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Elite family politics in Laos before 1975

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ABSTRACT

Major General Phasouk S. Rajphakd and Brigadier General Soutchay Vongsavanh were important right-wing military officers in the Royal Lao Army in southern Laos before 1975. However, elite family relations in Laos – especially between prominent families from the north and the south – greatly affected how they acted and interacted over the years. This article considers family relations in Laos during the 1960s and early 1970s. Kinship relations are certainly not determinant of all social or political interactions, as individual agency is also important, but they are often crucial nonetheless. There has been insufficient discussion about how elite family relations played out in Laos during the 1954–1975 period. To partially fill this gap, this article explores how tensions between the House of Champassak in southern Laos and the House of Luang Prabang and the powerful Sananikone family in Vientiane led to disunity amongst non-communist factions in Laos, and eventually contributed to the Pathet Lao takeover of the country in 1975.

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Introduction

Born on December 9, 1916, Major General Phasouk S. Rajphakd – also known as Phasouk Somly¹ – was a key military figure in the Royal Lao Army (RLA) before the Pathet Lao take-over of Laos in mid-1975.² Prior to being appointed chief of staff of the RLA in July 1971, Phasouk spent over a decade as the commander of Military Region 4 (MR IV), which included the southern provinces of Khong Sedone, Sedone, Sithandone, Attapeu and Salavan (Figure 1).³ He was replaced in the south by Colonel Soutchay Vongsavanh,⁴ a seasoned battle commander originally from Luang Prabang, in northern Laos, who had spent considerable time in the south since 1965. According to Thomas Ahern, “Soutchay’s CIA backers saw him as the best hope for military leadership in the south.”⁵

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¹Phasouk used the last name Somly at times (see Ahern 2006). Some claim that a friend of his was selected to study in France, but then did not want to go, so Phasouk took his last name in order to fit with the record (personal communication, Chitprasong Na Champassak, Paris, June 2009).

²Goldston 2009.

³Vongsavanh 1981. However, between 1961 and 1962, when Phasouk was receiving advanced military training in France, General Koth Venevongsoth served as acting commander of MR 4 (personal communication, Thongsamliith Venevongsoth, Paris, June 2009).

⁴Kamm 1971; Vongsavanh 1981.

⁵Ahern 2006, 419.



Figure 1. General Phasouk S. Rajphakd and John MacQueen (USAID Area Coordinator, Pakse) visiting the Cluster Village Program in in Vapi Khamthong around 1967. Credit: Ian Baird collection.

In early 1975, when the Pathet Lao's victory looked increasingly imminent, General Phasouk traveled to France and met with a French military commander, General Golff, who warned him that he might be in danger if he returned to Laos. However, Phasouk insisted on returning for three reasons: as chief of staff of the RLA, he had already urged other soldiers to go for re-education, so he felt obliged to as well; he thought that the Pathet Lao leaders were not very smart, and would need his expertise; and he believed that "Lao people don't kill Lao people."⁶

On July 22, 1975, at a time when the Pathet Lao had already unofficially taken control of the government, General Phasouk voluntarily flew from Vientiane to Houaphanh Province in northern Laos, presumably to study the circumstances in this Pathet Lao-controlled area.⁷ After being initially sent to a re-education camp in Viengxay District, on October 12, 1977, he was transferred along with twenty-five other key RLA and civilian political leaders to a special – and particularly harsh – prison camp near Sop Hao village in Houaphanh Province, close to the border with Vietnam. In mid-1978, Phasouk was put into metal leg stocks and confined to a dark cell, where he and others sat and slept in the same position. Phasouk became weak and thin due to lack of nutrition and movement,

⁶Personal communication, Bounlonh S. Rajphakd, June 2009; personal communication, Keuakoun Na Champassak, August 2013.

⁷Thammakhanty 2004.

and he eventually died in March 1979.⁸ Other high-level military leaders and politicians suffered similar fates, as well as most of the Luang Prabang royal family, including the king, queen, and crown prince.⁹ Phasouk's younger brothers, Colonel Samrane Singrajphakd (Figures 2 and 3) and Colonel Khamsouk S. Rajphakd (Figure 3), were also sent to a re-education camp in Houaphanh Province. Khamsouk was released in 1986 and eventually made his way to France. Samrane was freed in 1988 and immigrated to France in 1990.

A few years after arriving in the United States as a political refugee in September 1975, General Soutchay was given a desk job at the Pentagon and eventually wrote an account of his time as army commander in southern Laos for the US Army Center of Military History.¹⁰ This was published in 1981, after General Phasouk had already died, and at a time when his brothers were still incarcerated in Laos. General Soutchay's report provides a useful entry point for considering north-south elite family relations in Laos, and how tensions between elite families – especially the Champassak royal family in southern Laos, the Luang Prabang royal family in northern Laos, and the powerful Sananikone family in Vientiane – weakened the Royal Lao Government (RLG) and RLA, thus making the Pathet Lao takeover of the country in 1975 easier.

The research for this article began in 2013 when I was visiting Paris, France, to conduct research about the House of Champassak, the most influential family in southern Laos before 1975.¹¹ I was staying with Chao Keuakoun Na Champassak and his wife, Pathoumma S. Rajphakd, one of the daughters of General Phasouk. Phasouk's wife, Chao Heuane Nhing Bounlonh, one of the daughters of the former head of the House of Champassak, Chao Nhoy (Raxadanai), also lived nearby. I had a copy of Soutchay's 1981 report with me, and Pathoumma asked to look at it. Later, she expressed anger regarding the way that General Soutchay portrayed her father and uncle (Colonel Samrane). She called a family meeting and reported what she had read to others. Finally, after considerable discussion, she asked me to write a response to Soutchay's report. I told her that I could not guarantee the result that she desired, but if she wanted, I would be willing to look into the matter and let the cards fall where they may. Since then, I have interviewed dozens of people in France, the United States, Laos, and Thailand. I have also relied on other interviews I have conducted since as early as 2008, as well as relevant literature in English, French, and Lao.

In this article I examine an important but under-researched aspect of Lao history, one that greatly affected the political circumstances associated with the Secret War in Laos between 1962 and 1973¹² – the rift that existed between the House of Champassak in southern Laos, the Luang Prabang royal family, and the elite Sananikone family in Vientiane. Feuding between these elite families – mainly with regard to politics, power, and regionalism – opened up opportunities for the Pathet Lao to significantly discredit the RLG, incite student anti-government protests, and eventually manipulate the situation so as to be able to take full control of the country in 1975.

⁸Thammakhanty 2004. He probably did not die clearing mine fields in Sam Neua, as Conboy 1995, 423 reported.

⁹Kremmer 2003; Thammakhanty 2004.

¹⁰Vongsavanh 1981.

¹¹See Baird 2018.

¹²Conboy 1995.

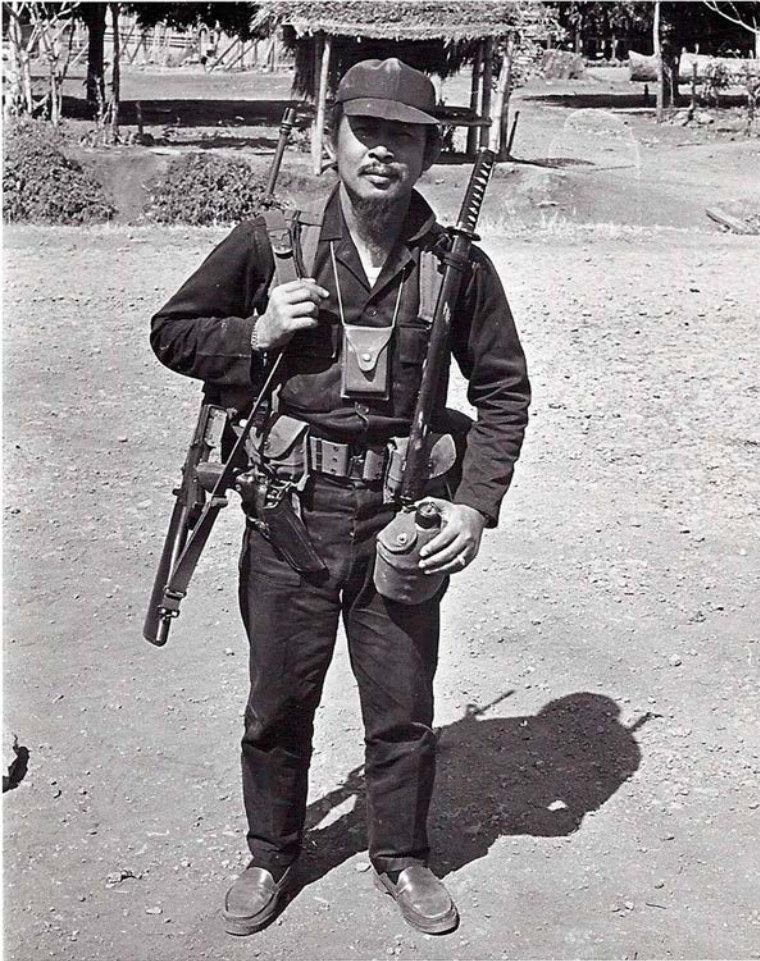


Figure 2. Colonel Samrane Singrajphakd, Paksong, around 1969. Credit: Ian Baird collection.

The rift between the House of Champassak and Phoui Sananikone

In the 1930s, when Phoui Sananikone was still young, he worked for the French colonial government and was sent to Salavan Province in southern Laos to be a *chao muang*, or district chief.¹³ One of his assignments was to oversee an important road construction project in Salavan. However, rumors started reaching the French administrators in Pakse that Phoui was absconding part of the workers' wages. Uncertain if the allegations had merit, the French leadership in Pakse assigned one of their most trusted and competent deputies, Anya Louang Sing – who was a member of the House of Champassak and had studied in France and spoke French well – to travel to Salavan to investigate these rumors.¹⁴

¹³He was born in 1903 in Vientiane, and entered the French colonial administration in 1923 (Halpern 1961).

¹⁴Personal communication, Bounlonh S. Rajphakd, Paris, August 2013.



Figure 3. Colonel Khamsouk Singrajphakd, Captain Singto Na Champassak, and Colonel Samrane Singrajphakd, in France in the 2000s. Credit: Singto Na Champassak.

After completing his work, Anya Louang Sing returned to Pakse and confirmed that Phoui Sananikone had indeed been skimming off part of the salaries of road workers in Salavan. The French were furious, and immediately called in Phoui, who was strongly reprimanded, stripped of his position, and ordered to return to Vientiane.¹⁵

Crucially, Phoui Sananikone held Anya Louang Sing directly responsible for the French learning about his corruption. In fact, Phoui was so angry that he cursed Anya Louang Sing and his family for seven generations, claiming that Sing and his descendants would experience misfortune if they ever set foot in Vientiane.¹⁶ These events would have important implications for family and north–south regional relations in the country, and ultimately the political circumstances in Laos, even decades later.

The breakup of Lao royal houses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

The Kingdom of Lan Xang originated in the fourteenth century when Chao Fa Ngum became the first King of Laos, based in the northern city of Luang Prabang. However, his descendent, King Setthathirat, moved the capital to Vientiane in 1560, so as to

¹⁵Bounlonh S. Rajphakd, personal communication, Paris, August 2013.

¹⁶In this context, seven generations may refer to the next seven people born in the family, rather than strictly seven generations, as understood in European contexts.

make the kingdom less vulnerable to attacks from Burma. After the death of King Souvignavongsa (1613–1690/1694), a succession struggle ensued, which led to a split in the royal family, as the late king's pregnant daughter, Soumangkhalā, fled from Vientiane to the south with a large number of followers, led by a senior Buddhist monk named Pha Khou Phonsamek. In 1713, her son, Chao Noksāt, established the new Kingdom of Champassak in what is now southern Laos. Thus, Laos was separated into three independent kingdoms in Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak. In 1778, King Taksin of Siam forced Champassak and Vientiane to become vassal states. Siam maintained control of what is now Laos until 1893, when France seized all territory east of the Mekong.¹⁷ Champassak and Xayaboury, both located on the west side of the Mekong River, were added to French Laos in 1905.¹⁸

The Secret War in Laos

At the end of World War II, the *Lao Issara*, or Free Lao movement, declared independence for Laos.¹⁹ However, they were militarily weak and the French were easily able to regain control of Laos in 1946, leading many *Lao Issara* members to flee across the Mekong River to neighboring Thailand for refuge.²⁰ But, following the defeat of French military forces by the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the French were forced to withdraw from Indochina, including Laos, thus allowing for the establishment of an independent Kingdom of Laos, a constitutional monarchy with a democratically elected government.²¹ French authorities had already been gradually transferring power in Laos since 1949, when most members of the *Lao Issara* had agreed to a compromise and returned to Laos from Thailand.²² Chao Souphanouvong, the so-called “Red Prince” from Luang Prabang, refused to accept this compromise and instead had joined Ho Chi Minh's Indochina Communist Party (ICP). This eventually led to the establishment of the Lao Party in 1951, which later became the Pathet Lao.²³

During this period, Laos had a population of less than three million, with well over half being ethnic minorities. The country was dominated by a relatively small group of lowland Lao people who mainly lived near the Mekong River.²⁴

The first Geneva Accords of 1954 stipulated that an independent Laos would remain neutral. The hope was that political divisions in the country would gradually be resolved, but once those efforts failed armed conflict increased between the government, the Pathet Lao, and neutralists, with significant involvement by the United States, the Soviet Union, North Vietnam, and China. In a second agreement signed in 1962, Laos' neutrality was guaranteed, and foreign military forces were prohibited in the country. However, two things subverted the plan. First, the North Vietnamese remained in northern Laos, and stepped up their use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran through the eastern mountains from central to southern Laos, to divert arms and military personnel past the

¹⁷Vientiane was depopulated and burnt down in 1827 after the Chao Anouvong rebellion.

¹⁸Evans 2002.

¹⁹Viravong 1964; Saigasith 1990.

²⁰Halpern 1960.

²¹Wolfson-Ford 2018.

²²Sasorith 1949.

²³Brown and Zasloff 1986; Dommen 2001; Evans 2002.

²⁴Fall 1969; Deuve 1984; Stuart-Fox 1997.

Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separated North and South Vietnam. Second, US military advisors left Laos soon after the 1962 agreement was signed, but before long, the United States returned to Laos to support the RLG. In order to not openly violate the 1962 Geneva Accords, the Kennedy administration used the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to secretly fund and otherwise support the war effort on behalf of the RLG. In addition, with the support of the RLG, which did not agree with the North Vietnamese using the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, the US Air Force started heavily bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail in order to disrupt North Vietnamese movement and support the war effort in South Vietnam. Thus, Laos became a crucial but largely secret part of the war in adjacent Vietnam.²⁵

Elite family politics in Laos before 1975

While Lao studies experts have long recognized the importance of elite family relations in Laos during the pre-1975 period,²⁶ the 1954–1975 period, between independence from France and the Pathet Lao takeover, remains under-studied. However, some scholars, such as Simon Creak,²⁷ Patrice Ladwig,²⁸ Sophie Sidwell,²⁹ and particularly Ryan Wolfson-Ford,³⁰ have recently conducted important research about different aspects of this period of Lao history. Still, much remains to be unveiled about how Lao elite family politics operated in the country before 1975, and the implications of kinship and regional relationships on broader politics in the country.

Some scholars see Laos before 1975 as simply the site of a “proxy war” dominated by the United States.³¹ While there is certainly no doubt that the United States had a great deal of influence over the circumstances in Laos during that time, as it did in the war in neighboring Vietnam, we need to return some agency to Lao citizens. North–south elite family relations were crucially important in the country, and family differences and squabbles made it easier for the country to be taken over by the Pathet Lao in 1975.

It is useful to briefly provide some background about elite families in Laos. Different families dominated important geographic centers. In Luang Prabang, the royal family was paramount, along with others such as the Vilay and Boupha families.³² In Xieng Khouang, on the Plain of Jars, the ethnic Phouan leader, Chao Xaykham, and his clan, dominated.³³ In Vientiane, a number of families gained prominence during the colonial and post-colonial periods, such as the Inthavong, Luangkhot, Patthamavong, Philaphandeth, and Sihapanya families.³⁴ However, probably the most influential, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, were the Sananikone and Souvannavong families, who were descendants of former officials of the Vientiane Royal House.³⁵ Farther south, the Insixiengmay

²⁵Conboy 1995; Dommen 2001.

²⁶Halpern 1960; Fall 1969; Deuve 1984; Ngaosyvathin and Ngaosyvathin 1994; Dommen 2001; Evans 2002; Stuart-Fox 1998, 2008.

²⁷Creak 2015.

²⁸Ladwig 2017.

²⁹Sidwell 2020.

³⁰Wolfson-Ford 2018, 2020.

³¹Tsing 2013.

³²Khamphoui Souksavath, personal communication, Surrey, BC, June 2016.

³³Yang Dao, personal communication, September 2013.

³⁴Khamphoui Souksavath, personal communication, Surrey, BC, June 2016.

³⁵Halpern 1960.

family had influence in Savannakhet while Champassak was dominated by the House of Champassak, which was led by Chao Boun Oum after 1946, when his father, Chao Nhouy passed away.³⁶ In addition, the Bounnaseng family was influential in Attapeu,³⁷ and in the Siphandone area, on Khong Island, the Abhay family held sway.³⁸

Ryan Wolfson-Ford has criticized what he calls the “family politics thesis,” arguing that it tends to assume that there were no underlying political differences amongst the Lao, just personal or small group differences.³⁹ I agree that we need to look more deeply at the ideological and political differences that existed amongst the Lao at the time. For example, Souvanna Phouma, a Luang Prabang royal, was more inclined to negotiate with the Pathet Lao than was Chao Boun Oum. But scholars should not ignore the importance that elite family and regional politics played in Laos.

Some relations and rifts between families and regions were instrumental in determining the direction of politics in Laos before 1975, particularly those between Souvanna Phouma and other Luang Prabang royals in Vientiane, the Sananikone family in Vientiane, and the Champassak royal family in southern Laos. Friction existed between the northern and southern parts of the country.⁴⁰ In particular, Souvanna Phouma, who served as prime minister from 1951 to 1954 and again from 1955 to 1958, did not get along with members of the House of Champassak, for personal, historical, and territorial governance reasons. For one, those from Luang Prabang are much more soft spoken and less boisterous than southerners. More importantly, Souvanna was unhappy with the south because Phoumi Nosavan, with Boun Oum’s support, had removed Kong Le and Souvanna from power in late 1960.⁴¹ Most importantly, however, Souvanna felt that the Vientiane government and the Luang Prabang royal family did not have the authority in southern Laos that they should have, and were instead frequently overshadowed by Champassak royals.

On the other side, Chao Boun Oum Na Champassak was unhappy that he did not have authority in central and northern Laos, although he held the title of “Inspector General for Life,” a position he had been granted by French colonial authorities in exchange for giving up his claim to the throne in 1946.⁴²

In addition, Major General Kouprasith Abhay, the deputy commander of the RLA, lived in Vientiane. His mother was a Sananikone, and his father was from Khong Island in Sithandone Province, near the border with Cambodia. He, too, did not like the authority that the House of Champassak had in southern Laos, even though he was a rightist. He apparently would not even stop in Pakse when traveling from Vientiane to Khong Island to visit his family. Kou Abhay, Kouprasith’s father, and Kou’s younger brother, Nhouy Abhay, apparently thought they were above the House of Champassak due to their education in France.⁴³ In MR IV, General Phasouk was the commander, but the appointment of battalion commanders in Sithandone was left to Kouprasith.⁴⁴ According to Khamsing Phaviset, the former chief of staff in Sithandone before 1975, the Sananikones had similar interests to the

³⁶Archaimbault 1961.

³⁷Baird 2010.

³⁸Koupranom Abhay, personal communication, Paris, August 2013.

³⁹Wolfson-Ford 2018.

⁴⁰Halpern 1961.

⁴¹Sidwell 2020.

⁴²Royal Lao Government 1949; United States Embassy Vientiane 1957.

⁴³Thavone Na Champassak, personal communication, Concord, NC, January 2016.

⁴⁴Vongsavanh 1981.

Abhay family, and both saw the Na Champassak family as an obstacle.⁴⁵ A member of the Sananikone family told me in an interview that “the Sananikones did not like General Phasouk,” not just for personal reasons, but for historical and important structural reasons related to who wielded authority in different parts of the country.⁴⁶

According to another interviewee, many Lao citizens believed that General Soutchay was “Souvanna Phouma’s man in the south” because both came from Luang Prabang, and both were outsiders,⁴⁷ but Soutchay himself vehemently denies that this was the case.⁴⁸ However, it is notable that Major General Oudone Sananikone was close to Soutchay Vongsavanh,⁴⁹ while there were tensions between Phasouk and Oudone.⁵⁰ It is also noteworthy that the Champassak royals tended to have good relations with the Hmong in northern Laos, with Chao Boun Oum being close with Touby Lyfoung, a Hmong leader.⁵¹ Sisouk Na Champassak was close to Major General Vang Pao, the ethnic Hmong MR II commander in northern Laos, during the early 1970s, not so much because they personally got along well, but because they had similar political interests.⁵² The House of Champassak was also connected to the leading families in Savannakhet Province. Boun Oum was related to Leuam Insiengmay, the right-wing vice-prime minister of Laos, through Boun Oum’s wife, Bouaphanh.⁵³ Finally, Phoumi Nosavan, a key general and a close ally of Boun Oum, had had a close relationship with Oudone Sananikone when he was younger. Later, however, the Savannakhet native had a falling out with the Sananikones, after the September 18, 1954 assassination of Kou Voravong, a close relative of Phoumi and an important politician from Savannakhet. Although it is unclear who ordered Kou’s murder,⁵⁴ the important point is that Phoumi Nosavan and other southerners believed – even if unfounded – that Kou was killed on the orders of Phoumi Sananikone,⁵⁵ who was thought to not have wanted a southerner to become prime minister.⁵⁶

In summary, each lowland center was dominated by particular powerful families.

The two generals

General Phasouk was an important member of the House of Champassak, even though he did not hold a high royal title. He was the oldest son of Anya Louang Sing, the senior

⁴⁵Khamsing Phaviset, personal communication, Brooklyn Park, MN, October 2013.

⁴⁶Ounla Thongsavanh, personal communication, Madison, WI, August 2014. As Major General Oudone Sananikone 1978, 37 wrote, “[A]n intense rivalry had developed over the years between Phoumi Sananikone ... and Prince Boun Oum” (the head of the House of Champassak).

⁴⁷Kone Mokesouphanh, personal communication, Madison, WI, April 2014; Khong Vongnarath, personal communication, Lyon, June 2009.

⁴⁸Soutchay Vongsavanh, personal communication, Chantilly, VI, April 2019.

⁴⁹Vongsavanh 1981.

⁵⁰Rangxanh Souvannasy, personal communication, Brooklyn Park, MN, October 2013.

⁵¹Halpern 1960, 1961; Lee 2015.

⁵²He later had a falling out with the Sananikones, particularly after the September 18, 1954 assassination of Kou Voravong, an important politician from Savannakhet, and a close relative of Phoumi. In 1985, Sisouk Na Champassak died in his sleep while staying at Vang Pao’s house in Santa Ana, California. Vang Neng was sleeping in the same room as Sisouk when he died (Vang Neng, personal communication, St. Paul, MN, November 2013).

⁵³Halpern 1961.

⁵⁴Deuve 1986; Stuart-Fox 1997.

⁵⁵Khamphay Muongchanh, personal communication, Seattle, WA, July 2016; Khamfanh Nouansavanh, personal communication, Fresno, CA, September 19, 2009.

⁵⁶Touane Baccam, personal communication, Madison, WI, September 2013.

French-era official who had been cursed by Phoui Sananikone after revealing corruption in Salavan in the 1930s. Phasouk's mother was Chao Heuane Nhing Angkham, one of the granddaughters of Chao Khamsouk (Chao Nhouthithammathone), the eleventh King of Champassak. General Phasouk was further connected to the Champassak royal family through his wife, Chao Heuane Nhing Bounlonh, one of the many children from various wives of Chao Nhouy, the head of the House of Champassak before 1946.⁵⁷

General Phasouk received a good education, including learning French, when he studied in Cambodia from April 1948 to April 1950. He took up his first military position in Salavan in the *Armée Nationale Laotienne* (ANL), established with French support in 1949 and the forerunner of the Royal Lao Army (RLA). In April 1959, Phasouk was appointed commander of MR IV, in southern Laos, with the approval of Chao Boun Oum, the head of the House of Champassak, since Phasouk was seen to be “energetic and cooperative.”⁵⁸ From April 15, 1961 to July 1, 1962, Phasouk received advanced military training in Paris before returning to his position with the prestigious title of *Phagna* (Lord) Phibounphon. Phasouk's brother, Colonel Khamsouk S. Rajphakd, commanded the neutralist 207th battalion. His other brother, Colonel Samrane, who was often described as a rough cowboy, was another a leading military figure in southern Laos.

Soutchay Vongsavanh was an outsider in Champassak, since he originally came from Luang Prabang. However, he graduated from officer training school at Dong Hene, in Savannakhet Province, and was commissioned into the RLA as a second lieutenant in 1953. In 1965, he was assigned to work in MR IV with the Special Guerilla Units (SGUs) that the CIA had established and funded in various parts of Laos.⁵⁹ He soon became one of the CIA's favorites, partially because he spoke English well, but especially because he excelled on the battlefield. According to Thomas Ahern, Soutchay was “a competent and courageous infantry officer who was also in charge of CIA-backed irregulars in MR 4” (Figure 4).⁶⁰

Initially, Colonel Soutchay and General Phasouk worked well together.⁶¹ However, their relationship changed in the early 1970s when Major General Bounpone Makthepharak, the commander of MR III in Savannakhet Province during the 1960s, was appointed head of the RLA in mid-1971 after the loss of Paksong to North Vietnamese forces, replacing retiring Major General Ouane Rathikoune.⁶²

General Bounpone wanted someone he could trust as his chief of staff. In addition, the CIA was clamoring for a change of leadership in MR IV, as they felt that General Phasouk was getting weary of the war and was too soft on his enemies. They thought that Soutchay would make a better leader.⁶³ Therefore, a plan emerged for Phasouk to leave his position in Pakse and move to Vientiane to become Bounpone's chief of staff.

⁵⁷Na Champassak 1995.

⁵⁸Ahern 2006, 197.

⁵⁹Conboy 1995.

⁶⁰Ahern 2006, 415.

⁶¹Rangxanh Souvannasy, personal communication, Brooklyn Park, MN, October 2013; Soutchay Vongsavanh, personal communication, Chantilly, VI, April 2020.

⁶²Bounpone was not a blood member of the House of Champassak, but he was closely linked to the family, having grown up in Champassak, albeit as a commoner. Later, he wanted to marry one of Chao Nhouy's daughters, Chao Heuane Nhing Sodachanh, but he did not have high enough military or political stature at the time, and so was denied approval. Over time, however, Bounpone rose up the ranks in the RLA. Eventually, he was allowed to marry another prominent member of the House of Champassak, Chao Heuane Phengphanh (also known as Phreophanh), a daughter of Chao Sone Bouttarobol, another prominent member of the House of Champassak (Baird 2017).

⁶³Ahern 2006.



Figure 4. Soutchay Vongsavanh in Laos. Credit: Ian Baird.

By all accounts, General Phasouk was not happy about moving to Vientiane. His family was in the south, and he had commanded MR IV since 1959, except for when he was studying in France. He was familiar with the situation in the south, and people respected him there. Phasouk was also hesitant about moving to Vientiane because Phoui Sananikone had cursed his father and his descendants in the 1930s.

The relationship between Phasouk and Soutchay soured. It is not clear if Phasouk blamed Soutchay for his transfer to Vientiane but in any case, Phasouk eventually made the move as ordered. Years later, General Soutchay would write about the years he commanded MR IV, between 1971 and 1975.⁶⁴ It is to his report that I now turn.

Soutchay Vongsavanh's criticisms and context

General Soutchay's 1981 report heavily criticized General Phasouk and his family, thus bringing out the elite family and regional differences that existed between the north

⁶⁴Vongsavanh 1981.

and south of Laos before 1975, in a way that has rarely been explicitly written about by a lowland Lao person who had a high position in Laos before 1975. Soutchay criticized Phasouk for often appointing inept officers.⁶⁵

There is some truth to the assertion that General Phasouk promoted unqualified people as battalion commanders. For example, he appointed Nhote Phouthavong, a distant relative, chief of the commander battalion of MR IV, even though Nhote was trained as a doctor, not a soldier. According to Chao Singto Na Champassak, a relative and military officer, Phasouk did not typically appoint relatives, due to being afraid of what people would say, but he did frequently appoint people who were close to him to high positions. Phasouk also believed in strong local leaders who had popular support, even if they were not the best trained in terms of military tactics. For example, he strongly endorsed and supported the ethnic Nha Heun leader, Captain Tong, an important military and political leader on the Bolaven Plateau.⁶⁶ In 1969, Tong also became the district chief of Sayasila District, with Phasouk attending the appointment ceremony.⁶⁷ Tong was allegedly like a “son” to Phasouk, indicating Phasouk’s close relationship with him.⁶⁸

Despite Phasouk being close with the Nha Heun leader, Soutchay accused Phasouk of ignoring irregular operations along the Ho Chi Minh trail.⁶⁹ When fighting accelerated in late 1970 due to North Vietnamese advances, Soutchay was similarly critical of Phasouk and his troops.⁷⁰

⁶⁵According to Soutchay Vongsavanh,

Since there was little chance that these units would be employed in actual combat, their present-for-duty strength was always relatively high. There were also excellent opportunities for the MV IV Commander, General Phasouk, to confer political appointments on relatively poor officers without exposing their ineptness since they were constantly employed in static defensive positions.

Soutchay continued,

The loyalty of these forces depended largely on who appointed the battalion commander; in almost all cases it was the military region commander ... General Phasouk appointed the Royalist battalion commanders and his brother, Colonel Khamsouk, ostensibly the Neutralist commander in MR IV, as Neutralist battalion commander. With this situation, the regular battalions could not be depended upon for other than the most mundane garrison duties.

See Soutchay Vongsavanh 1981, 47. He also wrote,

The guerrilla force commanders were appointed by General Phasouk also, but in these cases the American advisers had some influence since the troops were paid and supplied by the Americans. Although Phasouk continued to attempt to place his cronies in these lucrative command positions ... his attempts were largely negated by the almost daily supervision of the irregular battalion commanders by their American supporters. A battalion commander’s weaknesses were soon exposed and relief was quickly forthcoming. (See Vongsavanh 1981, 47–48)

⁶⁶Singto Na Champassak, personal communication, Metz, France, August 2013.

⁶⁷Sage 1971.

⁶⁸Hubiq 1967.

⁶⁹According to Vongsavanh,

During the period when the irregular forces were charged primarily with operations against the Ho Chi Minh trail structure in the southeast panhandle, the operations were far removed from population centers and the MR IV commander had little knowledge or interest in them. (See Vongsavanh 1981, 48)

⁷⁰General Soutchay Vongsavanh wrote,

Prior to December 1970, the war in MR IV was fought away from Pakse and really meant little to the Lao power structure in MR IV or in Vientiane. Then in December of 1970, the North Vietnamese struck at PS-22 on the eastern edge of the Bolovens Plateau. The NVA raid dispersed the regular battalion, commanded by one of Phasouk’s inept brothers [Colonel Samrane], and the irregular battalion which were in the PS-22 garrison. I was ordered to PS-22 to take command of the situation and restore the defense of the shattered camp. Realizing that the RLA troops in the area were scattered and not dependable, I picked up an airborne battalion from Savannakhet ... and took this battalion with me to PS-22. We reoccupied the camp and rounded-up the

Soutchay, although he had lived in southern Laos for many years before being appointed commander of MR IV, remained a relative outsider and was clearly frustrated with the power structure he encountered, writing: “As alluded to earlier, family power and relationships were real forces to be reckoned with in Laos. These forces, furthermore, were the sources of the most serious problems of command I faced while commander of the MR IV.”⁷¹

General Soutchay’s concerns about family relations are particularly evident in the following paragraph:

Of course, the organization and operation of irregular forces in southern Laos were complex activities because authority was shared by the Americans and the region commander, and this constituted a command problem of some magnitude, but this problem paled in the light of the difficulties I faced in attempting to execute my command responsibilities in the domain of the large and powerful Na Champassak clan in southern Laos. I succeeded in command General Phasouk S. Rassaphak, a member of the Champassak family, who had been in command for well over ten years. RLA regulations specified a maximum tour of command of three years for this post, but, regulations notwithstanding and in the face of repeated attempts by Americans and influential Lao officials to have him removed, General Phasouk held on. He had two brothers, colonels in the RLA, occupying command positions in the military region Colonel Samrane and Colonel Khamsouk and another relative, Sisouk Nachampassak, was minister of defense. (While Prince Souvanna-phouma was prime minister, he discovered that he could not properly execute his leadership duties and handle the defense portfolio as well, so he asked Sisouk to be defense minister). Each time an effort was made to relieve Phasouk, Prince Boun Oum, the leader of the family, and cousin to the king and the prime minister, would say no.⁷²

Although Sisouk Na Champassak was a Champassak royal, he lived in Vientiane and was not particularly close to the royal house in the south. He married a French woman, Christine Guida, and years later after they divorced, he married Tiao Marina, a member of the Luang Prabang, not Champassak, royal family, and a relative of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma.⁷³ According to Chao Sisanouk Na Champassak, “Luang Prabang got Sisouk a wife to shut him up. They bought him.”⁷⁴ Indeed, many southerners believed Sisouk was more aligned with Vientiane and Luang Prabang than Champassak, although Sisouk did, at times, defend Phasouk when he was criticized by Americans and senior politicians in Vientiane. This indicates that there was agency within kinship groupings, and that relations were not always automatically predictable or related only to family relations.⁷⁵ Joel Halpern has pointed out the flexibility that elite families sometimes demonstrated in terms of marriage partners.⁷⁶ For example, Khampheng Sananikone, the younger brother of the senior politician, Nhon Sananikone, married General Phasouk’s older sister, Bounthanh, despite family rifts.

Soutchay was clearly frustrated. As one former southern Lao soldier put it, “Soutchay was disappointed that the soldiers respected Phasouk more than him.”⁷⁷ Moreover, the

irregulars who were hiding out in the forest around the camp. I sent Phasouk’s battalion of regulars back to Pakse, since it was of no use to me.

⁷¹Vongsavanh 1981, 49.

⁷²Vongsavanh 1981, 49.

⁷³Godley 1970.

⁷⁴Sisanouk Na Champassak, personal communication, Paris, August 2013.

⁷⁵See also Halpern 1960.

⁷⁶Halpern 1960.

prime minister at the time, Souvanna Phouma, was quite frustrated by Chao Boun Oum's influence. Indeed, Souvanna Phouma and Boun Oum had been at odds with each other for many years,⁷⁸ with Souvanna Phouma allegedly blocking the US from sending B-52 bombers to Laos when these were requested by General Phasouk, but approving those requested by Soutchay.⁷⁹

On September 17, 1968, an officer in the US Embassy in Vientiane finalized a report about a conversation he had had with Chao Boun Oum at his house in Vientiane. Boun Oum reflected on the degenerating circumstances in Laos, as the Secret War continued to escalate. He said that there was no more administration, justice, or authority in the country. He was particularly critical of the King, Tiao Sisavang Vatthana, and the Vientiane government for being incompetent or inactive. Boun Oum also expressed bitterness about who had benefited from his giving up his right to the crown in support of national unity. He implied that he could reassert his sovereign claims, since the original agreement had not been properly implemented. He also said that he had not spoken to the Luang Prabang king in two or three years.⁸⁰ Boun Oum also criticized Souvanna Phouma for unsuccessfully trying to become the *ouparat* of the country, which would have made him third in line.

In addition, Souvanna refused to allocate funds for building Boun Oum a palace in southern Laos, a crucial decision that Sisouk apparently agreed with.⁸¹ Indeed, in December 1965, an officer at the US Embassy noted that Boun Oum did not visit Sisouk when he came to Vientiane, and that there had been "some coolness between Boun Oum and Sisouk."⁸²

In addition, Souvanna Phouma wanted Laos to only recognize his royal family, the House of Luang Prabang, led by Tiao Sisavang Vatthana. So, Souvanna was unhappy when Boun Oum made comments such as, there are "two kings in Laos."⁸³

General Soutchay justified his appointment as commander of MR IV in July 1971.⁸⁴ However, once in command, he had difficulties gaining support from regional commanders.⁸⁵

⁷⁷Sinouane Ngamvilay, personal communication, Mobile, Alabama, November 2013.

⁷⁸Rangxanh Souvannasy, personal communication, Brooklyn Park, MN, October 2013.

⁷⁹Pangkeo Nakhone Champassak, personal communication, Ubon Ratchathani, April 2017.

⁸⁰Lydon 1968. Boun Oum reportedly did not like Sisavang Vatthana and Sisavang criticized Boun Oum for including too many southerners and family members in his government when he was Prime Minister before 1962. See Rust 2014, 65–66.

⁸¹Sisanouk Na Champassak, personal communication, Paris, August 2013. Boun Oum was also reportedly angry with the House of Luang Prabang for not insisting that a budget be allocated for him to build a palace. See Singto Na Champassak, personal communication, Metz, August 2013.

⁸²United States Embassy Vientiane 1965.

⁸³CIA 1970, 9.

⁸⁴

Finally, however, the pressures became too great, and Sisouk responded to [chief of staff] General Oudone Sananikone's request and appointed me the new MR IV commander. As General Oudone told me later, he had argued for a new commander to be chosen not from the south—for it was certain that any officer from Prince Boun Oum's territory would be Boun Oum's man and just as unresponsive to direction from the general staff as was Phasouk—but from another region and not under Na Champassak influence. (Vongsavanh 1981, 49)

⁸⁵

Duly appointed, I took command of MR IV on July 1, 1971. My troubles began immediately. First, General Phasouk refused to move from the headquarters. When he finally did, three months later, he returned each weekend and signed orders and directives to the commanders of the battalions assigned to MR IV. These units were all commanded by relatives of Phasouk and continued to give him their loyalty and to respond to his orders which were generally to avoid any action against the PL or NVA ... The response was usually

In a 2009 interview, Soutchay told me that Phasouk did not like him, and that he realized that many southern soldiers did not like him. They would ask, he said, “Why do they need to get a general from the north to control the south?”⁸⁶ Regionalism made it difficult for Soutchay to, in his words, “clean up the mafia,” that is, to stop the RLA in the south from “accommodating with the enemy.”⁸⁷ It also hurt national unity (Figure 5).⁸⁸

A series of events during the last few years of the RLG especially demonstrates the importance of family relations and divisions. A man named La Phapphayboun, originally from Vientiane, was sent to southern Laos to become a “development governor,” a deputy governor position responsible for leading development activities in rural areas. La had studied law in Vientiane and worked closely with Inpeng Souriyadhay, who was from Khong Island and was the nephew-in-law of General Kouprasith Abhay. La was also a member of the Sahaphoumin Political Party, which Inpeng led. Conflict emerged when members of the Na Champassak family started feeling that La was competing with them. According to Vongsavanh Boutsavath, members of the Na Champassak family accused La of being like the Pathet Lao, because he did not show himself to be high class like them.⁸⁹

Finally, one day in early 1975, when La was traveling south in Champassak by car, with Colonel Chao Sith Na Champassak traveling in a separate car, La’s car came under gunfire and he was killed. The official story was that his convoy had been ambushed by the Pathet Lao, but few believed this, neither at the time nor now. Instead, most contend that the Na Champassak family orchestrated the assassination.⁹⁰ Later, in Vientiane on May 6, 1975, as the Pathet Lao were on the verge of victory, a passing motorcycle passenger threw a bomb into the car of Chao Boun Ome, Chao Boun Oum’s younger brother, killing him and two others.⁹¹ The government blamed the Pathet Lao, but others believe the older brother of the murdered La was behind the attack.⁹²

Beyond these personal feuds, it is important to recognize that General Phasouk advocated for a softer military strategy than Soutchay, and was particularly interested in political negotiations with the Pathet Lao, so as to convince members to defect. Indeed, a number of important Pathet Lao members defected, including officers such as Boualien Vannasay, Thittanh Douangmala, and Bouasay Sisounon, who defected with many of their soldiers after making contact with the head of the police in Pakse, Bounheng

negative so I learned to do without them until I was eventually able to get some of these commanders replaced. It was not until the end of 1972 that General Phasouk gave up this practice, and I never really gained absolute control over all the units assigned to my command. (Soutchay Vongsavanh 1981, 50)

⁸⁶Soutchay Vongsavanh, personal communication, telephone to Washington DC, May 2009.

⁸⁷Ahern 2006, 472.

⁸⁸Probably the most significant failure was the inability to end the conflict with the Phasouk family, which detracted from the war effort and caused dissension within the officer ranks of MR IV. This problem continued from the time Phasouk was appointed chief of staff of the Armed Forces in Vientiane to the end of the war. It is very difficult to fight a war while looking over your shoulder to make sure you are not being set up by the friendly forces. See Vongsavanh 1981, 104.

⁸⁹Vongsavanh Boutsavath, personal communication, Northfield, MN, November 28, 2013. See also Touane Baccam, personal communication, Madison, WI, September 2013; Khamsing Phraviset, personal communication, Brooklyn Park, MN, June 2016; Tem Phonghouvanh, personal communication, Kennewick, WA, June 2016.

⁹⁰King Souvannakane, personal communication, Vancouver, WA, June 2016; Ounkham Souriyavong, personal communication, July 2020; Thongsouk Khantivong, personal communication, Surrey, BC, March 2014; Kone Mokesouphanh, personal communication, Madison, WI, April 2014.

⁹¹Vongsavanh Sinbandhit, personal communication, Paris, August 2013. Radio Pathet Lao 1975a.

⁹²Oubon Xosanavongsa, personal communication, Vientiane, January 2015. The bomb thrower ended up as a political refugee at Nong Khai Refugee Camp in northeastern Thailand, and apparently admitted what he had done when drunk one night. See Singto Na Champassak, personal communication, Metz, France, August 2013.



Figure 5. General Soutchay Vongsavanh, Virginia, USA, April 5, 2019. Credit: Ian Baird.

Saithavy, in 1969.⁹³ Other Pathet Lao also defected to the government side, including Langxanh (Si Be).⁹⁴ In 1971, hundreds of Pathet Lao soldiers defected to the government side due to conflict with the Vietnamese.⁹⁵ Therefore, Phasouk and others in his inner circle had good reason to believe that the government could potentially convince more Pathet Lao to defect.⁹⁶ As one former soldier said, “Phasouk wanted to convince the

⁹³Boualien Vannasay, personal communication, Bangkok, July 2012.

⁹⁴Ahern 2006, 415. See also Mome Bouachanh Na Champassak, personal communication, Paris, August 2013.

⁹⁵USIS 1971; Vientiane Domestic Service 1971.

Pathet Lao to give up.”⁹⁷ In fact, many military leaders believed that they only had to worry about the North Vietnamese, because they could reason with the Pathet Lao. Moreover, some political and military leaders believed that elevating military campaigns against the Pathet Lao could reduce the chances of being able to convince them to change sides.

In any case, Soutchay justified his position and praised his own military strategy as commander of MR IV beginning with his first major campaign, on September 15, 1971.⁹⁸ Although he admitted that his forces could not hold their ground, he still justified this operation, despite the fact that the RLA suffered 1,000 casualties between June and September 1971⁹⁹:

Although Paksong was recaptured by the NVA after the withdrawal of GM 32, this effort required the North Vietnamese to expend more combat power and by the time the North Vietnamese were in position to again threaten Pakse, the irregular forces in MR IV were as ready as they were ever to become to halt the NVA drive and launch a counteroffensive.¹⁰⁰

General Oudone Sananikone was the key figure in the decision to replace Phasouk with Soutchay as commander of MR IV. In addition, Phoui Sananikone, the President of the National Assembly, called for a change of leadership in MR IV.¹⁰¹ Considering the curse that Phoui Sananikone had put on Anya Louang Sing and his descendants back in the 1930s, it should not be a surprise that Pathoumma, Phasouk’s daughter, was particularly concerned about the following statement by Soutchay in his acknowledgements section:

I am indebted to General Oudone Sananikone, former Chief of Staff for the Royal Lao Armed Forces and subsequently Under Secretary, Ministry of National Defense, for his guidance, assistance, and comprehensive knowledge of development in Laos. I am especially grateful for his review and critique of my final draft with the objective of providing a highly professional contribution to the Indochina Refugee-Authored Monograph Program.¹⁰²

This suggests that Soutchay had collaborated with Oudone Sananikone – someone who would have wanted to damage the reputation of Phasouk’s family, due to the curse – and was also behind Phasouk’s replacement as commander of MR IV in 1971. In addition, Phoui and Oudone Sananikone were close.¹⁰³

Elite family relations and the takeover of Laos by the Pathet Lao in 1975

On February 21, 1973, the Vientiane Peace Agreement was signed. Some believe that US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger threatened a skeptical Souvanna Phouma – who had

⁹⁶Lt. Colonel Trần Ngọc Châu, in the Republic of Vietnam, was similarly well known in Kien Hoa Province for preferring to try to increase communist defections over killing the enemy.

⁹⁷Kone Mokesouphanh, personal communication, Madison, WI, September 2018.

⁹⁸According to Vongsavanh,

In three days’ time, we had control of the high ground and Route 23 into Paksong. The success of this operation can be attributed to the surprise of the airmobile assault and to the aggressive attack of GM 32 in driving into Paksong causing the NVA defenses facing the Neutralist forces to collapse. It bought more time for the reorganization of the irregular forces in MR IV and in this respect, it was totally successful. (See Vongsavanh 1981, 68)

⁹⁹Evans and Novak 1971.

¹⁰⁰Vongsavanh 1981, 68.

¹⁰¹Evans and Novak 1971.

¹⁰²Vongsavanh 1981, v.

¹⁰³Khamphay Muongchanh, personal communication, Seattle, WA, July 2016.

been negotiating with the Pathet Lao since October, but had not finalized a deal – to sign the agreement or lose all financial support from the United States. Government officials in Vientiane were apparently wary about allowing Pathet Lao military forces to enter Vientiane and Luang Prabang, but at the end they accepted such conditions. Others say that Kissinger did not threaten Souvanna, but instead put implicit pressure on the RLG to sign an agreement.¹⁰⁴

In any case, once signed, the Vientiane Peace Agreement, like its equivalent agreement regarding Vietnam, allowed the Americans to begin to withdraw. Ministerial positions in Vientiane were divided between the Pathet Lao and the RLG. Initially, the agreement was implemented relatively smoothly.¹⁰⁵ However, in 1974 Pathet Lao leaders started heavily criticizing certain ministers in the RLG and by May 1975, student protests were raging in Pakse, with the students particularly targeting right-wing ministers in the coalition government.¹⁰⁶ This caused considerable upheaval, including the short-term taking of hostages by protesters.¹⁰⁷

The murder of Chao Boun Ome in Vientiane on May 6, 1975 further increased tensions between the House of Champassak in the south, and elite Sananikone family in Vientiane.

On May 9, student protests expanded into Vientiane. Even though Sisouk had already left Laos two days earlier,¹⁰⁸ the students specifically demanded that he resign from the government, and that the CIA leave Laos entirely. They also blamed ultra-rightists for sabotaging the peace agreement.¹⁰⁹

As protests intensified, meetings involving senior leaders in the RLG and the RLA were organized in Vientiane and Pakse to discuss the expanding crisis, but relations were already strained due to past family, political, strategic, and regional differences. For example, in late 1974, a meeting was hastily organized in Pakse at Chao Boun Oum's house. In a 2016 interview, Pangkeo Nakhone Champassak described what happened. Those in attendance included Chao Boun Oum, Chao Boun Eua, Governor Silolot, General Soutchay Vongsavanh, Chao Sith, General Khong Vongnarath, and Anya Bou. Chao Boun Oum proposed that the north could not be trusted, because the Luang Prabang royal family, particularly Souvanna Phouma, along with the Sananikone family in Vientiane, had been working for years to marginalize the influence of the Champassak royal family in the central government and in Vientiane. Therefore, Boun Oum wanted to separate Military Regions III and IV from the rest of the country. He also expressed his anger with Governor Silolot, who was his in-law, for not arresting student protesters in Pakse. Boun Oum told Chao Sith to send a letter to Luang Prabang to try to encourage the royal family there to resolve the protests. Before he left the meeting, he said, "If you do nothing, I will have to act myself." But his appeals could not mobilize the resistance needed. General Soutchay informed Souvanna Phouma about the circumstances in Pakse, but Souvanna wanted to avoid violence, and ordered Soutchay to allow Khamphai, the protest leader in Pakse, to stay at his

¹⁰⁴Khammone Souvannalat, personal communication, telephone to Paris, January 2011; Houmphanh Saiyasith, personal communication, Paris, June 2009; Yang Dao, personal communication, Brooklyn Park, MN, February 2011.

¹⁰⁵Goldston 2009.

¹⁰⁶Radio Pathet Lao 1975a; Vientiane Domestic Service 1975.

¹⁰⁷Radio Pathet Lao 1975b.

¹⁰⁸Stuart-Fox 2008.

¹⁰⁹Peking NCNA 1975.

house, further indicating the rift between the elites in the north and the south. Colonel Samrane kicked the desk and asked why Soutchay took the protest leader in, and Boun Oum asked Boun Eua to keep Samrane from killing Soutchay.¹¹⁰

The heads of all military regions, other senior military figures, and General Bounpone, the commander of the RLA, met in Vientiane in mid-1975, where they talked about an order issued by Souvanna Phouma to disarm soldiers and put their weapons in warehouses. According to Chao Heuane Phengphanh, Bounpone's wife, General Kouprasith Abhay said, "We are soldiers and we have been fighting for twenty years. Should we really give up our guns?" General Sing Rattanasamay, from Luang Prabang, also cautioned against losing control of their weapons too quickly. Kouprasith suggested stationing a division of soldiers at Vat Phou, near Champassak, as insurance, but said they should still follow the peace plan. Bounpone, however, dismissed the idea, and said that the higher ups were committed to peace. He pointed out that the king, Tiao Sisavang Vathana, was pushing for peace, as was Souvanna Phouma. However, Kouprasith insisted that soldiers needed to die with their guns. He told Bounpone to resign from his position and become a Buddhist monk, implying that he was no longer a soldier. Kouprasith finally pounded the table, asserted that he could not stay any longer, and abruptly departed. Soon after, he rounded up his family and his gold, went to the army base at Chinaimo, and flew across the border to Thailand. He would never return to Laos.¹¹¹ In the end, many other elites also fled to Thailand, including Sisouk Na Champassak, Phoui Sananikone, Chao Boun Oum Na Champassak, and Soutchay Vongsavanh.

A little over a week after Sisouk's departure, he was being referred to as a "vassal of U.S. imperialism" in China's state media,¹¹² and by June, the Pathet Lao's radio service was describing those still opposed to the Pathet Lao as "henchmen" and "stooges" of the "Sananikone-Sisouk Na Champassak clique."¹¹³ Sisouk later applied for political asylum in Thailand, but Thai officials were afraid that if he was allowed to stay in Thailand, tensions with Laos could escalate, so he was asked to leave the country, and became a political refugee in France.

On May 21, the Provisional Government of National Union, the coalition government established after the Vientiane Agreement was signed, dismissed Chao Boun Oum from his position as Inspector General for Life. Soon after, in June, Boun Oum fled to Thailand, driving across the border in his Mercedes Benz with his wife, other family members, and a small number of antiques.¹¹⁴ He too ended up as a political refugee in France. He was followed on June 19 by General Soutchay Vongsavanh, who fled to Thailand with US support.¹¹⁵

Others who did not flee agreed to undergo "re-education" in camps in various remote parts of the country, including General Phasouk, General Bounpone, Colonel Chao Sith, Colonel Samrane, and Colonel Khamsouk.¹¹⁶ A few RLG leaders, including Souvanna Phouma and his deputy Leuam Insixiangmay, supported the inevitable Pathet Lao takeover and were spared from the camps.

By mid-1975, the Pathet Lao had essentially orchestrated a bloodless coup d'état. Over the months that followed, the Pathet Lao further consolidated power. Finally, Tiao

¹¹⁰Pangkeo Nakhone Champassak, personal communication, Ubou Ratchathani, September 2016.

¹¹¹Khamtanh Souridaray Sayarath, personal communication, Paris, August 2013.

¹¹²Hsinhua 1975.

¹¹³Radio Pathet Lao 1975c.

¹¹⁴Bangkok Post 1975.

¹¹⁵Pathet Lao News Agency 1975.

¹¹⁶See Kremmer 2003; Thammakhanty 2004; Na Champassak 2010.

Sisavang Vatthana was forced to abdicate on December 2, the same day that the Lao People's Democratic Republic was officially established, thus formalizing the fact that Laos had been transformed from a liberal multi-party democracy and constitutional monarchy¹¹⁷ to a one-party Soviet-style communist country, where no political opposition or decent was tolerated.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the relationship between the Champassak royal family in southern Laos, the Luang Prabang royal family in northern Laos, and the Sananikone family in Vientiane had a major impact on how the war in Laos played out, and that these family conflicts ultimately made it easier for the Pathet Lao to gain control of the country in 1975. Indeed, if the Pathet Lao had not seized control, it is likely that Chao Boun Oum would have taken revenge against the Sananikone family, which he blamed for the murder of his brother, Chao Boun Ome.¹¹⁹ That would have undoubtedly further escalated the north–south divisions in the country. However, it is certainly true that the ultimate outcome of the conflict was also heavily dependent on the support that the North Vietnamese gave to the Pathet Lao, and the unreliable support that the United States provided to the RLG, especially once the anti-war movement in the United States contributed significantly to decreased American support for the war.

In any case, General Phasouk and General Soutchay both broadly supported the same cause. However, whereas Soutchay portrayed Phasouk, his relatives, his underlings, and the House of Champassak in a negative light in his written account, General Phasouk's surviving relatives and other members of the House of Champassak have a very different view. From their point of view, Soutchay's written account represents a major betrayal, especially considering that Phasouk was already dead by the time Soutchay's report was released. Moreover, his brothers, Colonels Samrane and Khamsouk, were still imprisoned when Soutchay criticized them.

Of course, it is not possible to say definitively whose view is correct. However, it is important to recognize that these different views were intertwined with elite family and regional relations and differences, which greatly affected the war and its conduct, and the ultimate victory of the Pathet Lao.

Emphasizing the importance of elite north–south family relations in Laos between 1954 and 1975, together with the recognition of individual agency within families, and historical and political differences, makes it clear that there were political debates important to Lao people that went beyond what the Americans believed. We need more research on politics in Laos, so as to give agency to Lao people and demonstrate that elite family relations had serious consequences for non-communist efforts in Laos.

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¹¹⁷Wolston-Ford 2018.

¹¹⁸Goldston 2009.

¹¹⁹Halusak Na Champassak, personal communication, Paris, June 2009.

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