies, the very groups we have supposedly been relying upon to encourage stability. Formerly status distinctions among the valley Lao had been based on birth, training and merit in both the Buddhist religious sense and that of individual achievement, and only to a limited extent on differing standards of living. Foreign aid made possible a whole range of status distinctions based on nothing more than what was often fortuitous access to the sources of external assistance. But even more important, increased education, the enlargement of the army, police, and civil service brought even larger numbers of people into a situation where both their horizons and aspirations were broadened. These aspirations, to a great degree unsatisfied, remain.

To a liberal-minded Westerner, the need for redistribution of power on the basis of individual ability and the allocation of resources to meet rising aspirations seem obvious, necessary, and desirable. But it is hard to see how the present leadership of the Royal Lao Government, preoccupied as they are with the problems of day-to-day survival, can possibly come to grips with these problems in a decisive way. The American aid program focusing on rural development and refugee aid can at best help sustain the Lao government; but they cannot by the nature of the situation be expected to initiate policies, no matter how well intentioned they may be.

One of the most hopeful developments in this area has been the Mekong River development project. Although still in its preliminary stages, it shows great promise, not only in its potential for fostering economic and agricultural development, but as a means of fostering regional cooperation.

These diverse elements do not fit into any coherent scheme, but once the political power conflicts are resolved, or even if an enduring truce can be attained, the problems involved in building a viable state in Laos may begin to be faced in a comprehensive manner. Neither side can attempt a fundamental solution in the present state of intermittent warfare. Just as World War II effectively destroyed the political structure of many states, particularly in Eastern Europe, so the Japanese conquest and subsequent achievement of independence combined with revolutionary warfare in Indochina

has effectively altered the traditional and social and political structures in this area and created types of aspirations which were largely non-existent before. The present struggle is focused on who will oversee the solution of the problems of nation building, problems which will remain to be faced after the military-political conflict has been resolved.

The prospect that these problems will be resolved in a way favorable to the West is not bright in the short run, but the basic need to focus on the common problems involved in urbanization and modernization does not automatically demand a pessimistic long range view. On the contrary, as the situation in Eastern Europe indicates, long range trends toward diversity within a system of universal modernization present at least some reasons for optimism from a broad humanistic viewpoint.

#### *Recent Publications Dealing with Laos*

This country is one of the most poorly known in Asia from the standpoint of the English language public and, one might add, to a significant extent for the scholarly world as well. Several years ago *France-Asie* published a special issue on Laos. Subsequently translated into English and published in Saigon in 1959, this volume deals mainly with history, the arts, ethnography, religion, language, and literature. A year later, the HRAF Press in New Haven brought out a handbook on Laos containing brief chapters on a number of topics including political dynamics, government, economy, labor, the financial system, and foreign relations. Both of these volumes contain extensive bibliographies. The communist Pathet Lao point of view is represented in the writings of the Communist Australian journalist, Wilfred G. Bruchett (who resides in Moscow), in his book *Mekong Upstream*, originally published in Hanoi and subsequently by Seven Seas in East Berlin in 1959. His more recent effort pertaining in part to Laos is *The Furtive War, The United States in Vietnam and Laos* (New York: International Publishers, 1963).

Perhaps most useful to the student of political affairs is the volume, *Conflict in Laos, The Politics of Neutralization*, by Arthur J. Dommen (Praeger: 1964), which deals in great detail with the decade 1954-1964, and examines the significance of the two Geneva conferences. This book also contains a useful bibliography. Another recent summary is the chapter on Laos by Roger M. Smith in *Governments and Politics of Southeast Asia* (edited by George M. Kahin, Cornell Univ. Press, 1965). An attempt to deal with recent events, especially the coup d'etat and the emergence of a third force in the person of Captain Kong le and his associates is the novel *The Brinkman* by Desmond Meiring (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), in which the prominent participants are scarcely concealed. Here, the role of American intelligence officials and Vietnamese revolutionaries is particularly emphasized.

The writings of Bernard Fall, although primarily concerned with Vietnam, do provide useful information on closely related matters in Laos,

e.g. *The Two Viet-Nams* (Praeger, 1964). Information on social and economic aspects of Laos, aside from the purely political, is largely lacking. To a certain extent, this gap has been filled by the two monographs of Joel Halpern issued by Yale University, Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph Series Nos. 4 and 5, 1964; *Government, Politics and Social Structure in Laos: A Study of Tradition and Innovation*, and *Economy and Society of Laos, A Brief Survey*.

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