

Ideology in the Royal Lao Government-era (1945-1975): a thematic approach

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents a revisionist history of the Royal Lao Government (RLG) that seeks to reclaim Lao agency during a pivotal era in modern history. The Lao elite of the RLG were not merely instruments of foreign powers, but had their own set of complex motivations, rationales, and beliefs which shaped their thoughts and actions in a difficult period in Lao history. To fully understand the RLG one must take account of these important actors. One must also take domestic politics seriously. Finally, this study aims to contextualize key political movements which emerged in the RLG period to show these were not isolated groups, but were rooted in and a part of wider trends in society.

This dissertation argues that democracy and anti-communism were central to the RLG. It locates the indigenous roots of both in the 1945 independence movement which emerged at the end of World War II, the Lao Issara. It then turns to a consideration of new elites who formed the Committee for Defense of National Interests (CDIN). The CDIN not only fundamentally altered democracy and anti-communism in the RLG, but also played a central role in the origins of the Second Indochina War in Laos. Finally, after 1962 it was the neutralists under Souvanna Phouma who took a leading role in the conduct of the war and the search for peace. While Souvanna Phouma is most often remembered as the champion of the neutralization cause of the 1950s he played a central role in all aspects of the war, including the US bombing campaign that devastated the country. Thus the Second Indochina War was a Lao war that the RLG elite fought to save the country from foreign invasion and defend the democracy they had built since 1945. This study thereby seeks to rehabilitate the Issara, the CDIN, the neutralists after 1962 as well as the rightwing

more generally in the history of the RLG. These movements were fundamentally important, although misunderstood, actors of the period.

This dissertation focuses on how cultural and intellectual trends influenced politics throughout the RLG period. The hypothesis elaborated in this dissertation is that there was an “RLG ideology” that was subscribed to by the elite of the civilian government and military. This ideology consisted of a belief in a Lao race that must be modern and foundational values of anti-communism and democracy. To study this ideology, I examine central themes in the RLG period including anti-communism, democracy, modernity, neutralism and post-colonial nationalism. Finally, by 1975 there were major forces within RLG society itself that supported the revolutionary overthrow of the government. These new elites coalesced around a coterie of young government civil servants and former *Mittasone* members to form a new political party, the Movement for the New Way, that played a leading role in the downfall of the RLG. Those who supported the revolution rejected the racialist regime in favor of a cosmopolitan tolerance of ethnic minorities touted by the Pathet Lao. Those sympathetic of the revolution also rejected close ties with the US in favor of peaceful coexistence with China and North Vietnam. Finally, they rejected anti-communism for neutralism. Yet behind each major social change of the RLG period there was a deeper generational conflict, which emerged in the late 1940s, late 1950s and early 1970s.

This study above all attempts to write the history of the RLG on its own terms from the silenced voices of an anti-communist and democratic Lao past. Due to the nature of the sources available, this research necessarily privileges the perspective of the Lao elite, who were most prolific in authoring texts, thus leaving an important, though largely ignored, written record of the time. More importantly the Lao elite played a leading role in RLG history, which has been neglected in studies of the period, which prefer to focus almost exclusively on the US or France.

One cannot fully understand the RLG without careful consideration of the elite. The West missed several important opportunities to collaborate closer with the elite that undermined the only anti-communist democracy in the history of the country.

The introductory chapter begins with a consideration of the problem of approaches to RLG history before presenting the thesis statement. This is followed by a brief sketch outlining the influence of key themes over the RLG period. The historiography on the RLG is also described, which has too often neglected Lao agency, but also favored loyalist and Pathet Lao accounts to the detriment of Issara and rightwing accounts, when not simply narrating events solely from a US or French perspective. Indeed, many Western accounts of the RLG bear striking similarities with Pathet Lao writings on the RLG. In terms of sources, no archive for the RLG exists, which has limited historical inquiry. The best sources for this study are Lao authored texts, mostly in French and Lao. Finally, the main study is preceded with a consideration of the origins of cultural nationalism at the Vientiane Buddhist institute. Important links between the cultural nationalists working at the institute in the 1930s and later nationalist movements of the World War II period are described.

In chapters two and three the Issara independence movement is examined. Chapter two describes the first democratic government in Lao history created by the Issara. The democratic nature of the Issara is explained, especially with reference to the first constitution in Lao history, which was heavily influenced by France. The Issara fundamentally changed the political discourse in the country by introducing and popularizing modern political notions and terms. They represented the transition to the era of popular sovereignty in modern Lao history. The introduction of democracy was itself a profound cultural shift, which is described further in chapter three. The Issara formulated the first articulation of Lao anti-communism thus providing its local origins in

1948. The Issara form of anti-communism was elaborated in a unique way with reference to Lao culture. The Lao would never support communism which conflicted with their culture, society, traditions and religion, it was believed. I also discuss those Lao opposed to the Issara, who supported French reconquest after World War II, whom I call the loyalists. In connection with them, I describe Francophone Lao of the time, who played an important role as cultural mediators. As well as taking the lead in practical matters and charting the course of early modernization efforts, the loyalists voiced important criticism of democracy that continued to resonate throughout the RLG period.

In chapters four and five the Committee for Defense of National Interests is examined. Chapter three charts the rise of anti-communism in RLG politics. The single most important anti-communist movement of the time was the CDIN, which nevertheless was part of the wider trend. The CDIN themselves formulated a new form of anti-communism, which viewed neighboring communist powers, China and North Vietnam, as imperialists forces seeking to conquer the Lao state. Many Lao elite feared that a communist victory would result in violent class-war that would overthrow the democracy and extinguish Buddhism in the country. Their very way of life was threatened in an existential conflict. The country would be wiped off the face of the map, transformed into a communist colony while the Lao race would be enslaved before a Red Sino-Viet tide. While anti-communism increased among the Lao elite, democracy declined culminating in the first coups and military dictators, whom were ultimately unsuccessful in establishing a stable dictatorship in the country. While the CDIN degraded democracy, this was inextricably linked to the outbreak of the Second Indochina War in Laos. Chapter five describes the RLG ideology as it emerged in elite intellectual works on history and language. Most important to the Lao elite was the articulation of a “birth of the Lao race” in the distant past that provided the modern origins of

the people. This development was related to government attempts to assimilate the ethnic minorities. The government even claimed that all the people were of the same Lao race. Ultimately, RLG ideology was linked to the outbreak of war, as the RLG elite view of the Second Indochina War in Laos was dangerously informed by ethnic tensions.

In chapters six and eight I examine the influence of neutralism on the country after 1962. The neutralists were a looser configuration than either the Issara or the CDIN, led somewhat informally by Souvanna Phouma. Nonetheless there was a proliferation of neutralist parties by 1969 including Souvanna's Neutralist party, a rightwing Nationalist Union for Liberal Democracy and a party of foreign-educated youth who formed the Movement for the New Way. The government itself treated the Second Indochina War as a violation of the country's neutral status, which shaped how it conducted the war. I further examine Souvanna Phouma's role in the war, especially his role in shaping the US bombing campaign that devastated the country. It was Souvanna Phouma himself who demanded that the US war in Laos was secret. Thus the so-called "Secret War" must be credited to the RLG prime minister, who was seeking in vain to maintain the neutrality of the country. In chapter eight, I describe the important role that neutralism played in the last years of the country. I describe the multiple versions of neutrality discussed at the time, as well as considering how the revolution was a victory of neutralism over anti-communism and peace over war. Finally, I describe the last youth revolt against their elders, led by the Movement for the New Way, which was an important aspect of the revolution of 1975.

In chapters seven and eight I examine important social and cultural developments in the final years of the RLG era. In chapter seven I describe the return of a more tolerant, cosmopolitan elite intellectual culture amid a highly diverse society, including changing gender relations, Christian converts and those influenced by American culture. This cultural trend would influence

those within RLG society who supported the revolution in 1975 in as much as it promoted equality among all ethnic groups. In chapter eight I describe the return of democracy in 1965 after the constitutional order had been disrupted and undermined by pretender military dictators. Despite the troubles involved with a democracy, the elite remained committed to fundamental democratic values by 1975, although tempered in some cases by the long war and a growing desensitization to violence. The government had done much to advance democracy including expanding universal education, supporting fundamental civil and political rights and a free press and open civil society. Civic organizations of the time were free to become involved in political activities and some even formed new political parties, which played a major role in politics. Yet by 1975 the Pathet Lao gained support among the people with the promise of a more fully realized democracy.

In chapter nine I consider the legacy and influence of the Royal Lao Government. The RLG was the first post-colonial government and as such dealt with many issues that have shaped the period since French rule. The Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) has faced many of the very same problems and responded similarly, revolution notwithstanding. Yet there remain continued calls for the return of multiparty democracy in the country that the LPDR struggles to address, having abandoned Western liberal parliamentary democracy, fundamental civil and political rights and the rule of law.

DEDICATION

For Natalie.

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I would never have been able to complete my work without the peerless generosity, kindness, compassion and unfailing support of my teachers and supporters. They have all gone above and beyond to help me as I struggled with various problems inside and outside academia. I was seeking to learn the historian's craft, but, more importantly, I will always have the strong moral example my teachers set for me. For that great gift, I am more grateful than words can express. I count myself extraordinarily lucky to have come to Madison.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION – OUT OF ASHES

Introduction

There is no comparable image of the fall of the Royal Lao Government (RLG) seared into our memory as with the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.¹ One cannot be certain even what day the RLG could be said to have fallen. The RLG never had more than a short, violent existence from 1945 to 1975 before being overthrown in revolution. Now, nearly half a century later, it is recalled as little more than a puppet of foreign powers, led by a corrupt, selfish, and narrow-minded elite that failed to win popular support in its fight against communism.² To many foreign observers

¹ Panivong Norindr has similarly observed: “No comparable image of Laos has been seared into our collective memory of the Vietnam War.” See his “On Photography, History, and Affect: Re-Narrating the Political Life of a Laotian Subject” *Historical Reflections* vol. 34, no. 1 (2008), p. 91.

² Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 68 supports the portrayal of the elite as selfish and narrow-minded to the determinant of nationalism: “personal, clan, and regional interests in obtaining a share [of aid] tended to be pursued in preference to...national welfare.” See *ibid*, p. 77, where Stuart-Fox claims that deputies in the National Assembly only sought personal gain. Other observers like Douglas Dowd referred to “the utter corruption of the Royal Lao Government” or its puppet status (“a genuine colony of the CIA”) without elaboration. See Douglas Dowd, “The CIA’s Laotian Colony; or An Interview with Souvanna Phouma” in (eds.) Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 377, 381. Both conservative and leftist observers were in agreement on the corrupt and puppet nature of the RLG, of which the elite were an exemplar. Thus Marek Thee claimed that in 1955 “American officials began to assume direct control over RLG policies” to the point that he can simply refer to US foreign policy statements as evidence of the RLG’s own policy. See Marek Thee, “Background and Notes on the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Laos and the Vientiane Agreements of 1956-1957” in Adams and McCoy (eds.), *Laos: War and Revolution*, p. 129-130. As the first chapter of Thomas Ahern’s study put it, the RLG, and by extension, the Lao elite, was “everybody’s pawn.” See Thomas Ahern, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* (Washington D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006). Others have described the RLG as “a somewhat dishonest government with a potential for unbelievable corruption...the result was total corruption within the Laotian government.” See Judith Cousins and Alfred W. McCoy, “Living it up in Laos: Congressional Testimony on United States Aid to Laos in the 1950s,” in Adams and McCoy (eds.), *Laos: War and Revolution*, p. 341. On the other hand Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land In Between* (Crow’s Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2002), p. 127-128: “It has become almost a cliché of commentary on Laos to say that these men [the RLG elite] could not suppress their personal interests and rivalry for the national good – but in fact they all held deep and strong nationalist beliefs, and fought for them.” See further *ibid*, p. 115 which notes that General Phoumi Nosavan “was endlessly denounced as an ‘American puppet.’” *Ibid*, p. 165, the Pathet Lao called on King Savang Vatthana to use his influence “to compel the Vientiane side [RLG] to extricate itself from being a US puppet...” On corruption in the RLG see Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 372 which notes it was at least as much to do with the American aid program, noting Ambassador Smith “attributed it to the manner in which American aid had been handled.” See further Norindr, “On Photography, History, and Affect,” p. 93, which draws critical attention to the “historians scorn” for the elite “for failing to selflessly serve their nation.”

the country it governed was hardly a nation at all.³ It was defeated in a war, which it never had any real prospect of winning, yet was nevertheless judged almost entirely on the outcome.⁴ Proof of its failure came in 1975 when the communist-inspired Pathet Lao (“Lao nation,” ປະເທດລາວ) seized power and abolished it along with the more than six-hundred-year-old monarchy, relegating it to “the dustbin of history” along with history’s other losers.⁵ The only lesson that one might derive from the history of the RLG has been what not to do. Although the RLG is viewed as one long string of failures, miseries, and defeats, this perception affords only a limited understanding of what it was or what it accomplished.

There is a profound need for a revisionist history of the RLG.⁶ We already know its faults; further discussion on these well-worn paths yields nothing much that is new. But what we do not

³ Grant Evans has observed it was common among scholars (Arthur Dommen, Bernard Fall, Arthur Schlesinger) to refer to the state of Laos as existing “by diplomatic courtesy.” See Grant Evans “Introduction: What is Lao culture and society?”, in Grant Evans (ed.), *Laos: Culture and Society* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books: 1999), p. 1. See further Maclister Brown and Joseph Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist movement in Laos, 1930-1985* (Stanford: Stanford University Hoover Institute Press, 1986), p. 3-5. See also Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 60 on the country in 1945 writes: “no ‘imagined community bound...even all lowland Lao...” In other works, the Pathet Lao were portrayed as the only nationalists in the country. See Fred Branfman, *Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life under an Air War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), p. 21, 24. Likewise, Wilfred Burchett writes “It was clear to the Laotian people that it was the Pathet Lao who were the authentic patriots defending the national interests, while the rightist forces were puppets of foreign interests.” See Wilfred Burchett, “Pawns and Patriots: the US fight for Laos,” in Adams and McCoy (eds.), *Laos: War and Revolution*, p. 287.

⁴ In the mid-1950s the US Joint Chiefs of Staff as well as prominent members of the Lao elite like Phetsarath all believed the Royal Lao Army could not possibly defeat a foreign invasion on its own. See further chapter four. In the face of war with its powerful neighbors the RLG would lose before the conflict began.

⁵ Bruce Lockhart, “The Fate of Neutralism in Cambodia and Laos” in Malcolm H. Murfett (ed.), *Cold War Southeast Asia* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 2012), p. 211.

⁶ Sheila Fitzpatrick has succinctly described revisionist historiography in the Sovietology field as “iconoclasm about received ideas, skepticism about grand narratives, empiricism, and lots of hard work on primary sources.” See Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Revisionism in Retrospect: A Personal View” *Slavic Review* vol. 67, no. 3 (2008), p. 703. It is a “subversive, iconoclastic genre rather than a monumental one,” *ibid* p. 703. She opposes revisionist histories to what Thomas Kuhn called “normal science,” “whose function is to elaborate, not challenge, dominant paradigms,” *ibid*, p. 704. From her own account, revisionist works led to emotionally charged disputes among scholars, but revisionist historians were attempting to question earlier assessments that they felt were biased. The revisionists gave attention to issues that had been unappreciated to formulate a new account. Fitzpatrick strove to revise Soviet history, which to her “meant rescuing it from Cold War bias,” *ibid*, p. 685. Many critics compared her efforts to Holocaust deniers, which was a “common antirevisionist argument,” *ibid*, p. 687, 693. On revisionist historiography of American involvement in the Second Indochina War (Vietnam War) see Andrew Wiest and Michael J. Doidge, *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (London: Routledge, 2010). This text is an evaluation of Mark Moyar’s revisionist account of the Vietnam War. In this dissertation, I do not claim the US and its allies could have won the Second Indochina War, however, I do call for a reassessment of the role of the RLG in the war. In

yet fully understand is what the RLG achieved, how and why it did it, what its leaders, the elite, thought they were doing, and what was at stake for the newly independent country. This endeavor consumed the enormous energies of some truly talented Lao for a crucial span of thirty years that were pivotal to the future of the country and to the fabric of the modern world. Only when we recover this history will we have a better understanding of the country in the era of decolonization. In the final analysis, I argue the RLG did leave a significant legacy to the modern world that has not been fully appreciated.

Assessments of the RLG's failures have been rehearsed many times since the end of the Second Indochina War, but do not really consider the Lao government in its own right, preferring instead to treat it as a battleground for the fortunes of one empire or another's misadventures. There was, in fact, another struggle being waged in the country, little noticed at the time, that was at root an ideological struggle concerning how to define what it meant to be a modern, democratic, anti-communist, neutral, post-colonial state, of which the Cold War was only the most visible manifestation. No matter how one may regard the RLG, its efforts shaped the modern nation. In a poor society wracked by war and recovering from the deleterious effects of colonialism, the RLG led the first independent efforts to modernize the country, define modern culture, forge a new national identity, and build a Western-liberal parliamentary democracy. The first democracy in Lao history persisted longer and more durably than many of its post-colonial Asian neighbors during the Cold War. By the 1970s, the RLG enjoyed a flourishing, open, civil-society buttressed by a number of civic organizations and social movements, which have not received due consideration. The country enjoyed a vibrant, free press with several major independent

reclaiming agency for the RLG Lao I do not intend to deflect blame for the US for its actions in the country, especially during the Second Indochina War (1959-1975).

newspapers in Vientiane. Important social and cultural changes occurred during the RLG era that have defined the country's modern culture, but which have been overshadowed by war. The RLG was overthrown almost half a century ago, but its history of nascent democracy remains relevant today as democracy continues to be elusive in the country and other places in Asia. Ultimately, it was an anti-communist state which attempted to forge an alternate path to modernity to that taken by the current government, the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

This has not been the traditional view of scholars who study the RLG, although that account under scrutiny contains many fallacies, biases, and misinterpretations. Following the lead of established scholars, I held to the traditional view until a chance encounter with a political refugee from Laos changed everything.⁷ According to the established view of the RLG, a genuine anti-communist nationalism is not possible. Yet the life of my own teacher, Maha Khamphoui Sisavatdy, is a testament to the true values of the RLG. He was a political supporter of General Phoumi Nosavan and married Phoui Sananikone's niece Thongsouvan.⁸ He has led a fascinating

⁷ I spent eight months studying palm leaf manuscripts with Maha Khamphoui Sisavatdy in Portland, Oregon in 2013.

⁸ Born in 1904 in Vientiane, Phoui Sananikone was the leading figure of the powerful Sananikone family, an aristocratic family of Vientiane, and widely regarded as a great orator and a true statesman. He studied at the Lycée Pavie until 1923 when he then served in the colonial administration as Secrétaire des Résidences. From 1942 to 1945 he served as provincial governor of Hua Khong (Nam Tha) and was long afterwards known as Phanya Hua Khong. He was a leading figure of the loyalists in the north. In May 1945 he fled to Burma, China and India with French troops. He returned to serve as Minister of Education, Health and Social Welfare in 1947. He was also elected deputy of Pakse the same year. He rose to be president of the National Assembly (1947-1950). He then served as prime minister in 1950. In this capacity he headed the RLG delegation to the Conference of the Associated States of Indochina at Pau, France in July 1950. Thereafter he was elected deputy from Vientiane in the 1951 elections. For these elections he founded the Independent party. From November 1951 to February 1956 he served as deputy prime minister and held other portfolios including Ministry of Interior, Defense and Foreign Affairs. He also represented the RLG delegation at the Geneva Conference in 1954, where he ensured the Pathet Lao were not recognized as party to the agreements. He was re-elected as deputy from Vientiane in the 1955 elections. In 1957 he served as Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He served as prime minister again from 1958 to 1959. In 1959 he merged his party with Souvanna Phouma's Progressive party to form the Rally for the Lao People Party. From May 1961 to June 1962 he served as the RLG delegate to the Geneva Conference. From 1965 to 1975 he was president of the National Assembly. In 1975 he left the country for France. See Jean Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965: Histoire événementielle de l'indépendance à la guerre américaine* (Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1984), p. 358. See further Joel Halpern, "Lao Project Paper no. 19: Laos Profiles," (Santa Monica: Rand Corp., 1961), p. 15-17.

life. Born into a poor farming family, and an indentured-laborer as a child, he was able to climb up the social ladder through Buddhist education, eventually going to study in Bangkok. His life story is one of unprecedented social mobility enjoying great opportunities in the young, newly-independent state. Later, he even rose to become a representative in the RLG's legislature, the National Assembly. He went into exile in 1975 and has never seen his homeland since. Yet for more than forty years since then he has remained a stalwart nationalist who strongly believes in an anti-communist Laos. How can the traditional account explain this?

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to challenge received notions of the RLG, as well as to recover lost voices from the anti-communist past of Laos. Bringing to light new primary sources such as government reports, newspapers, memoirs, private diaries, pamphlets, propaganda, school texts, and other ephemera this study seeks to present a more robust and sustained analysis of RLG government and society. The RLG amounts to more than a string of failures; instead the RLG deserves a special place in the history of post-colonial Asian democracies, a legacy vitally important to our own times.

Thesis Statement

This study traces the origins, evolution and impact of what I call RLG ideology through the history of the Royal Lao Government from 1945-1975. This ideology emerged most clearly among the elite, evident in the texts they authored. I employ Terry Eagleton's definition of "ideology" as "a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class."⁹ I study the cultural outlook of the elite to understand their beliefs and especially how these influenced their

⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 1.

actions at pivotal moments in the country's history. The elite in leadership roles made important decisions that greatly impacted the country. These decisions were informed by rational considerations, but also by culturally determined perceptions, norms and opinions held by some leading figures among the elite. This ideology consisted of belief in a Lao race that must be modern and foundational values of democracy, and anti-communism. This ideology influenced major events in the country from the creation of the state and resistance to France's return in 1945 to the entrance of the country into what became the Second Indochina War in 1959 (and support for its escalation in the 1960s). The influence of ideology on the course and outcome of the Second Indochina War has been neglected, although it was of major significance.

While the ideological struggle with France was important in the early years, after 1954 the major ideological struggle for the RLG concerned the communist inspired Pathet Lao and its allies. This ideological struggle was only concluded in 1975 with the overthrow of the RLG in a revolution championing neutrality, communism, and a new tolerance for ethnic diversity. I argue the fall of the RLG in 1975 was caused in some measure by the failures of RLG ideology. The revolution of 1975 was not just the rise of a new regime, but the rejection of the *ancien régime* (ຮັຖບານເກົ່າ) and those associated with it, who became "reactionaries" (ປະຕິກາວ). This revision of RLG history aligns with recent works on anti-communism, which stress the importance of ideology to fields as diverse as government, society and culture in Cold War Southeast Asia.¹⁰ As should be clear from this study, a more substantial level of understanding of the RLG will only emerge when scholars begin to account of the major ideas which drove events in the country from

¹⁰ Tuan Hoang, "Ideology in Urban South Vietnam, 1950-1975," (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2013), p. 43-44. He likewise focuses on "ideological culture that was articulated especially in print."

1945 to 1975. I define various terms used in this study, such as democracy, modernity, elite and race, below.

In this study, I assert a place for Laos in the study of Asian democracies, a field which has largely ignored the country while giving more attention to other places, even those with only a semblance of democracy like the People's Republic of China. Democracy in Southeast and East Asia today has at best an uneven legacy as Thailand remains under a military dictatorship, the Philippines' rule of law is threatened and Hong Kong protesters are in the streets, but places like Indonesia and most recently Myanmar restore and revive it. Democracy in the former states of Indochina is still viewed with hostility and suspicion, being too closely tied to the French and Americans. Meanwhile, China's leadership can boast about the country's great success under the wise guidance of the Communist Party with little need for democracy, offering the old formula of economic growth without political reform. Therefore, a reappraisal of Lao democracy is timely and its achievements are worthy of attention in the study of modern democracies more generally.

In this study I define "democracy" as Western liberal parliamentary democracy. This is a representative (or indirect) form of democracy or as one study termed it "electoral democracy."¹¹ As Ho and Bridges define it, representative democracy "implies certain institutions and practices, including accountable government, political competition through at least two political parties, open and peaceful alternation in power, popular representation, majority decision-making, the rule of law, the right to dissent, voting equality, a free press, popular consultation through public opinion polls, and so on."¹² Likewise Neher and Marlay provide their working definition of democracy as follows: "(1) the citizens participate in choosing government leaders, (2) candidates for elective

¹¹ Brian Bridges and Lok Sang Ho, eds., *Public Governance in Asia and the Limits of Electoral Democracy* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2010).

¹² *Ibid*, p. 2. Lok Sang Ho's own work challenges this definition in chapter two.

offices compete against one another, and (3) the government recognizes citizens' civil and political liberties."¹³ They add "political participation by citizens is the essence of democracy."¹⁴ Power comes through the ballot box rather than by force and rights are respected. While scholarly interest in democracy in Asia and Southeast Asia has increased in the last three decades Laos has been largely neglected in this trend, being solely considered on the basis of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Thus to the extent it is discussed it is only in terms of human rights violations and military dominance in lieu of civilian rule.¹⁵ I discuss democracy further below as one of the central themes of the RLG-era. I also study how it developed in the Lao context.

In this study, I examine how Lao elite living in the RLG understood and conceptualized ideas like freedom, democracy, the constitution, the rule of law, popular sovereignty and related matters. Yet these ideas were never static, and were expressed differently over time by different individuals, groups, parties, movements, and organizations. In particular, I propose to study the elite and their projects as the best way to reveal major contemporary debates concerning the central issues of democracy, anti-communism, modernity, neutralism, and post-colonial nationalism. From this analysis, I seek to recover a range of views as they were held at the time, from which will emerge a composite picture of different notions of the key political values and ideals within the RLG. This affords important context to the formation of RLG ideology. Many would struggle with questions concerning these matters throughout the life of the RLG yet there was never one

¹³ Clark D. Neher and Ross Marlay, eds., *Democracy and Development in Southeast Asia: Winds of Change* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), p. 5. They add that "a rigorous definition of an ideal democracy would require free speech, free press, meaningful elections, freedom to organize, majority rule, minority rights and an independent judiciary." But they prefer their working definition to the ideal one.

¹⁴ Ibid. See further, Aurel Croissant, "Majoritarian and Consensus Democracy, Electoral Systems, and Democratic Consolidation in Asia" *Asian Perspective*, 26, 2 (2002).

¹⁵ Laos is only considered as the LPDR in Aurel Croissant and Marco Bünte, eds., *The Crisis of Democratic Governance in Southeast Asia* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011). See especially *ibid*, chapters seven and ten. Laos is not mentioned in Alan T. Wood's *Asian Democracy in World History* (London: Routledge, 2004).

answer to such questions which could satisfy all. The different positions elaborated on these contentious issues drove the major historical processes in the country. The conflict between competing values, like anti-communism and neutralism, animated political life and yielded lively discussions in the RLG, as well as sparking policies, political campaigns and broader social movements or at times spilling over into violence. Indeed, the failure of democracy to effectively subordinate and control all social tensions in the RLG led directly to the outbreak of violence and war – yet few have observed this problem was not particular to the RLG, but is in fact universal in democracies the world over.

Thematic Approach

This study's contribution rests on its thematic approach, which serves to unpack and investigate the thesis. The thematic approach facilitates the study of RLG ideology by bringing into focus core beliefs, such as democracy, anti-communism and post-colonial nationalism, but it also takes into consideration opposing ideas that were no less important, such as neutralism. I was moved to take this approach because of what I perceived as the lack of substantive engagement with the deeper issues which appeared during the RLG era. This approach brought to my attention the interplay between the different forces in society. It also forced me to search for answers to various questions in the primary sources. The result has been a revisionist history of the RLG. Each theme defined major aspects of RLG culture, society, and government. It also influenced how I addressed different periods.

This dissertation does not purport to be a comprehensive study of the RLG, but instead only attempts a limited thematic study to bring to light RLG ideology more sharply into focus. By focusing on short, pivotal moments in RLG history I attempt to revise key understandings, but at

the same time I leave many events unaddressed. Historians struggle with the tantalizing urge to completeness, to fashion a comprehensive account, that is the bugbear of every historian. But one is reminded of what Robert Berkhofer called the “paradox of plentitude.”¹⁶ By this Berkhofer referred to the limited sources which survive from any historical period, which are only ever a tiny portion of the total evidence which existed at the time. Therefore, any historical study can only ever be partial.¹⁷ Moreover it will be subjective, capricious to a degree, and indelibly marked by the individual historian. The realization that truth is partial and contingent dictates that history must be in service to the present.¹⁸ History, being part of the humanities, does not merely study the object like the sciences, but its object of study, i.e. humanity, is one that speaks back. History is, therefore, an open-ended, on-going discussion rather than the production of monuments for the ages.¹⁹ It can never be definitive. Therefore, one cannot rely on an appeal to truth for authority but must rely merely on one’s persuasiveness. I am persuaded by the research of this dissertation but others would undoubtedly see it differently; this account is a synthesis of new evidence and my analysis, but the overall picture of the period will inevitably change as new evidence comes to light, and new syntheses are made by other investigators. This was the case during the period under study and will remain so long after this dissertation is outdated. If one takes history to be a discussion then Lao history undoubtedly is in need of more voices, and would benefit immensely

¹⁶ Robert Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹⁷ The process of preserving documents (e.g. an archive) is itself selective, undertaken according to the political agenda of the preservation entity.

¹⁸ History shows this more than any other academic discipline.

¹⁹ Of course, history is an art and science, even though it cannot be purely objective. Like the sciences, history must conform to sound logic; even though history can never be repeated in an experiment in the lab, it nevertheless shares modes of thinking in general with the sciences. Historians simply cannot make up their evidence, like inventing a conversation among historical parties, even if one thinks they can imagine it accurately.

from opening up the discussion to professionals and amateurs alike; lack of such discussion has allowed certain myths to survive for far too long.

To write a cohesive narrative, I emplotted each period according to a particular theme.²⁰ Part one of the dissertation consists of what I call the semi-colonial years from 1945-1954 and it is primarily concerned with democracy and its effects on society. I recognize the Issara founding of the RLG on October 12, 1945 rather than others who point to later dates (May 11, 1947 or July 19, 1949). I use the term “semi-colonial” to denote the role of the French in the country after 1945, a period marked by France’s steady devolving of power to the Lao, especially through the 1947 constitution and the National Assembly. Yet the French retained control of key powers in the country, similar to semi-colonial conditions elsewhere in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. China, Thailand).²¹ Part two focuses on anti-communism during the neo-colonial years, from 1954-1962. Similarly, I use the term “neo-colonial” to denote the role of the United States in the country after 1954, and especially to 1962, a period marked by the US’s neo-colonial intervention during the Dwight D. Eisenhower Administration. The RLG was perceived by its critics as a tool of “neo-colonialism” from this period, including the Pathet Lao, who claimed to resist “neo-imperialism” (ລັດທິລ່າວເມືອງຂຶ້ນແບບໃໝ່).²² US power over the RLG had much to do with its massive aid program, but it was not above intervening more directly by other means. The French also continued to intervene in RLG affairs.²³ These periods are important to account

²⁰ See further Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). Based on White’s analytical framework this dissertation has been emplotted as a tragedy.

²¹ Marxist intellectuals in Thailand and Indonesia viewed their early post-colonial societies as “semi-colonial.”

²² Anna Louise Strong, *Cash and Violence in Laos and Viet Nam* (New York: Mainstream Publishers, 1962), p. 9-11. Phoumi Vongvichit ປະເທດລາວແລະການຕໍ່ສູ້ມີໄຊຂອງປະຊາຊົນລາວຕໍ່ລັດທິລ່າວເມືອງຂຶ້ນແບບໃໝ່ຂອງອາເມລິກາ [“The Lao country and the victorious struggle of the Lao people to resist American neo-imperialism”] (n.p., Lao Hak Sat Publishing, 1968).

²³ In fact, much of the chaos of the period 1958-1962 was due to an intense rivalry between the US and France that played out in the country.

for the difficult circumstances in which the RLG operated. Part three, centers on neutralism during the neutralist years, 1962-1975. I use the term “neutralist years” to denote the role of neutralists in the country, and especially Souvanna Phouma, who was the indispensable leader in the period.²⁴ As Prime Minister he was the only one who could form a coalition government, which included all sides. I prefer the term “neutralist” rather than “neutral” for this period, because while neutrality was the ultimate goal sought in these years, it remained unattainable until 1975. Nationalism and modernity are themes which run throughout the study. Furthermore, all themes overlap one-another at various points in the discussion.

More than anything else, the RLG represents democratic era in Lao history (1945-1975). It was the only time when the country enjoyed a functioning democracy in most years, with largely free and fair elections, a multiparty political system, strong opposition parties that wielded power at pivotal moments, contending policies, and competing ideals, principles, and values.²⁵ The fundamental political revolution of the RLG was the introduction of democracy to Laos. Related

²⁴ See one interesting biography: Marithone Clotté-Sygnavong, *Souvanna Phouma (1901-1984) La passion de la paix* (Villabé: M. Clotté-Sygnavong, 1998). Born in Luang Prabang in 1901 (d. 1984), Souvanna Phouma was a member of the Front Palace royal line of the monarchy. He was at the center of events throughout the RLG period, being the brother of Phetsarath and the half-brother of Souphanouvong. Born into the traditional elite, Souvanna received a top French education. For secondary education, he attended the Lycée Albert-Sarraut in Hanoi. Thereafter he went to Grenoble, France to study at the École Nationale des Travaux Publics where he received a degree in civil engineering. He returned to the country in 1931 where he worked for the colonial public works department at Vientiane. He was involved in the restoration of Vat Pho Kaeo in Vientiane, which was widely acclaimed. In late 1945 he joined the Issara government where he held the Public Works portfolio. In exile in Thailand, he worked at a Thai electrical company. On his return to the country in late 1949 he formed a new political party, the Progressive Party, and served as Prime Minister several times during the 1950s (1951-1954, 1956-1958). He headed the government formed by the Kongle coup. Subsequently he founded the Neutralist Party in 1961. After 1962, he remained the Prime Minister until 1975. When not in this role, he served briefly as RLG Ambassador to France (1958-1959). After 1975 he was made an adviser to the Lao People's Democratic Republic. See Jean Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965: Histoire événementielle de l'indépendance à la guerre américaine* (Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1984), p. 369-370. See further Tou Chu Dou Lynhiavu, “No Protection And No Peace: Canada and the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Laos, 1954-1975,” (Ph.D. diss., Carleton University, 2003), p. 337-338.

²⁵ One must exclude the later LPDR government, which although claiming to constitute a form of democracy (Marxist Leninist democratic centralism) nonetheless denies its citizens any individual rights, bans any political parties (besides the Lao People's Revolutionary Party), denies the rule of law and has never permitted free and fair elections.

to this, the RLG enjoyed an open civil society and civic groups mushroomed in the Kingdom. Its constitution was highly venerated. Its citizens had political and civil liberties fundamental to any Western liberal parliamentary democracy, including free speech, a free press, freedom of assembly, and the rule of law. These rights were curbed from time to time due to war yet the most interesting aspect is that political and civil rights were largely created and upheld by the Lao themselves. The history of the RLG confirms that the democratic political system was not a foreign ideology imposed on the Lao. Democracy was never easy and, at times, arguably made the RLG vulnerable. But it was what the elite and the people of the RLG believed in, the signal value of the first modern, independent post-colonial state in the history of the country.

The origins of democracy lie in the semi-colonial years (1945-1954), a period marked by the emergence of the Issara government, French reconquest and France's subsequent withdraw from the country. At the time, democracy itself was seen as a fundamental way to modernize the country. Moreover, the Royal Lao Government witnessed the rise of a new political language necessary to the arrival of democracy. Along with this came the arrival of the nation, politically speaking, and a transition from a monarchy to a new era of popular sovereignty. Nonetheless, throughout the history of the RLG there were skeptics of the new democracy among the elite, who saw the arrival of democracy as a major social disruption that was poorly understood by the average person and was furthermore culturally alien and, in some respects, ill-suited to society. Democracy and democratic values were further twisted by war. But by then the sheer number of debates over highly controversial political issues was a constant feature of the modern social fabric, facilitated by modern media (e.g. newspapers, books, pamphlets, leaflets, radio). Thus, democracy brought with it major social and cultural changes. Even though it was opposed at times by France and the United States, the Lao elite understood its universal value, even those who were not

Western educated. Above all else, this study charts the rise and fall of the only democratic government in Lao history. Certainly, there were interruptions to the democratic order, especially in the early 1960s, but they were the exception rather than the rule.

Lao democracy was challenged by war, and at times suspended in a state of emergency, but it was always restored. The Lao elite turned to it in their ideological struggles with the Pathet Lao. Its fundamental value never seriously questioned until 1975. In fact, the elite ensured democracy was taught in RLG schools, transmitting it to the next generation. Wartime democracies are notoriously difficult to maintain: freedom, liberty, and political rights face unprecedented limitations, curbs, and challenges as threats to security and the basic survival of the state take precedence. Yet Lao democracy, as troubled as it was, was remarkably successful in comparison to its peers: it resisted dictatorship and maintained the constitutional order better than South Vietnam, South Korea, Taiwan, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, or the Philippines.²⁶ The Royal Lao Government lasted longer as a functioning democracy than any of these places. Consequently, its very success as a post-colonial democracy during the Cold War needs to be explained.

The war against communism (1959-1975) was itself fought to defend democracy, to uphold the values of freedom and liberty, and to save the democracy from being overthrown by a communist insurgency. The elite repeatedly warned that the communist Pathet Lao were seeking to wipe out democracy. Therefore, democracy was what the war was fought for – what made it a Lao war. Yet in the final years, the fact that the RLG had a democracy, founded on a free and open civil society, left it vulnerable to its enemies, allowing Pathet Lao agitators to operate freely,

²⁶ This point will be addressed at length in the conclusion.

working to bring about the downfall of the government. The only Lao democracy in history did not destroy itself, but was in fact overthrown by a violent insurgency supported by hostile foreign powers.

No less important to the RLG was anti-communism, which originated locally and was not a foreign imposition. The origins of Lao anti-communism can be traced back to the origins of the Cold War itself, even before the fall of Republican China or the outbreak of the Korean War. Contrary to some observers, Lao anti-communists were not merely looking to drum up foreign aid or support.²⁷ The most striking finding is that Lao anti-communism predates major US activity in the country, emerging even before Washington officially recognized the country and opened formal diplomatic relations. Therefore, the Lao elite called for their country to be an anti-communist bastion in the region many years before the US ever did. Moreover, the Lao elite formed the basic tenets of Lao anti-communism before the US ever gave any aid to the RLG. There are even signs anti-communism enjoyed more popular support than has been previously acknowledged. The RLG elite thereby charted their own course through the Cold War far more than has been appreciated.

The earliest forms of Lao anti-communism were informed by French thought, yet the US became an important source later. It reached its apogee in the neo-colonial years (1954-1962) when the US Dwight D. Eisenhower administration attempted a disastrous intervention to install a pliant dictator, an effort that ultimately failed. Even though Lao anti-communism was enjoying popular

²⁷ For but one example of this charge, see Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land In Between* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2002), p. 100. Evans contextualizes his discussion of Katay Sasorith's writings on anti-communism by noting that "Lao actively courted American involvement." He added "having gained independence from the French, the depressing reality had begun to dawn on many that Laos was unable to sustain that independence economically." Thus he claimed the Lao elite became anti-communists only after 1954 as a superficial aid-seeking activity. This will be addressed fully in chapter three.

support and it had broad agreement among RLG leaders some of the elite were not able to convince the US that they were genuine anti-communists. On the other hand, in this period some among the elite who advocated for democracy were firmly anti-communist while still being a neutralist, or even opposing capitalism or not wanting to closely follow the US in its global Cold War.

Thus, RLG elite anti-communist views played a key role in the fight against communism as it took shape in the country. They confidently asserted that Lao people were naturally “immune” to the communist “virus” by virtue of their traditions, culture, society, and, above all, their observance of Buddhism. The Lao anti-communist movement was therefore a cultural movement whatever else one may say of it. The elite were able to comfortably reject communism as atheism, while still discussing its perceived similarities to Buddhism. They later enlisted prominent members of the sangha to denounce the dangers of communism. Finally, the elite rejected communism because they feared it would unleash destructive forces in society that would lay waste to the country and ultimately overthrow the social hierarchy, casting out the elite themselves. Yet some of the elite in the earliest years curiously claimed that the country did not have any social classes and therefore no class warfare could arise.

Elite conceptions of anti-communism were not static. In later articulations of Lao anti-communism, the Lao race was facing an existential threat from the Red Sino-Vietnamese tide. As new forms of anti-communism arose old ones were discredited which informed much of the dissention among the RLG elite in the neo-colonial years. Yet in the final years, anti-communism noticeably weakened at the same time as war-weariness rose. Among the elite one observes criticisms of the Cold War, the alliance with the US and the Second Indochina War. Anti-communism itself was by then labelled as “old thinking.” Finally, the war against communism had ruined the country, having laid it waste amid one of the most destructive bombing campaigns in

history. War had in the end caused the very destruction which the elite feared would come to pass if the communists ever gained power. The cure had proved worse than the disease. Even Western educated Lao would join the revolution, cheering the Pathet Lao as they marched into Vientiane in August 1975, in what was a profoundly anti-American revolution that swept away the RLG, which in its last days was perceived as nothing more than a US puppet.

Neutralism and anti-communism were the twin engines that drove major political events in the RLG. Existing scholarship has given most attention to neutralism leading up to the 1962 Geneva Accords that re-established the neutral status of Laos. Neutralism is thus portrayed as a tragic story of missed opportunity symbolized by the collapse of the first coalition government (1957-1958) between the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962. Yet, in fact, neutralism rose to prominence, uncontested among the RLG leaders only after 1962, which is explored in part three, the neutralist years (1962-1975). I present an examination of leading neutralists in their prosecution of the Second Indochina War in Laos (1959-1973). The war may have been started by the anti-communists, but it was fought under the leadership of the Neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. Yet how could Souvanna, the champion of neutrality in the 1950s, possibly lead the country to war? He and the RLG were fighting to defend the independence and sovereignty of the country against a massive foreign invasion. They fought to preserve the democracy which they had built since 1945. The government perceived itself as a neutral power and a victim of invasion, forced to take up arms reluctantly in self-defense. As a result, a militant form of official, government neutralism emerged among the elite during the war years. There was a strong willingness among RLG leaders to stop the invasion, which led them to become deeply involved in the US bombing campaign.

Yet in the last years of the RLG, amid profound war-weariness, neutralism finally triumphed over anti-communism in the search for peace. Scholars who have only considered its role between 1954 and 1962 have missed the enormously important role that neutralism played in the final years of the RLG.²⁸ By 1973, there was a profound desire for peace after the most violent and destructive war in the country's history. There was renewed interest in neutralism, especially as the US began its retreat from the former states of Indochina. Yet there was also rising anti-Americanism amid anger over the war and uncertainty as the aid-dependent economy began to collapse. After the war, neutralism was the only realistic option, even among the RLG elite. Amid these developments a new political party, the Movement for the New Way Party emerged from a prominent civil society organization (*Mittasone*) to play a leading role in the fall of the RLG.

For the purposes of this study I define modernity following Anthony Giddens: "...a shorthand term for modernity... it is associated with (1) a certain set of attitudes toward the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation, by human intervention; (2) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; (3) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy. Largely as a result of these characteristics, modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society – more technically a complex of institutions – which, unlike any preceding culture, lives in the future, rather than the past."²⁹ The RLG fulfilled most of Giddens's criteria, except for the second point, but the elite were unmistakably future-oriented and some returning from study abroad were essentially technocrats who looked to solve society's problems by government intervention. Moreover, the country underwent major changes associated with modernity including

²⁸ For standard accounts see Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos* and Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos*. See further Askew et. al, *Vientiane*.

²⁹ Anthony Giddens and Christopher Pierson, *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 94.

population movement from rural to urban settings, upward social mobility and increasing literacy and education, albeit unevenly and shaped by war. Shmuel Eisenstadt has described modernity as a plural condition noting “modernity is not westernization, and its key processes and dynamics can be found in all societies.”³⁰ The RLG era then represented within a few short decades a period of rapid modernization experiencing economic, social, cultural and political processes that took centuries to develop in the West.

Modernity was a pivotal issue on which the very survival of the young state depended. It was closely linked to what the war was about, and central to the RLG’s appeals for popular support. Yet in broad terms, modernity impacted the first post-colonial state in a multitude of ways which continue to influence the present, revolution notwithstanding. Elite efforts were ramped up as the RLG entered the most intense period of modernization the country had ever witnessed. Thus, the RLG laid the foundations for the modern economy. Yet the drive to modernize was never solely concerned with material aspects, but also engendered broader social and cultural changes. In this effort, new questions were raised about what to preserve and what to discard. There was a fundamental conflict in the RLG years between tradition and modernity, which is observable in diverse domains.

In the efforts to modernize the country there was a greater engagement with the West in what was at times a collaborative spirit. Nonetheless, scholars have focused on the role of foreigners, but there was in fact a Lao quest for modernity that appeared especially among the elite throughout the RLG. Study of this quest reveals elite thinking about modernity, their visions for the future of the country, and their efforts to satisfy one of the major enduring aspirations of the

³⁰ See Gerard Delanty “Modernity” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* George Ritzer (ed.) (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 3070. See further Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities: Vol. 1*, (London: Brill, 2003).

people since the colonial era. At the root of this quest was a strongly held desire to never stop improving in each new iteration as life became permanently oriented toward the future-horizon. To that end, the RLG used new technologies to dominate the environment as never before and to extend the reach of the state to bind people in an unprecedented way. This introduced new questions about the proper use of modern technologies that permitted new powers over nature and people.

The RLG quest for modernity was key to winning popular support for the young state. All sides in every period of the RLG agreed on the need for modernization, even the communists, yet none could agree on how to go about it.³¹ This dilemma raised serious questions: from whom should one accept aid and under what conditions? Should the new modernity be modeled after Western capitalist countries like France or the US? Or should it be modeled after socialist economies of the Soviet Union, China, or North Vietnam? The Second Indochina War was also fought in Laos over which model of modernity would prevail. Yet even before this conflict the same question was already at stake as early as the 1940s. Those receiving aid to power the transformation of the economy and society often appealed to the people to accept economic growth while holding off greater political reforms. Modernization thus was one of the key battlefields between the RLG and its enemies.

The quest for modernity failed at various times over the course of the RLG, which finally led to the downfall of the government. Modernization brought with it not just growth of the economy but also rising income-inequality, skyrocketing inflation, official corruption, and the introduction of new Western capitalist values, which were socially disruptive. Over-reliance on

³¹ Vattana Pholsena “Highlanders on the Ho Chi Minh Trail” *Critical Asian Studies* (2008) vol. 40, no. 3, p. 465 identifies educational opportunities as a key reason some joined the Pathet Lao movement, illustrating the allure modernity had on both sides at the time.

foreign aid infringed sovereignty and allowed foreign powers to meddle in the country. Before 1954, it was feared the French would use their influence over modernization to serve their own interests, continuing the economic exploitations of the colonial era. Later, the US attempted to introduce the seeds of capitalism to secure the country in the “free world” camp, regardless of the social consequences. Moreover, the US used aid in a variety of ways to control the RLG, even going so far as to become a wedge between government and people. While France provided so little aid that the country starved, the US provided so much aid the country choked. Finally, the collapse of the aid-dependent economy in the 1970s was a major impetus for revolution.

By far the most potent social, cultural and political force in the RLG era was nationalism. It had been developing since the 1930s, first in an elitist form and then, during World War II, expanding rapidly in the first popular mass movements in the country, including the Vichy French-inspired *Lao Nyai* campaign (1941-1945) and irregular guerrilla movements like *Seri Lao* and *Lao Pen Lao*. Yet the crucial role of nationalism has not always been recognized by scholars. It became a cliché to observe of the RLG that there was no nationalism, no unity, no ethnic consciousness (only a collection of “tribes”) – it was not even a real country, but only a state that existed as a matter of diplomatic courtesy.³² RLG leaders were widely condemned for lacking nationalist spirit and for their perceived lack of any effort to build a durable nationalism to rally the people. This assessment is the single greatest myth of the RLG, based on French and American biases, a

³² For the country as a mere collection of tribes see Maclister Brown and Joseph Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist movement in Laos, 1930-1985* (Stanford: Stanford University Hoover Institute Press, 1986), p. 3-5. Brown and Zasloff refer to the country as “the ill-defined Lao nation,” p. 3. Its people were scattered across an imposing environment that “discouraged notions of larger national unity” *ibid.*, p. 4. Its ethnic diversity “further dilute[s] the concept of Lao nationhood,” *ibid.* Finally they conclude: “the region covered by contemporary Laos has provided an isolated haven for ethnic groups pushed into the area, which have clung to tribal and feudalistic forms of political organization...,” *ibid.*, p. 5. They then turn to what they call the “anomalies” of the country. On the country as a matter of “diplomatic courtesy” see further Grant Evans, “Introduction: What is Lao culture and society?”, p. 1. Evans himself commented that such observations were clichés. See his *A Short History of Laos*, p. 127-128.

dogma repeated without ever being sufficiently investigated. On the contrary, I argue that the RLG did not suffer from a lack of nationalism, but if anything, suffered from an overabundance of nationalism to the point that violent dissident groups formed ready to challenge the central government and calling for national liberation to remove foreign influence at several times in RLG history. There were also patriotic groups that formed within the RLG itself who pledged to “rescue the nation” (ກູ້ຊາດ), but who nonetheless remained loyal to the state. Finally, this tendency culminated in the single most enduring cultural act of the RLG elite, the creation of an exclusionary, hyper-nationalist “Lao race” (ຊາດລາວ), which had major implications for the fate of the RLG. Being a cultural matter, it was not determined primarily by foreign powers, but was entirely in the hands of the elite themselves.

Race is a social construct, recognized since the end of World War II as having no scientific validity.³³ In pre-colonial Laos, ethnicity was relatively plastic but after half a century of French colonial rule, itself predicated on a strict racial hierarchy, the Lao elite especially no longer perceive ethnicity as changeable.³⁴ The French had manipulated different racial groups to incite hostility among them to maintain their rule.³⁵ Among the Lao great animosity formed toward the Vietnamese whom seemed to be favored by the French, but minorities also felt discriminated

³³ For a general introduction see George Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2002). See also Tzvetan Todorov, “Race and racism” in Les Back and John Solomos (eds.) *Theories of race and racism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), which provides a useful discussion of racialists as distinct from racists. Of course, French notions of race were distinct from English and American notions. In the French context, different races were never seen as chattel and had some legal rights. Moreover, some Lao did become French citizens during the colonial era. For the influence of race in Vietnam see Patricia Pelley, ““Barbarians” and “Younger Brothers”: The Remaking of Race in Postcolonial Vietnam” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1998). For a study on race in China see Frank Dikotter, *The discourse of race in modern China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1992). For Thailand, see Scott Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the creation of a Thai identity* (Singapore: National University of Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).

³⁴ See especially Vatthana Pholsena’s discussion of the Kha “race” in her *Post-War Laos: The Politics of Culture, History and Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

³⁵ Alfred W. McCoy “French Colonialism in Laos, 1893-1945” in (eds.) Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 80.

against by the Lao.³⁶ It is no coincidence that just as nationalism and mass politics in general became a major force in the country that the French Vichy regime was in power. The Vichy imparted the particular idea that the Lao race was in decline, threatened with extinction, and needed to be saved.³⁷ French notions of race cast a long shadow over the RLG. The small Lao elite of the time were more Westernized than any other Lao, and thus were more exposed to French ideas of race, especially in French schools and by working in the colonial administration. In their writings, Lao elite used a Lao word with some ambiguity (ຊາວ) but in their French and English writings they always used the word “race.” This study investigates the implications of the racist mindset of the elite for RLG history.

The most important act of the elite was the creation of an exclusionary hyper-nationalist idea of a Lao race. The elite saw the dire need to unite the country in the face of unprecedented challenges, both internal and external. Yet in doing so they excluded minorities in one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Southeast Asia. In general, those who concerned themselves with foreign threats were more likely to invoke the notion of an eternal true Lao race, in an effort to close ranks against the foreigners. The elite at times even went so far as to deny any minorities

³⁶ For one account of a minority – a Lao Phuan – who experienced discrimination at the hands of the Lao during the colonial era see Grant Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010), p. 260, which describes Prince Saykham’s experiences in school. Saykham wrote on his brother’s experiences in school in Vientiane: “He could no longer take the mockeries and insults of the pupils and the professors with regard to Phuan... Weren’t we a people of total duplicity? “False like a Phuan” –such was the saying that was current there “Head turned towards Annam, buttocks towards Siam.” We were wind vanes that followed the direction of the wind.” Saykham recalled animosity between his Phuan people, Lao of Vientiane and the Vietnamese. Ibid, p. 261, as such while in Vientiane Saykham “hardly left the Phuan milieu” living in a kind of informal, *de facto* segregation. Phuan there attempted to blend in with the Lao, and when Saykham became sick he recalled “there was obviously no question of putting me in the hands of a Vientiane doctor!”

³⁷ This idea had been present earlier in the colonial years, but became very important during World War II. See Soren Ivarsson, “Toward a new Laos: *Lao Nhay* and the campaign for a national “reawakening” in Laos, 1941-1945” in Grant Evans (ed.), *Laos: Culture and Society* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books: 1999). See also Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015), p. 52-83. On the Vichy in Indochina see Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Petain’s National revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe and Indochina, 1940-1944* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

existed in the country, claiming that everyone spoke the same language and had the same culture. The RLG elite thereby deliberately sought to assimilate the minorities to the dominant Lao culture.³⁸ This was one of the most serious errors of the RLG elite, itself a result of an overabundance of nationalist pride; yet it is one with which many modern countries have struggled. While some minorities responded positively to RLG assimilation, this exclusionary nationalism became dangerous as the Pathet Lao began to counter it by appealing for ethnic equality. Yet the greatest error of the elite came when they launched headlong into the Second Indochina War influenced by their own notions of a struggle for survival of the Lao race against a Sino-Viet invasion. Those among the RLG elite who believed in a true race were determined to save the race from extinction, whether at the hands of colonialists or communists.

But there was at times a more inclusive cosmopolitan view of nationalism that emerged from some quarters of the elite to promote a multi-ethnic nationalism more suitable to the realities of the country. Yet it was never as powerful or appealing among the RLG elite until the final years of the RLG era when a more cosmopolitan outlook emerged that was concerned with tolerance of ethnic and cultural differences. A variety of new hybrid identities arose to mediate with the West. These were fraught with difficulty, facing cultural alienation, caught between two cultures that nonetheless represented different ways of being Lao that were unique to the period. On the other hand, there were many within the RLG, who, while not supporting the Pathet Lao, nevertheless

³⁸ In this regard, the Lao elite's use of race may not have always met the definition used by Fredrickson. While he noted that how race was defined changed over time, Fredrickson felt that the modern phenomenon only existed when ethnic differences became static or there were those who sought to establish "a permanent group hierarchy" that was unchanging; see his *Racism*, p. 5-6. He added if one could assimilate to the dominant ethnic group then it shouldn't be considered racist, *ibid*, p. 7. However, his study primarily concerned the history of race in the West. Yet the reality of RLG society could be ambiguous at times. The government viewed the population as three distinct races, which it recorded in its demographic statistics, yet in other contexts the RLG conflated nationality with race or otherwise promoted assimilation policies. This may have involved the government pursuing a course of inclusivity of minorities, whom would nonetheless be exploited to a degree as their own cultural identity was suppressed, see *ibid*, p. 9-10. There was a complicated relationship between assimilation and discrimination in the RLG.

questioned the role of the West in the country. On all sides, there were those who believed they were patriots and thought they were doing what was right for the country.

The RLG elite continued to spend scarce resources on cultural nationalist projects even in the depths of war as the government fought for its very existence. The RLG elite understood that the survival of the young state depended on their ability to forge a new nationalism that was modern, democratic, anti-communist, and, at times, neutralist. Their enemy, the Pathet Lao had called for a national liberation – an appeal that proved popular even after 1954. Thus, the RLG elite had to respond to form their own brand of nationalism to win popular support. In service to the RLG cause, the elite gained control over the organs of the state for the first time. They were thereby able to popularize their views to the masses using the tools of modern media. They celebrated the nation in a series of public holidays and monuments. They renamed the streets of Vientiane. They sought to standardize culture to modernize, define, and disseminate a true version of Lao-ness. Yet the elite faced vexing questions concerning to what degree traditions and culture should change and risked facing cultural-loss. Authoritative cultural works were created to defend the Lao language, the independence of which was viewed as intrinsically linked to that of the nation. The elite produced a number of modern historical works that served to promote nationalism to the masses. Nationalism was at times variously swept up in currents of anti-French, anti-American, anti-Chinese, anti-Vietnamese, and a broader anti-communist feeling, leading to the entanglement of cultural and political movements. Thus, the RLG faced issues that were unique to the era of post-colonial independence.

The RLG was shaped by a number of conflicts in society, at root of which was often a generational conflict between the young and old. Elders could at times be too domineering with the youth, who chafed at their control. In every decade from the late 1940s, to the late 1950s to the

early 1970s, this led to what amounted to a youth revolt against their elders. “Youth” was at times variously an insult implying all the negative connotations of inexperience, ignorance, and ingratitude. Whereas at other times, certain movements deliberately portrayed themselves as “young” to claim that they were the future of the country while stigmatizing their opponents as “old.” In some cases, younger people took advantage of seniors’ conflict with the powers-that-be to advance their own interests. As a result, the RLG took various measures to control youth, not just in the schools but in youth groups and other avenues of society as well, especially the military. In the schools, the RLG elite sought to transmit the key values they viewed as central to the RLG, but this did not always work. Educated youth returned from study abroad with great ambition, but often faced frustration when forced to respect the hierarchy. The RLG’s rise and fall to an uncanny degree paralleled the struggles between youth and elders in society.³⁹

Historiography on the Royal Lao Government

The RLG is a highly complex historical subject that has received too little sustained scholarly attention. The principal studies in English were written before the conclusion of the Vietnam War and mainly concerned events in the country leading up to the second Geneva conference of 1962.⁴⁰ The main focus was on the neutralist champion Souvanna Phouma and his

³⁹ Some RLG writers themselves observed the role of the clash of generations in shaping the course of events. See Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos* (New York: Praeger, 1961), p. 20, where he notes: “It was now the turn of a new generation, which, more conscious of the evolution of the world around it, was also in a better position to draw Laos out of its age-old apathy and into the modern world.” He was of course referring to the CDIN, of which he was a leading member.

⁴⁰ See for example Martin Stuart-Fox, *Buddhist Kingdom, Marxist State: The Making of Modern Laos* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1996), p. 247 where he recommended for further reading in English on the RLG Hugh Toye’s *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground* (1968), Alfred W. McCoy and Nina Adam’s *Laos: War and Revolution* (1970) and Arthur Dommen’s *Conflict in Laos* (1971). He also recommended the works of Jean Deuve in French. Grant Evans recommends Toye and Dommen (“still excellent”) as well as Charles Stevenson’s (“early but excellent”) *the End of Nowhere*. He also recommended the more recent work by Timothy Castle. *Ibid*, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 242-243.

clash with the hardline Eisenhower administration. Yet US documents remained classified at the time leaving important questions unanswered, masked by a veil of official secrecy. Lao sources were little used. Foreign influences were exaggerated. Some works were written by journalists and almost none were written by anyone claiming to be a specialist on the Lao. Nevertheless, these works formed the broad outlines which all subsequent studies have largely followed, even by well-regarded scholars, without questioning of some key issues – in part due to the limited attention the RLG has attracted as a subject of study. More than anything else, these studies established the interpretation of the RLG as consisting of little more than a conflict among three factions (left, right, neutral) conveniently represented by three princes (Souphanouvong, Boun Oum, Souvanna Phouma); which is, in fact, a highly reductive view of the situation. In general, RLG historiography, when not written simply from the perspective of the French or the US, has been biased in favor of those who supported France's return after World War II (whom I call the loyalists) or the Pathet Lao, while neglecting the Issara independence movement and the CDIN and the so-called "rightwing" more generally.

The notable exceptions to these early works were those of Martin Stuart-Fox and Arthur Dommen who both continued to revise and produce new works for decades afterward. The standard work on modern Lao history for many years has been Martin Stuart-Fox's *A History of Laos*. Stuart-Fox has made enormous contributions to the study of Lao history. That being said, there are a number of points on which I disagree, which I indicate where appropriate. Arthur Dommen continued to work on RLG history for many years.⁴¹ Dommen sought to write a sympathetic account of the RLG, yet both he and Stuart-Fox relied almost exclusively on Western

⁴¹ See especially his massive study *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

sources.⁴² Dommen was nonetheless able to write engagingly on domestic RLG politics from US sources. Moreover, he offered important criticism of US involvement in the RLG.

In previous studies, key political movements that played a vital role in the RLG were portrayed in a biased and unfavorable manner. The Issara independence movement that created the RLG in 1945 was viewed as little more than a band of “rebels” for opposing France’s reconquest of the country after World War II, while their legitimate demands for democracy were simultaneously deemed a failure and of no lasting consequence, assigned little significance in historical studies. The Committee for Defense of National Interests (CDIN) that led the anti-communist movement in later years was similarly dismissed as “Young Turks” or “improvident children” in comments that strongly echoed colonialism.⁴³ Yet the CDIN were simultaneously derided as neo-colonial tools, as a US puppet, denied any popular support, even as the country was being invaded by North Vietnam.⁴⁴ Similarly misunderstood has been the neutralists persecution of the war from 1964 to 1973, a desperate fight for survival against a far more powerful foe in a last bid to save the RLG. For Souvanna Phouma’s efforts to defend the country against invasion, he was branded “as a savage and voluntary Asian rightwinger.”⁴⁵ Noam Chomsky summarized well the low opinion of the RLG in his discussion of its enemy the Pathet Lao:

⁴² For a criticism of Martin Stuart-Fox’s use of Western sources on the RLG see Norindr, “On Photography, History and Affect,” p. 101.

⁴³ Bernard Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960-1961* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 179.

⁴⁴ Bernard Fall’s dismissal of the RLG’s earliest claims that the country was being invaded by North Vietnam was particularly misguided, yet he remains a key source for many scholars. See his *Anatomy of a Crisis*. Likewise, Jean Deuve also questioned RLG claims. See his, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 152. Beginning on December 14, 1958, the North Vietnamese were in fact in the early stages of building what would become the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which began as a short route to circumvent the DMZ at the 17th parallel via Xepon. On the origins of the Ho Chi Minh Trail see Ang Cheng Guan, “The Huong Lap and Phu Loi incidents, and the decision to resume armed struggle in south Vietnam” *South East Asia Research* vol. 4, no. 1 (1996). Yet as early as 1950 there was already a “precursor” to this trail, an “Indochinese trail” that extended “from the Sino-Vietnamese frontier to western central Vietnam by way of central and southern Laos and north-eastern Cambodia.” See Christopher Goscha, “Vietnam and the world outside: The case of Vietnamese communist advisers in Laos (1948-62) *South East Asia Research*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2004), p. 150.

⁴⁵ Dowd, “The CIA’s Laotian Colony,” p. 377.

The target of the American attack in northern Laos is the Pathet Lao which, as everyone admits, is the only political organization in Laos with a popular base, comprising the only elements in Laotian society that have any reasonable plans, that offer any realistic hope for social and economic development within the framework of genuine Laotian nationalism.⁴⁶

Chomsky did not mention the Pathet Lao's violent means nor the decisive support of North Vietnam. At the time, he could not be aware of what the Pathet Lao would actually do after seizing power. Yet he, like many others, fundamentally misunderstood the RLG.

One cannot ignore every major political movement in the RLG, besides communism, and expect to have a real understanding of it completely shorn of its leading political, social, and cultural forces. By primarily studying the RLG in terms of the war, from the perspective of international relations and as an adjunct of US foreign policy, we know too little about domestic movements and social, cultural and intellectual trends. After the Vietnam War, scholars continued to produce studies of the colonial era and the Pathet Lao, but for a long time no new studies in English on the RLG appeared.⁴⁷ Yet elsewhere in the former states of Indochina, a re-appraisal of anti-communist post-colonial states first appeared from Vietnam scholar Keith Taylor.⁴⁸ This trend has continued including a study of Vietnamese anti-communism and most recently yielding a reconsideration of the complicated man at the heart of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem.⁴⁹

Since the late 1990s, the nature of RLG studies greatly changed under the impact of the culture turn, as a number of scholars have begun to investigate the country's cultural history.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Noam Chomsky "Introduction" in (eds.) Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) p. xix.

⁴⁷ Jean Deuve has written most extensively on the history of the RLG, but does not treat it after 1965. The most important works on the RLG after 1975 have been by Martin Stuart-Fox and Arthur Dommen, but neither wrote a research monograph dedicated solely to the subject. RLG historiography is much poorer as a result.

⁴⁸ Keith Taylor, "How I Began to Teach about the Vietnam War" *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Fall 2004), vol. XLIII, no. 4.

⁴⁹ Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). On Vietnamese anti-communism, see Tuan Hoang, "Ideology in Urban South Vietnam, 1950-1975," (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2013).

⁵⁰ See further Kathryn Sweet, "Limited Doses: Health and Development in Laos, 1893-2000" (Ph.D. diss., National University of Singapore, 2015), p. 61. On cultural history in general, see Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History: Studies on the History of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

This development has been led more than anyone else by the late anthropologist Grant Evans, which says something about the state of the field of Lao history.⁵¹ Evans first addressed the country's history in an anthropological study by investigating the revival of public history commemoration in the Lao People's Democratic Republic.⁵² He then went on to edit an important collected volume, which brought the study of culture and society to the forefront.⁵³ Contributors to this volume discovered a Lao cultural nationalism that originated before (or during) World War II as the Lao elite imaged a cultural nation before independence.⁵⁴ My own research has been greatly influenced by a new appreciation for cultural and social changes that were caught up with broader political events, leading me to study the ideology of the RLG which is important to understand how the RLG appealed to win popular support for the young state through elite cultural projects and their quest for modernity.

The cultural history approach holds great potential for producing illuminating new historical research, such as a study of the religious appeal of Captain Kongle⁵⁵ during his coup of August 1960, which was the only military coup to garner much popular support.⁵⁶ Evans himself

⁵¹ Even today many of the best historical accounts continue to be written by anthropologists such as Olivier Evard, Hjørleifur Jonsson or Vanina Bouté. Human geographer Ian Baird also writes excellent histories, especially using oral history methods.

⁵² Grant Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998).

⁵³ Grant Evans (ed.), *Laos: Culture and Society* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books: 1999).

⁵⁴ See the contributions by Peter Koret, Nick Enfield and Soren Ivarsson. This thesis was expanded to a research monograph by Soren Ivarsson. See his *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space Between Indochina and Siam, 1860-1945* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008). He notably applied to Lao history key concepts from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Thongchai Winichakul's *Siam Mapped*.

⁵⁵ Soon to be promoted to General, Kongle was born into an ethnic Brao family in Phalane in Savannakhet province on March 6, 1934. He enrolled in the Royal Lao Army and rose to be an officer. He received military training in Thailand and the Philippines. He was the commander of the elite second parachutist battalion before he staged his coup. During the coup he was Vice President of the Committee for Neutrality and National Unity as well as Vice President of the High Command of the Armed Forces. In 1961 he fled Vientiane to the Plain of Jars where he helped Souvanna Phouma establish a neutralist government, which took Khang Khay as its capital. In late 1961 he became Vice President of Souvanna Phouma's Neutralist Party. He commanded 10,000 neutralist forces at Muong Phanh on the edge of the Plain of Jars until October 1966 when his troops mutinied, and he was forced into exile, first in Indonesia, then permanently in France. For one short biography see Tou Chu Dou Lynhiavou, "No Protection And No Peace," p. 351. See further Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos*, p. 347.

⁵⁶ Saowapha Viravong has written a fascinating account of Kongle in an unpublished manuscript.

followed up his earlier works with his own *A Short History of Laos*, which despite its title suggesting just another summary was in fact an original account that presented a new sympathetic approach to the RLG.⁵⁷ Evans and other scholars did basic historical research on the domestic scene, delving into the evidence to bring new Lao sources to light. These works of cultural history were able to recover the texture of the period in a striking way. Most recently Simon Creak's pioneering, revisionist research has expanded on earlier cultural histories by studying nationalism at the intersection of masculinity, the military, sports and the body producing a study that introduces many new subjects along the way.⁵⁸ I have taken Creak's work as a model for how best to make a cultural and intellectual history of the RLG. Still no research monograph devoted to the RLG itself over its entire history has yet appeared. The study of Lao history will only advance with the production of research monographs, like Creak, Viliam or Lee's work, and the primary research inherent to that. The field is in great need of case studies as an antidote to the many summary accounts that repeat the same old dogmas, offering nothing substantially new. Nevertheless, even with the rise of the culture-turn there are some pressing historiographical problems of RLG history that remain.

The first issue to address is the problem of agency. In general, what we know of the RLG is disproportionately focused on the international scene and foreign powers in the country, while

⁵⁷ He especially questioned key myths of the RLG. In particular, I have sought to expand on his observations of a growing intelligentsia in the 1960s to identify the same in earlier periods of the RLG. Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos*. For his discussion of the RLG intelligentsia see *Ibid*, p. 151-160. He followed this work with a study of the monarchy, see *ibid*, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010).

⁵⁸ Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015). He dared to present revisionist accounts of some aspects of RLG history not questioned in half a century. Other recent accounts of the RLG have presented similar revisionist views. See Viliam Phraxayavong, *History of Aid to Laos: Motivations and Impacts* (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2009). In US foreign policy, see Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American foreign policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). While not directly dealing with the RLG, also important is Mai Na Lee, *Dream of the Hmong Kingdom* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015).

our knowledge about the domestic sphere is not sufficiently developed to explain important matters. Often the focus on foreign powers in the country compensates for a lack of knowledge on the domestic scene, and the absence of evidence is all-too-easily taken as evidence of absence. As a result, there is a tendency to focus almost exclusively on the US (or France) and ignore the RLG entirely as if the latter hardly existed. This has allowed certain myths to hold sway for a long time without being challenged or questioned. The problem is so severe that in many works it is not explained why the Lao themselves were fighting, beyond being pawns in a global game of empire.⁵⁹ The central problem to RLG history can only be resolved by more research on Lao as major historical actors and the production of what John Smail called “autonomous histories.”⁶⁰ This work attempts to redress the imbalance of historical knowledge on the RLG by focusing on local movements like the Issara, the CDIN, the neutralists at war and the Movement for the New Way, which have been neglected by others, yet whom I argue drove key events in their own time. I seek to rehabilitate the role played by these local movements in RLG history.

Looking closely and carefully at Lao actors is the key to revising the history of the RLG. Through this approach I have discovered that democracy, Western political rights, and anti-communism had their origins among the Lao elite, and which existed in the RLG not due to any

⁵⁹ Or as Stevenson put it, “Laos has been a blood-splattered chessboard and its people the pawns, for the grand strategists in Washington, Peking, Hanoi, Saigon, and Bangkok.” Charles Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy toward Laos since 1954* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 1. Others have claimed “the average Laotian soldier had nothing to fight for.” See Judith Cousins and Alfred W. McCoy, “Living it up in Laos: Congressional Testimony on United States Aid to Laos in the 1950s,” in Adams and McCoy (eds.), *Laos: War and Revolution*, p. 341.

⁶⁰ John R. Smail, “On the possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* (1961) vol. 2, no. 2. See further Oliver Wolters’ discussion of “localization” in his, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP Publications, 1982). Also useful is what Paul Cohen has referred to as the “China-centered” approach that was influential in Chinese historiography for a time. See Paul Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). Most recently criticisms of the “China-centered” approach have appeared that have sought to bring foreign influences back into the story. There have also been criticisms of “autonomous history.” See for example Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox, “Autonomous Histories and World History” *World History Connected* 9, 3 (2012).

foreign imposition. Moreover, the RLG elite had their own reasons to go to war in 1959 against communism, well before the US ramped up its own war in South Vietnam in 1965.⁶¹ The RLG fought to defend their country from foreign invasion in what was for them a defensive war (i.e., the Second Indochina War in Laos). The RLG's war was informed by elite notions of nationalism that were then virulently anti-communist, strongly Buddhist and perceived communism as a threat to their very way of life and continued existence. To impute all this to a handful of US officials would be to greatly overstate US influence at the same time as to marginalize the Lao from their own history, which is a widespread problem in Lao history in general. Underlying these issues are continuing problems of US-centrism and Eurocentrism. As for the Second Indochina War in Laos, those who simply blame the superpowers have, in effect, erased Lao as responsible actors, capable of good or bad actions, from their own history and implicitly portrayed them as nothing more than the passive victims of history. This dissertation is not a study of Lao dominated by foreigners, but focuses on Lao agency during trying times.⁶²

There is another related problem concerning the interpretation of RLG politics. Scholars have often said that divisions among RLG political parties were not actually based on any real ideological differences.⁶³ There was no actual conflict over principles, values, ideals or any great issues of substance. The only reason for these divisions was that each political party really

⁶¹ There is a danger of presenting the CDIN government as monolithic, but there was more overlap on the key issues with the later neutralists than previously realized.

⁶² Further, this study is informed by my earlier study of the precolonial period, which has provided me with a valuable perspective on the broad strokes of history.

⁶³ See for example Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p. 175 where the author sums up RLG politics as settling issues "*en famille*." He repeats this analysis at various points throughout his study. On the otherhand Nina Adams noted that ideology was ignored in favor of family politics on which was placed "far too much emphasis." See Nina Adams, "Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries: The Lao Search for Independence, 1945-1954" in Adams and McCoy (eds.), *Laos: War and Revolution*, p. 112. More recently, Panivong Norindr was highly critical of what he saw as Martin Stuart-Fox's reducing all RLG politics to personal gain among a few families. See Norindr, "On Photography, History, and Affect," p. 101.

represented a different faction vying for control of state or other resources.⁶⁴ One could not really speak of an RLG politics as such, just the latest round of bickering among selfish clans for their share of the spoils to dole out to supporters – a view that will be referred to as the “family politics” thesis. It has had a disproportionately large influence on our understanding of the RLG. More than anyone else Jean Deuve been associated with this theory, which he in one place summarized as the “supremacy of personal over national interests.”⁶⁵ Martin Stuart-Fox referred to it as “politics centered on personalities not politics” and cited Deuve.⁶⁶ The idea was granted weight because Deuve had worked in the government, yet he had also fought against the “rebel” Issara in France’s reconquest of the country and continued to work as a French agent in the country until his expulsion in April 1964. He was hardly a neutral observer of events. Following Deuve, American and French works tend to emphasize personalities at the expense of, or even to deny the importance of ideals, much less broader intellectual movements. Grant Evans described it as “*Phu nyai* politics” which likely appealed to the anthropologist in him.⁶⁷ Frank Lebar, who wrote several summaries of the country in the 1950s and 1960s, could thus repeat what was by then common knowledge saying there was no difference of political ideas among different parties and at the root of such conflict were just a few elite families.⁶⁸ He hoped the United Nations would play a larger

⁶⁴ See for example Martin Stuart-Fox’s treatment of the Issara in his *A History of Laos*, p. 63, 66-68, 102. Politics was “centered on personalities, not parties” and the “struggle for power...between influential clans became endemic in Lao politics over the next three decades.” “Personal, clan, and regional interests in obtaining a share [of aid] tended to be pursued in preference to...national welfare.”

⁶⁵ Jean Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965: Histoire événementielle de l’indépendance à la guerre américaine* (Paris: Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1984) p. 25.

⁶⁶ Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 67. He also cited Joel Halpern. See further *ibid*, p. 61, 63, 66, and especially p. 68 where he states the “struggle for power...between influential clans became endemic in Lao politics over the next three decades.” And *ibid* p. 102, his criticism of RLG parties as “little more than elitist groupings around powerful clan leaders who dispensed patronage in return for political support.” Geoffrey Gunn repeated the notion to describe Issara who could not hold to their convictions; see his *Political Struggles in Laos (1930-1954)* (Bangkok: Damol Press, 1988), p. 209.

⁶⁷ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 105. He says of political parties, they “fractionalize endlessly along personal lines.”

⁶⁸ Frank Lebar and Adrienne Suddard, *Laos: its people, its society, its culture* (New Haven: Human Relations Area File Press, 1960), p. 4.

role in the country to provide “political education.”⁶⁹ Given the continuing prevalence of this idea, it must be addressed. As such, I raise it throughout this study where it limits understanding.

The “family politics” thesis has a complicated history.⁷⁰ It arose strongly at the time of the Issara independence movement, which was a highly polarized period. As soon as Lao began to demand rights and freedom, their efforts were quickly and heavily criticized by Western scholars and dismissed as a cynical front for material gain. The “family politics” thesis was used to undermine Issara claims for independence, implicitly questioning Lao capacity for democracy.⁷¹ Yet even some Lao who endorsed France’s return themselves wrote about early Lao democracy to perpetuate the idea that even at the momentous occasion of its arrival, there still was no real politics in the country. Even years later, the idea was still useful to justify foreign intervention. The perception among Westerners that no politics existed in the country was especially convenient for semi- or neo-colonial interventions of the decolonization era. Foreign powers could not infringe on Lao sovereignty if it did not exist.⁷² Outsiders could act with a free hand to protect their interests, which they might even conflate with that of the Lao for their own interests. However, in the late 1950s the CDIN itself greatly reinforced the “family politics” thesis in their political campaigns which excoriated corrupt government in the hands of a few top families.⁷³ Their works were cited with approval by scholars advancing this thesis, but one must recognize that a central

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ I do not address the colonial period when certain families competed (e.g. Sananikones, Champassaks).

⁷¹ One sees this in historical accounts that view the Issara as mainly a phenomena of the personal conflicts among different branches of the Luang Prabang royal family (e.g. Phetsarath and Sisavang Vong).

⁷² Even as late as the mid-1960s this remained a stubbornly held belief among Westerners such as US Ambassador William Sullivan: “Instead of seeing Laos as a fully sovereign country, he seems to have looked on it as a great-power condominium of the nineteenth-century sort.” See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 609.

⁷³ The influence of the CDIN attack on the Old Ones (established politicians) is apparent in the works of Bernard Fall, Joel Halpern and others.

paradigm of studies on the RLG emerged in partisan struggles within the country itself that were little concerned with matters of bias.

Evans himself called the “family politics” thesis into sharply question, but the idea still has maintained a strong grip on Western scholarly thinking.⁷⁴ Scholars have argued that political clashes were only driven by personal interests, yet are then unable to explain how or why the very same argument, issue or problem among Lao would reappear years or decades later, unwilling to recognize that what was at stake was in fact a clash over principles, values, and ideals. In the RLG there were, of course, highly principled people who sacrificed their own interests for their beliefs like Bong Souvannavong, who advocated strict neutrality and was marginalized as a result.⁷⁵ The entire period from 1945 to 1975 was marked by so many Lao who sacrificed their lives fighting for what they believed in. While exhaustion and domestic changes in Thai politics led many to return, other important members of the Issara themselves endured years of hardship in exile,

⁷⁴ See his *A Short History of Laos* on p. 105-106 where he pointed out flaws with the “family politics” thesis, observing that members of the same family would often in fact fall on different sides of a political issue. For a nineteenth-century example of the latter concerning the elites of Issan see Kennon Breazeale, “The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oxford, 1975).

⁷⁵ Born on June 8, 1906 in Vientiane to the aristocratic Souvannavong family Bong played a leading role in the political and intellectual life of the RLG era. He completed studies at the Ecole Supérieure de Pédagogie in Hanoi in 1928 and went on to the Centre d'Éducation Physique in Hanoi. He then served in the colonial administration as an instructor at the Lycée Pavie in Vientiane, as well as schools in Luang Prabang (1937-39, 41-45), Pakse (1936-37), Savannakhet (1935-36) and Sam Neua (1939-41). In 1932 he was president of the Lao Art and Sport Society in Savannakhet. He was governor of Luang Prabang province in 1946. He was elected as a deputy from Vientiane and served as President of the Constituent Assembly from 1946 to 1947. In 1946 he founded the first political party the Lao National Union Party (ລາວຮວມສັມພັນ). He edited the party's newspaper, which in 1959 had a circulation of 5,000 copies. He served as Minister of Economic Affairs from 1947 to 1949. He was a founding member of the Literature Committee since 1951. He was again a deputy from Vientiane (1951-55) where he was in the opposition. He was sued for libel several times and imprisoned from October 6, 1954 to March 9, 1955, accused of participating in a plot. In 1956 he organized and served as president of the Committee for Peace and Neutrality (ຄນະສັນຕິພາບ ຕັບນກາງ) and was director of its paper. At the same time he supported the Sintham movement, which was founded by his nephew. In 1959 he broke ties with the Peace and Neutrality group (which then became a party) and became strongly anti-communist. He then served as Minister of Posts and Fine Arts in the Phoui Sananikone/CDIN government (1958-1959) although he was critical of the CDIN. He received several awards from the Lao, French and Cambodian governments. He was also a successful businessman involved in real estate and construction. After 1960 he became less involved in politics. After 1975 he was arrested for subversive activities and sent to re-education. For an interview with Bong Souvannavong see Joel Halpern, “Lao Project Paper no. 19: Laos profiles” (1961), p. 23-30. Halpern also wrote an ethnographic account of Bong's political campaigning in rural areas around Vientiane. See also Jean Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos*, p. 335-336.

refusing to return until real change was won. Katay Sasorith was prevented from attending his own mother's funeral because of his devotion to the Issara cause and he wrote about the pain this caused him.⁷⁶ Not everyone held true to their ideals and some genuinely changed their minds as events progressed, but many more were devoted to what they thought was right – even at great personal cost – than the “family politics” thesis would predict, raising serious questions about it. I attempt to address some problems of the “family politics” thesis by introducing the missing ideological level, which, may be combined with a social perspective to yield a more nuanced view that better comprehends the complexities of RLG society. Future oral histories may offer one method to address these issues.

The “puppet” became an important trope throughout the RLG. Long before the Pathet Lao painted the RLG as puppets of the US, the Issara had said much the same of the loyalist government, which, in their view, collaborated with the French. From the beginning, the RLG was viewed as the puppet of foreign powers, regardless of who was in power or who was the latest foreign patron. Yet it is important to realize that at the time it was as much a polemical attack as a true reflection of the situation and was employed in various controversies, often to slander one's opponent and brand their ideas as inferior or wrong. Thus, historians who later refer to such comments as evidence of the situation need to be careful to appreciate the full context in which such statements were made. The government-in-power tended to treat its opponents as rebels, and at the extreme to silence them rather than engage in any meaningful dialogue.

⁷⁶ Katay Sasorith ed., *Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement d'Indépendance nationale Lao* (Bangkok: editions Lao-Issara, 1948), p. i. The dedicate to this important work of the Issara reads: “To the memory of all those who have fallen heroically for the cause of Lao national independence . . . to the memory of my brothers Katé and Kalout, both deceased in the course of unfortunate events which assaulted our poor Laos since the Japanese action of March 1945 and to the memory of my beloved mother who had just died at Pakse, the 12th of January 1948, and who I will not have the joy of seeing again at the end of this struggle.”

Finally, it is impossible to understand the history of the RLG properly without careful consideration of the elite. Any reference to the Royal Lao Government is really a reference to the persons who worked as government officials, prime ministers, cabinet ministers, members of the Privy Council, department heads, and deputies of the National Assembly, who were collectively a major section of the elite.⁷⁷ The elite have been written off as being too small, too selfish, unpatriotic, too clannish, only benefiting themselves, their families, their followers, and clients, and disastrously favoring nepotism over merit. The elite have not been seriously considered as having contributed anything of value to the history of the RLG⁷⁸; instead they busied themselves collecting the spoils their privileges entitled them to, mismanaging the economy, alienating the people from the government and blindly corrupting the state, driving it to collapse. But one cannot understand the country from 1945 to 1975 without a more serious analysis of the elite. Without taking into account the elite, the RLG seems to be nothing more than a puppet of foreign powers. On the other hand, one finds with study of the elite that RLG Lao were not simply the poor victims of superpowers, but were active and optimistic, guiding the country to what they believed was a bright new horizon. This is not to say the elite deserve universal praise – not by any means. But they merit a critical appraisal of what they did, for better or worse.

To the degree possible, elite writings are the single best way to study the elite and access some approximation of an emic view of the time. Historians are naturally drawn to elites because they write texts, which have distinctive class features, but can in some places serve as a bridge to

⁷⁷ I do not mean to imply the RLG itself had no internal divisions. Some of these are well known. Some within the RLG were Pathet Lao sympathizers even after the collapse of the first coalition government. For example, see Pholsena, "Highlanders on the Ho Chi Minh Trail," p. 463.

⁷⁸ For one example see Paul F. Langer and Joseph Zasloff, *Revolution in Laos: The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao* (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation, 1969), p. 61: "In contrast to the Vietnamese, even the educated Lao rarely are intellectuals or even avid readers. The desire for intellectual achievement, in the Western sense, plays little part in the life of the Lao elite... One can conclude that ideology, for the ... nonrevolutionary Lao plays a distinctly subordinate role."

the broader, popular culture of the time (much of it oral). In Laos, the elite wrote for a Lao audience, to be intelligible in a wider discourse and so were never far from the average person's understanding. Some of their ideas may have been restricted to themselves, but others had wider currency in broader sections of society. The elite thus did not just represent themselves nor were they only talking among themselves.⁷⁹ Critics may point to the very small print runs of Lao works, but this would be misleading as the audience was always larger. Texts had multiple readers who would take them from town to town, to be read aloud to the crowd, giving these texts a larger impact than limited print runs indicate.⁸⁰ One did not even need to be literate to access a text's contents. Consequently, I propose to study elite writings to form a better understanding of the RLG. Obviously, this approach reinforces elitism in the writing of history, but such a study does permit one to shift the narrative away from foreigners to look at local actors, discourse, issues, and events that would otherwise remain obscure.

The Lao elite in 1945 was a tiny minority in the country, consisting mainly of a traditional hereditary elite that numbered no more than twenty families, estimated at perhaps 2,000 individuals.⁸¹ Yet from 1975 to 1978 around 40,000 of the wealthiest, best educated and most experienced in society fled the country, not counting others who chose to stay under the new regime.⁸² This demonstrates that the elite as a group grew exponentially as the RLG progressed

⁷⁹ Peter Koret has observed that in pre-colonial literature the elite were not as far removed from the rest of the people as in other places in the region. See further Peter Koret, "Whispered so softly it resounds through the forest, spoken so loudly it can hardly be heard: the art of parallelism in traditional Lao literature" (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1994).

⁸⁰ This practice is explicitly referred to in *Lao Nyai* pamphlets which exhort the reader to share the text with their friends and family. It is referred to elsewhere like T.D. Roberts, et. al. *Area Handbook on Laos* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), p. 193.

⁸¹ T.D. Roberts, *Area Handbook*, 1967, p. 67.

⁸² Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 172. See further *ibid* p. 229 footnote 11. The 40,000 figure is my own calculation based on the number of government officials (22,595), the sangha (16,495), and top RLA officers (3,731) which gives a total of 42,821. There were some 1,297 top military and civilian leaders of the RLG held in re-education camps in the Viengxay area of Sam Neua alone after 1975. See further, Joanna C. Scott, *Indochina's Refugees: Oral Histories from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1989), p. 267-305. There

over three decades. This was partly the result of an enormous expansion of education during the period which broadened the ranks of the elite immensely. There were only 11,401 Lao students enrolled in all schools in 1945, but by 1972 the rolls had mushroomed to 306,110 pupils who were studying in a variety of programs (primary, secondary, private, technical, religious, fine arts, rural schools and higher-education (medical, law and administration, teacher training); not to mention those reached by the so-called “radio schools”).⁸³ In 1945 only a dozen Lao students had ever studied abroad in the modern sense; in 1972 alone 675 were abroad at higher institutions of learning in the West and across Asia.⁸⁴ While there remain insolvable problems with RLG statistics,⁸⁵ one can see there was an educated elite at the end of the RLG period, literate in French and Lao, that was very much larger than the twenty families of the (traditional) elite at the beginning of the period.⁸⁶

was an uncertain number of the elite who managed transition to the new regime (such as Sila Viravong or Mayoury and Phueiphan Ngaosrivathana or Sombath Somphone).

⁸³ For the 1945 enrollment figure see Kingdom of Laos, *Primary School Statistics: School Year 1965-1966* [ສະຖິຕິປະຖົມສຶກສາປີການສຶກສາ 1965-1966] (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, n.d.), p. 28. For the 1974 figure see Service nationale de la statistique, *Bulletin de Statistique: 1^{er} Semestre 1974* [ວາຣະສານສະຖິຕິ] (Vientiane: Kingdom of Laos, 1975), p. 13-14. In 1974 the individual breakdown for enrollment was: primary (245,857), secondary (9,774), tertiary (875), technical (1,427), teacher-training (3,998), fine arts (295), private (43,884). The country population in 1974 was reported by the government as 3,257,000; see *ibid*, p. 6.

⁸⁴ Service nationale de la statistique, *Bulletin de Statistique: 22^{ème} Année – 1^{er} Semestre 1972* [ວາຣະສານສະຖິຕິ] (Vientiane: Kingdom of Laos, 1973), p. 36. There were 636 tertiary degrees granted from 1940 to 1972 including 111 in 1971 alone and 255 overall from France, see *ibid*, p. 32.

⁸⁵ The Service nationale de la statistique was not created until 1956, lacked technical personnel, had no branch bureaus in different parts of the Kingdom and was unable to properly collect records due to the Second Indochina War. See further Frank Lebar, *Human Relations File 23: Laos* (Chicago: 1955), p. 120-121, where it is noted that population statistics were only “estimates”: “Data for the estimates was gathered by asking the local officials in each commune to estimate the number of people resident. Those figures were then compiled by the local administrators... a questionnaire is sent to each chau khoeng, chau muong, tasseng and pho-ban or village chief. These are filled in and returned to the Ministry of Interior, which has the responsibility for the compilation of the estimate.” Lebar adds that some officials inflated population estimates to enhance the image of their area of responsibility.

⁸⁶ Joel Halpern made a very careful anthropological study of the elite in the late 1950s which contains many valuable insights; however, there are contradictions where he tries to clearly define the elite and this study departs from his conclusions on various points. See further Joel Halpern, “The Lao Elite: A Study of Tradition and Innovation” (n.p., Rand Research Memorandum, 1960).

One way to define an educated elite, distinct from the traditional elite, would be to consider the literacy rates, which were estimated to be 15-20% of the population in 1950.⁸⁷ As a result of the improving education system, literacy rose to 35% by 1967.⁸⁸ Literacy even became a criteria for candidates in the general elections of 1960, which effectively barred the NLHX candidates as “most of them were illiterate.”⁸⁹ Of this newly educated population those who completed primary education and passed the associated certificate exam would almost certainly be gainfully employed, often by the government or the military. In this case, the statistics for secondary school enrollment are suggestive of the size of the elite in-training in any given year: there were just 282 students enrolled in 1950, whereas by 1974 enrollment had jumped to 9,774 students.⁹⁰

Others have defined the elite by considering the number of central government workers, which numbered 7,404 individuals in 1959, over half of whom were concentrated in Vientiane.⁹¹ Teachers made up the single largest segment of government employees at 2,925 persons, many of whom were women entering the modern professional class for the first time.⁹² By 1974 there were

⁸⁷ UNESCO, *World Illiteracy at Mid-Century: A Statistical Study* (Paris: UNESCO, 1957), p. 40. This was said to be a high estimate. One US study estimated only 10% of the population was literate in 1959. See Victor B. Anthony and Richard R. Sexton, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The War in Northern Laos, 1954-1973* (Washington D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1993), p. 12.

⁸⁸ UNESCO, *International Yearbook of Education, Vol. XXIX* (Paris: UNESCO, 1968), p. 256. This figure was provided by the RLG Ministry of Education in its annual report to UNESCO. This year the RLG began an adult literacy program that in the post-75 period would result in literacy rates around 70%. The “liberated” Pathet Lao zones also had an adult literacy program.

⁸⁹ Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and the U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Washington D.C.: Office of Chief of Military History, 1984), p. 60.

⁹⁰ For the 1950 figure see Kingdom of Laos, *Annuaire Statistique du Laos*, p. 119. For the 1974 figure see Service national de la statistique, *Bulletin de Statistique: 1^{er} Semestre 1974 [ວາຣະສານສະຖິຕິ]* (Vientiane: Kingdom of Laos, 1975), p. 13. The secondary school enrollment figures remained lower than those for primary schools due to a number of “bottle necks” (sufficient quantity of teachers, conflict over language of instruction, curriculum) that the Ministry of Education struggled to overcome. As for primary schools, of the 245,857 students enrolled in 1974, 93.8% were considered “Lao,” however, this must refer only to the student’s nationality rather than ethnicity.

⁹¹ Joel Halpern, “Project Paper No. 8: Government Statistics” (Santa Monica: Rand Corp., 1961), p. 4.

⁹² Kingdom of Laos, *Primary School Statistics: School Year 1965-1966 [ສະຖິຕິປະຖົມສຶກສາ ປີການສຶກສາ 1965-1966]* (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, n.d.), p. 29. In 1959 there were 184 female teachers; by 1967 there were 1,000.

22,595 civil functionaries, including 5,600 police and 10,365 teachers.⁹³ The sangha was another avenue to advancement, which counted 17,023 members in 1957.⁹⁴

The Royal Lao Army (RLA) itself has been seen as key to social mobility within the RLG, representing a new avenue to power and prestige in society, irrespective of birth.⁹⁵ Founded on March 23, 1950 with just two battalions, the RLA numbered 23,600 soldiers after the First Indochina War in January 1955.⁹⁶ By the cease-fire of early 1973 all Lao military forces (RLA, irregulars, pro-government Neutralists, Air Force and River Flotilla) numbered 150,000, according to Major General Oudone Sananikone, who was a member of the general staff of the RLA.⁹⁷ In the army's earliest years most officers were French, but by 1973 the officer corps of the regular army was 13,731 men.⁹⁸ In the mid-1950s most U.S. aid was designated to the RLA which the State Department viewed as the key Lao institution to carry out nation-building in the country.⁹⁹ Members of the military enjoyed one of the highest pay in Asia.¹⁰⁰ Yet there did exist a divide

⁹³ Service national de la statistique, *Bulletin de Statistique: 1^{er} Semestre 1974* [ວາຣະສານສະຖິຕິ] (Vientiane: Kingdom of Laos, 1975), p. 72.

⁹⁴ Halpern, "Project Paper No. 8," p. 1. By 1974 the number of monks was reported in government statistics as 16,495. See Service national de la statistique, *Bulletin de Statistique: 1^{er} Semestre 1974* [ວາຣະສານສະຖິຕິ] (Vientiane: Kingdom of Laos, 1975), p. 11.

⁹⁵ Halpern, "The Lao Elite" p. 40. "The army has become an important democratizing force." As another indicator of the RLA as an important engine of social mobility, a US study noted that only 5% of the force had finished primary education (three years). See Anthony and Sexton, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia*, p. 12. While the RLA was largely illiterate, by late 1957 "almost all of the Pathet Lao soldiers knew how to read and write in Lao" according to North Vietnamese sources. Goscha, "Vietnam and the world outside," p. 173.

⁹⁶ Halpern, "Project Paper No. 8," p. 4.

⁹⁷ Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and the U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Washington D.C.: Office of Chief of Military History, 1984), p. 160. Other lower estimates of the RLA during the late 1960s-early 1970s usually neglect to include the provincial militias. The RLA itself has been estimated to be between 55,000-60,000 soldiers.

⁹⁸ There were 4 Lieutenant Generals, 6 Major Generals, 19 Brigadier Generals, 700 high officers (colonels, majors), and 10,000 Non-Commissioned Officers. See Mongkhol-Katay Sasorith, "Les forces politiques et la vie politique au Laos" (Ph.D. diss, Pantheon-Sorbonne University, 1973), p. 195.

⁹⁹ Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos*, p. 131-132. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended "no force levels" for Laos and many believed the RLA should only be around 12,000 to 15,000 force intended for ensuring internal control by the government.

¹⁰⁰ Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, p. 35.

between rank and file RLA soldiers and officers.¹⁰¹ Moreover as the Second Indochina War progressed, members of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-funded Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs) were paid nearly nine times their RLA peers.¹⁰²

One finds many anecdotal accounts of rapid social mobility during the RLG: the son of a farmer who became a general, or the son of a fisherman who became provincial governor.¹⁰³ My focus on the elite refers foremost to the fact that many of the actors I study were prominent leaders in society, often from aristocratic families, even as the traditional hierarchy waned in the new modern democratic society. I focus on those who authored texts in Lao, French, or English language during the RLG period. These people are encompassed when I use the term “RLG elite”, “Lao elite” or simply “elite.” Yet there is a distinction between those at the apex of the elite who led the country and a more diffuse, educated elite that included a much wider segment of society, most with no connection to the aristocratic families, and some of Chinese, Vietnamese or Khmer ethnic backgrounds. The CDIN themselves represented a new generation of elites in the late 1950s just as the members of *Mittasone* who went on to found the Movement for the New Way Party did in the early 1970s.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Halpern, “The Lao elite,” p. 50-51: regular soldiers were very poorly housed whereas top officers lived in government funded villas. This was one of the motivating factors precipitating the Kongle coup. Kongle’s troops had not received back pay and were housed in miserable conditions.

¹⁰² Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 139. RLA soldiers were paid 900 kip per month with 30 kip for rations while SGU soldiers were paid 8,000 kip per month with 200 kip for monthly rations.

¹⁰³ Halpern, “The Lao Elite”, p. 24. See further *ibid*, p. 40, where Halpern notes the elite were not a “closed group.”

¹⁰⁴ For a compelling biography of a non-traditional elite who nevertheless rose to prominence in the RLG see Norindr, “On Photography, History, and Affect,” which details the education and career of his father Pheng Norindr who became a supporter of Souvanna Phouma after the Kongle Coup. Pheng’s father was a silversmith who served the Luang Prabang royal court, but he himself succeeded in the colonial education system. Pheng studied at the Lycée Pavie in Vientiane before completing his studies at the Lycée Sisowath in Phnom Penh. He then went on to serve as an instructor in the 1940s as the education system expanded, especially after 1945. For Pheng’s early career see *ibid*, p. 93-94.

The material basis of the elite remains a topic for further research. Halpern noted the traditional elite derived wealth from taxes, privileges and land ownership, but during the colonial era that changed. The elite continued to enjoy privileges and material benefits thereafter principally by collaborating with the colonial regime, which provided among other things access to education and administrative posts required for advancement. In the colonial era there was much less opportunity for advancement, especially given the French predilection for employing Vietnamese in the administration. In the 1950s as the country gained independence the traditional elite expanded their sources of wealth into a variety of new business ventures (banks, airlines, movie theaters, hotels, sawmills, construction firms, bus and trucking companies, etc.).¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, the elite of Luang Prabang connected to the royal family still “own large areas of irrigated land” around the royal city in the mid-1960s yet was less wealthy than other elite.¹⁰⁶ However at the same time, new individuals gained prestige and wealth from other avenues including government employment and enlisting in the military. Corruption was one way many of the time profited. By the 1960s a small urban professional middle class was emerging made up of teachers, doctors, nurses, lawyers and journalists among others. These newly wealthy persons challenged the traditional elite in various ways, thereby forming new elites. However, in the late 1950s as Halpern noted those not from the traditional elite would at times marry into elite families providing important linkages. Some of the most important traditional elite families besides the royal family included the Sananikones and Voravongs of Vientiane, the Abhays of Khong and the Na Champassaks of Pakse. Others have noted the traditional elite enjoyed socializing in French-style leisure clubs while Halpern himself noted new elites preferred civic organizations (Junior

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 16. See further Grant Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty*, p. 251-253 for an account by the US Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley of the Na Champassak wealth ca. 1970, which included a number of businesses concentrated in the south.

¹⁰⁶ T.D. Roberts (ed.), *Area Handbook of Laos*, 66.

Chamber, Lao Red Cross, Rotary Club of Vientiane, Boy Scouts, Lao Women's Association, etc.).¹⁰⁷

Many scholars who have taken up the question have observed that it is difficult to precisely define the elite.¹⁰⁸ Some scholars have defined the elite simply as those who went through the French-style education system, but such a view excludes prominent members of the elite, like Sila Viravong, who never had such an education.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the association of the Lao elite of the RLG with urban areas is problematic as the RLG was one of the least urbanized countries in the world at the time. The reason it is difficult to define the elite in this period is because it was in a rapid state of change. Over the period as education became more widely available, and other avenues of social mobility opened up to the masses (e.g. the military, professional occupations), the notion of who was elite in society itself became blurred and was in many ways challenged and contested by difference forces in society. There were those who rose up to challenge the established traditional elite families (most prominently the CDIN, *Mittasone*) suggestive of the new classes on the rise, who were better educated, had spent more time abroad, were confident and optimistic about the future, and some of whom could even be considered technically-minded positivists or modernists.

In a study concerned with elite discourses one must consider: how widely did those discourses circulate in RLG society? What might audience reception of the elite's messages have

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 176. Halpern "The Lao elite" p. 66, 70. Halpern, *ibid*, p. 13 observes the traditional elite expanded French social clubs after independence.

¹⁰⁸ Halpern, "The Lao elite" p. 10: "it is difficult to delineate the elite with precision." See further *ibid*, p. 41. Many scholars who use the term "elite" do not define it.

¹⁰⁹ See for example Pornsak Phongphaew, "The Political Culture-and-Personality of the Laotian Political-Bureaucratic Elite." (Ph.D. diss., The University of Oklahoma, 1976), p. 6 who defined the elite as "an urbanized man having at least some secondary school education, knowing a world language, belonging to the salaried middle classes, strongly influenced by nationalism and the desire to modernize his country, and often inclined toward state capitalism or socialism." See further *ibid*, p. 3-9.

been? While my study focusing on the elite has not been able to fully recover or understand the popular audience's reception of elite messages any measure of audience size must comprehend the mass media of the day: newspapers and radios. Newspapers were an important new media that really came into its own during the RLG era. In 1952 there were perhaps only two dailies each with a circulation of 1,000.¹¹⁰ At the medium's height in 1970 there were 41 newspapers and periodicals, with at least eleven dailies in Lao, French and English.¹¹¹ Most dailies had a circulation of 2,000 copies, but the largest paper in circulation, *Xat Lao*, had a circulation of as much as 6,000 copies in 1970.¹¹² Circulation for the major dailies was lower outside Vientiane, and usually only a few hundred copies concentrated in the other major cities of the country, but *Xat Lao* was able to reach small villages at its height.¹¹³ Other papers were distributed to village heads free of charge. According to one editor, Prisa Trichanh, newspapers in the early 1970s represented a range of viewpoints from across the political spectrum, suggestive of the freedom of the press in the RLG era.¹¹⁴ As one indication of audience reception, the most popular section of newspapers was the 'letter to the editor' section which were described as "popular and powerful."¹¹⁵ In *Xat Lao* the editor Pone Chantaraj would solicit new topics from the public and "for the ordinary Laotian this opportunity to be heard and to see his name in print can be an exciting experience."¹¹⁶ Yet as the

¹¹⁰ United Nations, *Statistical Yearbook: Fifth Issue 1953* (New York: Statistical Office of the United Nations Department of Economic Affairs, 1953), p. 541. This estimate might be too low. One might expect besides the government newspaper *Lao Presse* that the main parties would continue to run their newspapers (the Democrats, the National Union Party, the Independents, the new Progressive Party).

¹¹¹ G. Raymond Nunn and Do Van Anh, *Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian Newspapers: An International List* (Taipei: Chinese Materials and Research Aids Service Center, 1972).

¹¹² John Lent, "Mass Media in Laos," *International Communication Gazette* 20 (1974), 171-172.

¹¹³ Ibid, the newspaper "could afford to lose money by circulating to small villages as ad revenue made up deficits."

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 174.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p. 173.

¹¹⁶ Albert Ravenholt, "Xatlaos: the history and problems of a Laotian newspaper," *American Universities Field Staff reports: Southeast Asia series* (Hanover, N.H.: American Universities Field Staff, 1967), p. 13.

aid-dependent economy declined in the early 1970s operating costs rose putting many newspapers under pressure.¹¹⁷

Radio was another important means for elite messages to reach and influence people. Like newspaper, radio broadcasting had a small beginning but increased dramatically over the RLG period. In 1951 Radio Lao was established.¹¹⁸ The service broadcast from Vientiane with a 10KW transmitter and included programs covering information, education, politics, government and culture. Other stations were established later in Luang Prabang and Pakse. The most popular programs were music, drama, news and debate. On the monthly debate programs, “opposition parties were represented.”¹¹⁹ Radio Lao would also cover “the National Assembly live when the prime minister is answering questions.”¹²⁰ Broadcasts were mostly in Lao, with some French segments. In 1951 when service began there were only three hundred radio receivers in the country.¹²¹ While it is hard to estimate audience size, by 1967 the director of Radio Lao, Kath Dittavong, said “about one in every three Laotians has a radio set.”¹²² According to official statistics, the population in 1967 was reported to be 2,759,000, which would yield an audience of over nine hundred thousand for Radio Lao.¹²³ He explained that the cheapest set sold for 8,000 kip

¹¹⁷ The cost of newsprint was a concern to many of the editors Lent interviewed in December 1973. According to UN statistics, the RLG consumed 400 metric tons of newsprint in 1969, but declined thereafter dropping to 300 metric tons the next year and remaining at that low level as late as 1972. United Nations, *Statistical Yearbook: Twenty Fifth Issue 1973* (New York: Statistical Office of the United Nations Department of Economic Affairs, 1973), p. 518. Ibid, p. 794 notes the book market in the RLG in 1971 produced 93 new titles (16 general titles, 14 religious, 37 social science, 1 philology, 2 pure sciences, 2 applied sciences, 16 literature, 5 geography/history and 1 children’s book).

¹¹⁸ Lent, “Mass Media in Laos,” p. 177.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 178.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ United Nations, *Statistical Yearbook: Sixth Issue 1954* (New York: Statistical Office of the United Nations Department of Economic Affairs, 1954), p. 550.

¹²² Lent, “Mass Media in Laos,” p. 178.

¹²³ Service national de la statistique, *Bulletin de Statistique: 19ème Année – 2er Semestre 1969* [ວາຣະສານສະຖິຕິ] (Vientiane: Kingdom of Laos, 1973), p. 6.

and that “families with two or three members employed pool their savings to purchase radios.”¹²⁴ Finally, I discuss elite influence on the population via the school system, which grew enormously (see chapter eight).

Whatever contributions I may claim, there are many limitations to this study. By acknowledging these I hope to respond to Panivong Norindr’s call “to write situated and ethical history that is self-conscious of its preconceptions.”¹²⁵ It does not address fully all topics considered, sacrificing comprehensive treatment of each topic in an effort to show the broad array of issues existing at the time. While this study focuses on democracy, for example, it is mainly concerned with elite expression of that as an ideal, abstract value and how the elite perceived it to be central to the state. It does not investigate closely how democracy was practiced on the ground, what the average person thought of it, or how it functioned in practice.¹²⁶ Buddhism was central to elite forms of anti-communism and neutralism, and was used by the Pathet Lao and the RLG alike, but it deserves a more complete study to untangle its complicated history in the RLG era.¹²⁷ Further, while this study does consider the issue of minorities in the RLG, it is concerned foremost with how the (mostly) Lao elite viewed non-Lao minorities.¹²⁸ In attempting to present the RLG in a coherent manner on some issues I risk oversimplifying the issues or at times portraying the

¹²⁴ Lent, “Mass Media in Laos,” p. 178.

¹²⁵ Norindr, “On Photography, History, and Affect,” p. 102.

¹²⁶ This will be the focus of a future research project.

¹²⁷ My research makes no special investigation of Buddhism in the RLG, rather it concerns a tradition that was appropriated by certain groups in opposition to ideas they oppose. It necessarily appears monolithic as a result. My thanks to Anne Hansen for this point. For a useful survey of Lao Buddhism, see John Holt, *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009). The Lao sangha, besides being split between anti-communists and communist sympathizers, was divided between the Mahanikai sect and the Thammayut sect. The two sects competed, especially in the south. This topic deserves further research. While Thai anti-communist monks sought to aid their Lao counterparts in the sangha, this exacerbated the competition between the sects and played into the Pathet Lao’s hands.

¹²⁸ This is a consequence of my research focusing primarily on Lao language documents. There are many valuable studies available on various minorities in the RLG era, especially on the Hmong, but there remains a need for some new synthesis to form an idea of the experience of minorities living in the RLG, and the nature of their relations with the Lao majority.

RLG as a monolithic entity when in reality it was a highly diverse and complex society. Further while this study attempts to recover Lao nationalism as it existed in the RLG I do not mean to suggest nationalism was only a positive force; it is necessary to fully understand RLG politics, society and culture, but I likewise draw attention to its darker aspects: as a cause for war, as a symbol to sacrifice one's life.¹²⁹ Finally, this study does not address in detail many other issues such as the Royal Lao Army, gender relations, Lao Christians, the economy, the evolution of the state, foreign relations, the legal system or urban-rural relations much less endemic corruption, crony capitalism or nepotism.¹³⁰ This study does not account for the importance of family networks, which I leave to other scholars to investigate. I make no use of oral sources, which limits this study in many important ways. All these issues could be treated individually in more depth, but a consideration of them together raises questions that were central to RLG, and shows some of its rich history, connecting the past and present of the country.

Methodology and Sources

This dissertation research is based on previously unused primary sources authored by Lao of the RLG era, which were predominantly written in Lao and French languages. Where possible, I have striven to return to the primary sources in preference to any secondary source. My aim has been to study what the RLG elite said themselves, to determine what they thought they were doing in their own terms, and how they expressed themselves, in a bid to sketch the intellectual discourse at the time. For a study that employs methods of textual and discourse analysis the best sources

¹²⁹ For a critical assessment of the nation's influence on history see Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997).

¹³⁰ For RLG foreign relations see Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*. Lack of an economic or quantitative social history is due in part to serious difficulty with sources, such as the lack of solid, reliable statistics on which to base such work. Yet from a consideration of RLG history, economic questions invariable arise, such as, was there a material basis for the 1975 revolution?

are RLG-era Lao authored texts, which provide direct evidence for my research questions.¹³¹ Furthermore, I have endeavored to form a narrative based on primary research. Thus I strove to substantiate important statements, rooted in the evidence. While this led to an attempt to validate Lao actors from various political backgrounds this approach also led me to revise and question received wisdom. The result has been a revisionist history, which attempts to overturn long-standing views of the RLG.

Historical research of the RLG has been complicated by the fact that there is no archive for that regime. This is not accidental because nearly all RLG documentation was intentionally destroyed by the Pathet Lao during and since the revolution. When I was researching at the National Library of Laos, I was told by the library staff that after 1975 RLG-era documents were used to wrap fish in the market.¹³² The revolution itself thereby made the study of RLG history far more difficult by its willful destruction of RLG documents. More than anything else, the Pathet Lao were attempting to destroy the historical legacy of the royalist regime, thereby eliminating any competing narrative other than one they have constructed themselves about the war years, to close off any alternate path to modernity. Thus, what we know of the RLG has been greatly shaped by their enemies, the Pathet Lao.¹³³ Western academics have not been able to entirely transcend Pathet Lao efforts to control the narrative. The Pathet Lao produced propaganda works for Western

¹³¹ See further Kathryn Sweet, "Limited Doses," p. 11. Sweet emphasizes the importance of her research which relies on written sources, rather than oral sources, which she says is the source of "the bulk of contemporary Lao histories." Moreover, it is difficult to do oral history research on sensitive topics with informants residing in the LPDR, see *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹³² Simon Creak was told the same. His work is highly valuable for accessing LPDR archives, but the Pathet Lao have ensured no comparable research can be conducted on their former foe, the RLG. See further Viliam Phraxayavong, *History of Aid to Laos*. On the other hand, Kathryn Sweet has been able to secure some RLG documents from the current LPDR indicating the Pathet Lao destruction of RLG documents was not total. See Sweet, "Limited Doses," 11-12. It took her twenty months to secure access. See further Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 937, which notes the Pathet Lao did capture some RLA personnel files in military region II, aiding their efforts to hunt down the new regime's enemies.

¹³³ One might compare it to Chinese dynastic history in which the new dynasty wrote the history of the old one.

consumption that Western scholars have relied on far more often than any RLG document.¹³⁴ The RLG was never as adept as the Pathet Lao in getting its message out to the West, perhaps because it took for granted Western support since it was a democratic state allied to the “free world.” It moreover faced far more scrutiny and skepticism among Western academics than did the Pathet Lao. At any rate, the absence of any RLG archive is highly problematic to the field of history, which relies primarily on official repositories.¹³⁵ It furthermore explains the lack of interest in RLG history, and the little serious history work done on it by Western scholars. It is problematic to be unable to investigate the official documents of the government that would reveal its inner-workings, but it only makes the surviving published RLG documents still extant all the more valuable to recover a lost history.

Lack of an archive has severely restricted our understanding of the RLG independent of the French, United States, and British governments whose records have primarily been used to write RLG history, but which are themselves framed by foreign nationals, with a view to foreign interests, loaded with assumptions and biases that must be treated with the utmost caution.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, this dissertation does include research from the US and French archives, albeit a small amount compared to my research of Lao sources so as not to overwhelm the Lao ones.

¹³⁴ Clive Christie in his study of nationalist movements is clearly indebted to Pathet Lao propaganda works that were available, and even intended for an international audience. See Clive Christie, “Marxism and the History of Nationalist Movements in Laos” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1979). A study on the Lao sangha during the war by Martin Stuart-Fox and Rod Bucknell similarly relied on Pathet Lao works for its account. Thus, the Pathet Lao were able to spread their perspective of the war far better than the RLG ever did, even and especially among Western academics. See further Martin Stuart Fox and Rod Bucknell, “Politicization of the Buddhist Sangha in Laos” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 13, 1 (1982). See also Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). See further Wilfred Burchett, *Mekong Upstream* (Hanoi: Red River Publishing House, 1957) and *ibid*, *The Furtive War: The United States in Vietnam and Laos* (New York: International Publishers, 1963).

¹³⁵ The historian’s over-reliance on archives has major implications for the historical study of the RLG. Oral histories are vitally important as a result. The Center for Lao Studies has one of the few Lao oral history projects. Ian Baird, Vatthana Pholsena, Patrice Ladwig and Mai Na Lee among others are also doing great oral history work.

¹³⁶ Panivong Norindr has pointed to this problem in historical sources. See his “On Photography, History, and Affect,” p. 100-101. He further suggests reasons why few Lao wrote memoirs of their experiences, including his own father Pheng Norindr. His father was a private person, but also informed by Buddhist notions of impermanence.

Kathryn Sweet said of the French archives that “Lao voices were muted at best.”¹³⁷ Moreover, by reading US sources against the grain, I have been able to uncover more detail about RLG’s role in the Second Indochina War. I have used these sources to discover evidence of greater agency exercised by RLG wartime leaders than previously thought.

Nevertheless, there is a wealth of published RLG-era documents, which remain largely unexploited, scattered among libraries across the world, especially in the West. Given the limitations of the subject, studies of RLG primary sources can make important contributions to our understanding even if they are non-archival. Study of the RLG has for too long been limited by insufficient consideration of Lao language materials, even though more people were literate in Lao than any other language. One can discern elite and popular discourses in various pamphlets, newspapers, journals, magazines, books, propaganda, school books, and other ephemera. Many surviving RLG sources are ephemeral, since many publications did not stay active for long, which gives a fragmented view of events. Newspapers are especially important sources that recent studies have begun to be utilized with good results.¹³⁸ Such sources provide the best prospects for future research that will undoubtedly yield fascinating accounts of the country during the RLG era. Oral history sources also remain under-utilized and offer unique vantage-point on the period providing an important counterpoint to the textual sources. Lao history will be enriched when all sources are brought to bear on the central questions of the period.

Despite these numerous texts, the opinion seems to have formed that there were too few of them to do anything like a textual study of the RLG period. Critics can point to a high level of

¹³⁷ Sweet, “Limited Doses,” p. 13.

¹³⁸ See for example Ivarsson, *Creating Laos*. For an earlier study that used some Lao newspapers, see Gunn, *Political Struggles in Laos*. RLG-era newspapers have been less utilized than ones from the colonial era. For one study that does use RLG-era newspapers, see Creak, *Embodied Nation*.

illiteracy and find the intelligentsia in the RLG too “small” or otherwise insignificant.¹³⁹ This has often been the argument for those who wish to make their analysis while dismissing or otherwise ignoring the elite. Yet more texts were produced during the RLG period than at any point previously in history as the RLG gained control of modern printing presses for the first time.¹⁴⁰ Lao themselves even discussed a desire for modern texts, which outstripped demand, as Nouphat Chounlamani explained:

We all recognize that food is for the body, and knowledge is food for the brain and mind. To speak of achieving knowledge is to speak of disseminating books. Therefore, I your humble servant really understand that in our Lao [country] there are only how many persons who write books? If [one] compares [us] to another country, we still do not have great amounts of books equal to the desire. [There is great desire] because today more Lao read books every day.¹⁴¹

While Nouphat wrote this preface to promote a particular work, he commented on wider trends of rising literacy in society, discernable in the final years of the RLG era. He added one reason to print the book, a history, was for intellectual curiosity. He could enjoy the fact that he did not have the answer already, thus he said: “Mr. Nyun Onphom wrote this book with the sole aim to make we Lao feel that in any era, how is our history?”¹⁴²

Vientiane Buddhist Institute and the Origins of Cultural Nationalism

The origins of the modern country may reside in one colonial-era institution, the Vientiane Buddhist Institute.¹⁴³ This library and Pali school opened in February 1931 under the chairmanship

¹³⁹ Many scholars cite Halpern who on the first page of his study of the Lao elite noted it was “a small elite.” See Halpern, “The Lao Elite” (n.p., Rand Research Memorandum, 1960), p. 1. See further *ibid*, p. 11.

¹⁴⁰ Kennon Breazeale read extensively in the French colonial archives (1893-1945) but did not find any reference to Lao language writings except for a Lao law code. I am very grateful for this valuable insight.

¹⁴¹ Phaya Chamnong Rasakit (Nouphat Chounlamani) ຄໍາບໍາ [“Preface”] in Nyun Onphom, ພົງສາວະດານລາວສມັຍ ຕັ້ນຫົວເມືອງຂຶ້ນຂອງປະເທດສຍາມແລະປະເທດຝຣັ່ງ [“History of the Country in the colonial era of Thai and France”] (n.p., 1971), p. ໓.

¹⁴² *Ibid*.

¹⁴³ One does need to be cautious about the notion that cultural nationalism had a single origin point at the elitist Vientiane Buddhist Institute. In many accounts of the origins of nationalism scholars always point to a Westernized elite as the source, always assuming that Western education is vital to the origins of nationalism, but this view may

of Prince Phetsarath Rattanavongsa and his secretary Maha Sila Viravong, who both played a leading role in charting the course of the country through much of the twentieth century.¹⁴⁴ From its small offices emerged the modern cultural nationalist movement that held the elite's attention so much throughout the RLG period, never flagging even in the face of the most violent war the country had ever seen.¹⁴⁵ It thereby provided the intellectual foundations for the RLG period. As Simon Creak observed, Laos, like Ireland, had to realize its own independent culture before it could seek political independence.¹⁴⁶ Yet he and others, notably Soren Ivarsson, have refrained from calling it a nationalist movement, but to call the origins of cultural nationalism anything else

be flawed. For one, Lao did not need Western education to fight for independence, and there were plenty of Issara, Seri Lao and Lao Pen Lao members who had no such education. More broadly, modern nationalism was a global phenomenon appearing around the world at the beginning of the twentieth-century; to label it "Western" is a somewhat meaningless distinction. Underlying this issue, Western scholars assume too easily the liberating value of Western education, but this may be more fantasy than real. At any rate, if Westernization did not appear nationalism would have still arisen by other means. For the moment, the story of the Lao elite at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute is the best one we have until future research appears.

¹⁴⁴ Phetsarath was born into the Front Palace branch of the Luang Prabang royal family in 1890. He was among the first generation of Lao to receive a French education. He studied in Saigon and Hanoi before spending nearly a decade studying in France; first at the École Coloniale in Paris (1905-1908) then at the Lycée Louis Le Grand (1908-1913). He spent a year studying at Oxford in 1912 and returned to the country the next year. During World War I, he gathered funds for the Allied cause. On his return he rose to the highest post of any Lao in the French colonial administration, serving as the secretary of the Résidence Supérieure and traveled widely in the country in this capacity, often by horseback. He participated in the indigenous assembly created in 1923. He also served as head of the Vientiane Buddhist institute, and had an interest in astrology, history and hunting. In 1931 he rose to the position of Inspecteur Indochinois des Affaires Politiques et Administratives. He was the son of viceory Bounkhong and was the last to hold that title (although the French abolished it 1919-1941). He may well have harbored bitterness toward the French due to their treatment of his father. In 1941 he was belatedly given the rank of viceory. At the same time he was also made the first Prime Minister of a newly modernized Luang Prabang government, now reorganized along Western lines. When the Japanese took power in March 1945, Phetsarath collaborated with them seeking to create a independent, nationalist movement in Laos. He was a central figure in the Issara independence movement, but never held an official position in the Issara government. He returned from exile only in March 1957 when his rank was restored by King Sisavang Vong on April 16, 1957. He died on October 15, 1959 within two weeks of the death of the King and two months before Katay's death. See Joel Halpern, "Lao Project Paper no. 19: Laos profiles" (1961), p. 3-9, which includes a description of a tour of the countryside in the fall of 1957. See further Jean Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos*, p. 356. See also the excellent biography given in the forward by John Murdoch to '3349,' *Iron man of Laos: Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa*, trans. John B. Murdoch, ed. David Wyatt (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP, 1978). See further Soren Ivarsson and Christopher Goscha, "Prince Phetsarath (1890-1959): Nationalism and Royalty in the Making of Modern Laos" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, 1 (2007).

¹⁴⁵ Soren Ivarsson, "Cultural Nationalism in a Colonial Context: Laos in French Indochina, 1893-1940" (2008) provides on p. 238 a useful definition of cultural nationalism: a unique form "articulated by intellectuals preceding the independence struggle." See further Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 45.

¹⁴⁶ Creak, *Embodied Nation*.

risks making important historical developments unnecessarily obscure.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, such interpretations miss important connections to the later wartime mass movements and the Issara independence movement. The cultural works produced at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute were a form of elite nationalism that only became a mass movement during the *Lao Nyai* campaigns (1941-1945), the first in the country as the French warily lifted the usual political repression that had kept such pent-up feeling hidden below the surface.¹⁴⁸ Yet at the same time, elite notions were popularized in anti-French irregular guerilla movements like *Seri Lao* and *Lao Pen Lao*.¹⁴⁹ These events at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute were, moreover, some indication of the impact modernity would have on the Lao in the twentieth century.

The first generation of Francophone Lao elite emerged during the colonial-era, notably Phetsarath Rattanavongsa, King Sisavang Vong,¹⁵⁰ Thao Nhouy Abhay,¹⁵¹ Pierre Somchin

¹⁴⁷ Ivarsson, “Cultural Nationalism in a Colonial Context” p. 238 distinguishes between cultural and political nationalism; and further on p. 242 argues that the *Lao Nyai* campaign “was not linked with the formation of an independent state.”

¹⁴⁸ In lieu of a study of political freedoms in colonial Laos, one can point to the press laws in the neighboring Indochina protectorates of Tonkin and Annam where the press was “heavily censored” according to Christopher Goscha. See his *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), p. 105.

¹⁴⁹ On the *Seri Lao* movement see Oun Sananikone, *Lao Issara: the memoirs of Oun Sananikone*, John Murdoch (trans.), David Wyatt (ed.) (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP, 1975).

¹⁵⁰ Born on July 14, 1885, head of the Luang Prabang royal family, Sisavang Vong ruled for fifty-five years. He attended the École Coloniale in Paris from 1900 to 1901, being one of the first Lao to study abroad in France. His education was cut short when he was forced to return home from France abruptly in 1904 due to his father, Khamsouk’s, illness yet he continued to be influenced by French culture. He became King on April 28, 1904 and his coronation was on March 4, 1905. His kingdom was enlarged with Xieng Khouang, Houaphan and Vientiane in 1941 to compensate for the loss of Sainyaburi to the Thai. In 1945 the Issara unified the country under his rule, which was upheld by the French after their reconquest of the country in 1946. During the Issara independent movement he pledged his loyalty to France, but was later put under house arrest by the Issara. One day before the French reconquered Luang Prabang he recognized the Issara government as legitimate. After this he guided the country as the French gradually devolved power to the Lao. In March 1953 when the Vietminh invaded and nearly captured the city of Luang Prabang, he refused to retreat, persuaded by a blind monk that the Vietminh would never take the city, which one French official described him as “stubborn as only a good, proud King knows how to be.” See Joel Halpern, “Lao Project Paper no. 19: Laos profiles” (1961), p. 1. Later in the 1950s he became ill; he was less active and travelled less as a result. He died on October 29, 1959. See especially, Evans, *Last Century of Lao Royalty*. See further Jean Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos*, p. 364.

¹⁵¹ Born on January 9, 1909 at Khong in southern Laos, Nhouy and his brother Kou were members of the important Abhay family. He studied abroad in France where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1932. He returned to the country in 1933 where he served as a Chao Muong. He became a teacher in 1937. He was a co-founder of the Lao Renovation Movement. When the Japanese seized control he became the director of education and ran a newspaper. He was a member of the Issara independence movement and served as a minister in the Issara government. He was

Nginn,¹⁵² Souvanna Phouma, Souphanouvong and Katay Don Sasorith.¹⁵³ They were the first to mediate with the West, confronting modernity, and navigating its clash with tradition to modernize their culture. They studied French culture and traveled to France for education. They were exposed to Western culture at the very moment when the West was greatly affected by racism, fascism, militant nationalism, and social Darwinism.¹⁵⁴ Many others also went to Saigon, where they witnessed lively politics and a freer press than in Hanoi or Laos. Others also went to Phnom Penh where some became radicalized.¹⁵⁵ There were others who went to Thailand, especially to continue

one of the first Issara to return to the country, returning in April 1946. He joined the Privy Council in 1948. From 1949-1950 he was minister of education and health; and from 1951 to 1954 he was minister of foreign affairs. In 1956 he was minister of the interior. Later from 1960 to 1962 he served again as minister of education in various governments. He was one of the leading intellectuals of his time and produced many works on high scholarship. Later in the 1950s he called for a modern reform of Buddhism. Jean Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos*, p. 352-353. See further Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation*, p. 32-35.

¹⁵² Born in Luang Prabang, his father was a Cambodian member of the Mission Pavie. He received his education in Vientiane and Saigon. Thereafter he was able to continue his studies abroad in France at the École Coloniale in Paris. On his return he was a primary school teacher. He worked at the French consulate in Ubon, Thailand. Then he was chef du bureau for the Résidence Supérieure. From 1939 to 1942 he worked at a radio station in Saigon. After that, he worked for Information Service in Laos, later becoming the director. He also served as president of the Vientiane Buddhist Institute and after it was established 1951, president of the Literature Committee. He continued to teach courses on Lao literature and Pali. See Joel Halpern, "Lao Project Paper no. 19: Laos profiles" (1961), p. 95-97.

¹⁵³ Born in Pakse in 1907 to a Vietnamese father and Lao mother, Katay was of central importance to the first two decades of the Royal Lao Government. He came from humble origins as his father ran a restaurant popular with the local French community in Pakse. For his education, he studied abroad in Hanoi, before returning to work in the colonial administration. By 1943 he attained the post of chef du Bureau des Affaires Économiques for the Résidence Supérieure. During this time he also co-founded the Lao Nyai (Renovation) Movement. After the coup in March 1945 he worked with the Japanese. Thereafter he joined the Issara independence movement and was a member of the first cabinet, serving as the minister of Finances. He was the chief ideologue of the Issara movement, and took a leading role in the Issara newspaper after being exiled to Thailand. On his return in 1952 he joined the Progressive Party with other former Issara members. He served as chief of the new party. He also was active in sports and promoted the Association Sportive de Pakse. He also served as general secretary of the Lao Scouts. He established his own bilingual newspaper, *La Voix du Peuple*. He rose to become Prime Minister from late 1954 to 1956. After this he served as minister of state and in 1958 as minister of defense and of the interior. He also seemed to have close links to the police. He was alleged to have illegally enriched himself exploiting the fixed exchange rate of kip to dollars before 1958. Besides that, he was president of Air Laos. In 1957 he broke with the Progressive Party over negotiations with the Pathet Lao to form his own Nationalist party. He was critical of the CDIN when they emerged. His untimely death in December 1959 was a major blow to the country. See Jean Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos*, p. 341. See further Joel Halpern, "Lao Project Paper no. 19: Laos profiles" (1961), p. 11-14.

¹⁵⁴ Vichy influence continued into the 1950s and 1960s. For accounts of the Lao elite abroad in France at the time, see Evans, *Last Century of Lao Royalty*.

¹⁵⁵ Martin Rathie, "The History and Evolution of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party." Vanina Bouté and Vatthana Pholsena (eds.) *Changing Lives in Laos: Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017).

their studies of Buddhism. By the time the Vientiane Buddhist Institute was founded, the Lao elite were concerned, for the first time, with creating a distinct Lao history, literature, grammar, poetry, calendar, religion, architecture, and so forth. They sought to create a standardized culture to bring the many diverse conceptions of Lao under the unitary sign “Laos,” thereby preparing the way for mass popular nationalism. While lacking the tools of mass media or the permissive government stance which undergird the *Lao Nyai* campaign, the elite in the 1930s nonetheless wrote the overarching cultural script that would later be distilled and popularized. The works of the Vientiane Buddhist Institute are a clear precursor to the later popular nationalism witnessed during the early 1940s among a wide array of movements, pro- and anti-French.

Phetsarath was personally involved in the earliest elite culture works, writing the first modern textbook on Lao astrology, which explained how to calculate the calendar according to Lao methods.¹⁵⁶ Yet his project contained serious tensions that illuminates a central problem of the elite’s cultural nationalist project: modernity might revive culture, but only in a distorted fashion in which the original was irrevocably lost. For one thing, the “Lao” calendar Phetsarath sought to revive was itself based on the earlier Mon system.¹⁵⁷ While Phetsarath spent over twenty years writing it and finally published it in Thailand in 1951, in the interim his textbook was taught as a course at the Pali school attached to Vientiane Buddhist Institute. Phetsarath’s revival of Lao

¹⁵⁶ Prince Phetsarath Rattanavongsa, ໂຫຮາສາດລາວ [“Lao Astrology”] (Vientiane: Dokked, 2011 [1951]). He wrote on the same topic elsewhere in French as early as the late 1930s, but this work is the only appearing in Lao. See further Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 72, which notes that Phetsarath assisted Le Boulanger in the writing of his important history of the Lao. Phetsarath was influenced by Thai works of the time and wanted to make available a modern Lao history. Ivarsson’s discussion of the evolution of a modern Lao religion is useful, but does not consider the substance of any text written by the Lao elite. See *ibid*, “Cultural Nationalism in a Cultural Context,” p. 247-250. The traditional use of astrology had been to determine auspicious and inauspicious times of the year. It was also used to determine the annual dates of Buddhist festivals throughout the year.

¹⁵⁷ Thanks very much to Kennon Breazeale for bringing this point to my attention. See further J.C. Eade, *The Calendrical Systems of Mainland South-East Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

astrology in the modern world must be taken at least partly as a rejection of the French calendar and the wider colonial project that held the future of the Lao was to assimilate totally to France.

As he noted in his preface, Phetsarath claimed that astrology had become a lost science and that no one could be found who knew it anymore, which he linked to the decline of the country since the fall of the old Lao kingdom of Lan Xang two centuries before.¹⁵⁸ Thus Phetsarath faced a serious problem: how could he possibly recover the lost science of Lao astrology if there was no one left to teach him:

When I did see the difficulties to make [for] oneself a new calendar and the lack of understanding in calendar texts like this then [I] had even more of an interest, wanting to study the science of ancient astrology more greatly. But were [one] to seek a teacher, a person who understands this science, [they] were rare, or [one] might even say that there was not any [teacher] at all. I thus needed to seek, research [and] learn by myself, according to the texts of the Lao, Khmer and Thai ancestors. These texts also might bear good fruit. Yet in these texts there was no explanation for the basis of various principles. Anyhow, I still hold that the texts of the three races [Lao, Khmer, Thai] is a good teacher for me.¹⁵⁹

In his effort to revive a distinctly Lao calendar, Phetsarath found he was too late and the knowledge he was searching for had already been lost. To fill in the gaps, he had to rely on Thai and Cambodian works. Thus, elite like Phetsarath were not simply “recovering” old Lao traditions, nor merely preserving them, but recreating and re-inventing them.¹⁶⁰ Ironically, the very institute the French established to bind the Lao to the other Indochina states (Vietnam, Cambodia) resulted in a work which partly drew on Thai sources, showing how French designs could be frustrated by the actions of the elite. But why did no one ever think to make a Lao calendar before? Before the modern-era, no one would have ever thought of making a “Lao” calendar, only a Buddhist one. Phetsarath was contributing in his own way to a transition from the universal Buddhist religion into a new national form, carving out a Lao Buddhism in the process, a uniquely modern

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p. ix.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ E.J. Hobsbawm and T.O. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

endeavor.¹⁶¹ The elite cultural nationalist project was a modernist movement. An authentic Lao culture, where it had been lost, had to be created by the cultural geniuses among the elite. This process gave birth to the idea of a Lao culture and nation perceived as a race facing extinction under Thai, French (and Vietnamese) domination.

Phetsarath was joined in his work at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute by many others, some of whom had diverse backgrounds. Maha Sila Viravong, Prince Phetsarath's secretary, wrote the first Lao grammar in 1935, thereby staking a claim to the independence of the Lao language.¹⁶² A few years later he wrote a treatise on codifying Lao poetry, which explained how it was separate and distinct from Thai poetry. Like Phetsarath, Sila did not have any teacher when he codified the rules of Lao poetry and had to make up the verse rules, inevitably drawing from the Thai.¹⁶³ In the 1930s, Sila was already on his way to becoming a highly important figure among the RLG elite. Yet this was not inevitable as he was born in Roi-et, in the northeast of Thailand to a family of farmers. He trained many years to become a judge in the Thai judiciary before deciding to give up the only life he had ever known. He chose to move to Laos after being subjected to ethnic aspersions in Bangkok for being Lao.¹⁶⁴ He recounted this pivotal episode in his life in his memoir written nearly sixty years later:

Given this situation, I lost my determination to study further and at the same time, after reading a Lao newspaper from Vientiane which some monks from Meuang Khong had brought, I had the idea that what I really wanted was to go to see Vientiane. Together with this, I read a book called *Prapagabot Ai Anou Viangchan* or "The Suppression of the Rebellion of Ai Anou of Vientiane" published by Phra Nakhorn Sawannaworaphinich, the Supreme Councilor of the King Rama 7... which was distributed at a royal *kathina* robe-offering ceremony. In this book, they called King

¹⁶¹ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), p. 40 where he describes Mongkut's role in the splitting of the world into a religious and a scientific one. See further Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006).

¹⁶² Born in Roi-et, northeast Thailand to a family of farmers, Sila was able to become a central figure of the intellectual elite of the RLG period.

¹⁶³ Peter Koret "Books of Search: The Invention of Traditional Lao Literature as a Subject of Study" in Grant Evans (ed.) *Laos: Culture and Society* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999).

¹⁶⁴ I use the term "ethnic" rather than "racist" here due to the different context in Thailand compared to Laos. Most importantly, Thailand never experienced a racist colonial regime like Laos did.

Anou “Ai” Anou and his wife Queen Khampornng was called “Ee” Khampornng. When I finished reading this story, I felt extremely hurt and angry, and the idea of national liberation arose very strongly. From that time on, I urged my fellow monastics who had passed the *maha* level to form a group in order to liberate Laos, even though we had no power or knowledge of politics, only anger and resentment.¹⁶⁵

The term *ai* (ໄຂ້) meant “bastard” or “fool” so one can understand the offense this would have caused Sila or any other Lao. It was also a form of address of an adult to a child, which thereby served to portray the Lao as the dependent helpless wards of the Thai. Westerners who were in Bangkok around the turn of the century wrote of how speaking Lao would cause Thai to call them a “monkey.”¹⁶⁶ Later the *Lao Nyai* newspaper would print political cartoons mocking Thai as monkeys.¹⁶⁷ Such antagonism, with its racist undertones, was formative, often central, in the earliest forms of modern nationalism. Until this point, Sila was willing to assimilate to the dominate Thai culture, but after this experience he awakened to the cause of Lao nationalism, in youthful anger.

Tradition was invented by the Lao elite at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute for their own political purposes. The nationalist movement would have been impossible without them (or at least have taken a very different form), but it also drew from diverse sources. As much as the French sponsored or supported the Lao elite in their cultural works, there were many cases in which the French sought to suppress Lao nationalism or were the antagonist to an emerging Lao nationalism. During the colonial era, it was the French who maintained divisions within the country, especially between north and south.¹⁶⁸ They did not allow Lao to publish freely and even largely excluded

¹⁶⁵ Sila Viravong, ຊີວິດຜູ້ຂ້າ [“My life”] (Vientiane: Manthathurat publishing house, 2004), p. 41-43. English in the original.

¹⁶⁶ Justin McDaniel, “Notes on the Lao influence on Northern Thai Buddhist Literature” in K. Nettavong, H. Hundis, D. Kanlaya, D. Wharton, and K. Yangnouvong, eds., *The Literary Heritage of Laos: Preservation, Dissemination and Research Perspectives*, (Vientiane: National Library of Laos, 2005).

¹⁶⁷ Ivarsson, *Creating Laos*.

¹⁶⁸ Kennon Breazeale has found evidence in the French archives that the Luang Prabang elite (ca. 1893-1930) had their own reasons to maintain their special status as a protectorate separate from the rest of the Lao colony.

them from the administration, employing far more Vietnamese instead. Some French actually opposed cultural nationalism projects by suggesting Lao use the Thai script or that the ancient Buddhist monastery Vat Sisaket be made into a museum, arousing opposition by Phetsarath who was never simply a docile subject, even in the colonial era. More importantly, the French influence on Lao cultural nationalism, rather than being “instrumental” was rather mixed.¹⁶⁹ Even though the colonial administration was tiny some previous studies of Lao cultural nationalism privilege French works to the exclusion of Lao ones.¹⁷⁰ This simplification does not show any of the complex interplay among French and Lao or even those who totally rejected French works, which itself was often how the French were able to (negatively) influence the Lao.

Further, cultural nationalism has been artificially separated from political nationalism and the independence movement. While in other places such a dichotomy may have existed, in Laos Phetsarath was the leader of both the elite cultural nationalists at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute and the *de facto* head of the later Issara independence movement. Moreover, the co-founders of the Lao Renovation movement themselves, Katay Sasorith and Thao Nhouy Abhay both cooperated with the Japanese and joined the Issara when the time came.¹⁷¹ Issara documents were printed on the backs of Lao Renovation documents aptly illustrating how closely the two were linked. And Sisouk Na Champassak, himself a loyalist pointedly said “the first awakening of a true Lao consciousness dates from 1945.”¹⁷² While some have not attributed any role of cultural

¹⁶⁹ Ivarsson, “Cultural Nationalism in a Colonial Context,” p. 238: “What I wish to show here is how French colonialism was instrumental in bringing about a similar kind of cultural nationalism in Laos...”

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, especially his discussion of early histories, p. 244-246, where he only considers French works which leads him to repeat uncritically the colonial propaganda that the French saved Laos from the Thai.

¹⁷¹ Michel Caply (Jean Deuve), *Guérilla au Laos* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1966), p. 175. Nhouy Abhay ran a newspaper spreading pro-Japanese propaganda, including calling for “yellow races” to unite against the white race. Both he and Katay were concerned with the threat of Vietnamese separatists in the urban areas of the country who might seek to unite with a resurgent Vietnam.

¹⁷² Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 11.

nationalism in the rise the independence movement that created the Royal Lao Government, ignoring the progression from one to the other is needlessly convoluted. While there was a cultural aspect to early Lao nationalism that was key, that does not mean those working in the 1920s and 1930s on cultural texts were apolitical, or had no differences with the French.¹⁷³

While it is clear the French wanted to “delink” Laos from a Greater Siam this does not explain the motivations of the elite working at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute.¹⁷⁴ What were the Lao elite hoping to achieve by defining a distinct Lao history, culture, religion, and language? Even though they were reacting in part against French cultural assimilation and portrayals of the Lao, they worked to revive their culture so as to not forget they were Lao. Moreover, one can only speculate as to whether the elite might have considered independence in the 1930s. Franco-Lao cooperation had clear limits, rooted in the separate interests of each side. While the French sought to cultivate a dependency among the Lao, some among the elite would not accept this subordination indefinitely. Toward the end of World War II, it became clear that there were irreconcilable differences.

¹⁷³ Ibid, p. 249, portrays Sila as “intimately linked with endeavors...orchestrated by the French” yet only a few years later Sila would flee the country in 1940 and return to join the Issara independence movement. Sila in fact never even learned French and remained skeptical of the West throughout his life.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 238.

PART ONE: SEMI-COLONIAL YEARS (1945-1954)

CHAPTER TWO: ORIGINS OF DEMOCRACY

Introduction

This chapter examines the origins of democracy in Laos. For the first time in history, a “Kingdom of Laos” was formed by the unification of what was then the Kingdom of Luang Prabang with southern Laos on September 15, 1945.¹⁷⁵ This was followed by the promulgation of the first democratic constitution on October 12, 1945, which was the first legal document to grant Lao civil and political rights by the first Lao parliament. This Kingdom of Laos was itself a creation of the Lao Issara (ລາວອິດສະຣະ) independence movement, which declared the country independent in the political vacuum after World War II. Unprecedented in Lao history, the “Lao people” (ປະຊາຊົນລາວ) were invoked as the ultimate source of authority for this and other acts taken by the Issara government, which acted without any foreign sponsor, in what it viewed as the interests of the nation. In this and other ways the Issara independence movement opened a new era in Lao history, one of popular sovereignty and modern democracy, that has not yet been fully appreciated.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Katay Sasorith ed., *Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement d'Indépendance nationale Lao* (Bangkok: editions Lao-Issara, 1948), p. 179 “Proclamation of Lao Unity.” The Kingdom of Luang Prabang was treated as a protectorate in some ways whereas the southern Lao territory was a colony administered directly by the French. However, Kennon Breazeale has noted that the treaty August Pavie made with Luang Prabang concerning its protectorate status was never brought before the French parliament. See Kennon Breazeale, “Laos Mapped by Treaty and Decree, 1895-1907,” in Mayoury Ngaosrivathana and Kennon Breazeale (eds.) *Breaking New Ground in Lao History: Essays on the Seventh to Twentieth Centuries* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002). Moreover, Breazeale argues persuasively that the French colonial officials sought to maintain this appearance for their own purposes.

¹⁷⁶ Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 60, 65, 74 mainly discusses the Issara in terms of “failure” and “defeat.” See further Adams, “Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries,” p. 110 which misrepresents the Issara as solely concerned with “prolong[ing] the retention of lowland Lao elite privileges.” While some level of class interest is undeniable, that was not the only concern of the Issara, who introduced a democracy over any other political system (including absolute monarchy). See *ibid*, p. 101 which labels the Issara “immature defensive culturalism.” While Adams did consider Issara writings she claimed they were not concerned with modernization or social change and had no clear vision of the future.

But this was never an easy or simple transition by any means. The Issara government was only in power for less than a year before it was forced into exile by a French military campaign to reconquer the country.¹⁷⁷ Nevertheless its influence on modern Lao politics is large and enduring. In the immediate aftermath of exile and reconquest there followed a deep controversy concerning the nature, condition, and direction of the country, what the French and those loyal to them promoted as the “New Laos” (*Le Laos Nouveau*, ລາວໃໝ່).¹⁷⁸

The key questions centered around: what were the aspirations of the people, what should be the place of democracy, what should be the future of the country, what should modernity look like, and what of traditional culture? By the end of 1949 many of the most prominent Issara had returned to the country to rebuild in earnest, joining the loyalists in a renewed quest for modernity, of which democracy was the signal achievement, yet already there were the looming drums of war on the horizon.¹⁷⁹ But even then, tensions among former-Issara and their opponents the loyalists continued to burn slowly behind the scenes. Thus in the semi-colonial years, Lao people, elite and commoner alike, raised central issues that would dominate the political and intellectual life of the Royal Lao Government (RLG) era.

¹⁷⁷ Michel Caply (Jean Deuve), *Guérilla au Laos* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1966) and J. de Crèvecoeur, *La Libération du Laos, 1945-1946* (Chateau de Vincennes: Service historique de l'Armée de terre, 1985) are the principal works on the French reconquest.

¹⁷⁸ I use the term “New Laos” to refer to the country from French reconquest (April 1946) to the return of the Issara (October 1949). The term “New Laos” had been in use since the war-time *Lao Nyai* campaigns (1941-1945), but took on new meaning after reconquest as the French sought to renew the colonial bond. For the *Lao Nyai* campaign see further Soren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space between Indochina and Siam, 1860-1945* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2008) and Soren Ivarsson “Towards a New Laos: Lao Nhay and the campaign for a national “Re-awakening” in Laos, 1941-45” in *Laos: Culture and Society*, ed. Grant Evans (Silkworm Books: Chiang Mai, 1999).

¹⁷⁹ The Issara were partly motivated to return to Laos by the change in government in Thailand. The Pridi Banomyong government had been sympathetic to the Issara cause and provided refuge for Issara in exile, but it was forced out of power by the return of Field Marshal Phibun Songkram. See Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 181.

Lao democracy took root in the soil of a poor country wracked by war, where peace would prove fleeting and illusory; it appeared at a most inauspicious time. The movement from which it sprang was led by a Lao elite who had served in the French colonial administration and had little proven political experience, but who nonetheless managed to find support from broader sections of society.¹⁸⁰ Many have discussed the anti-colonial dimensions of the Issara movement to the neglect of its democratic elements.¹⁸¹ The nascent movement deliberately took democracy as its primary aim for the country perceiving that there would be no true independence without a democratic form of government, even as the movement for independence evolved at the grassroots level. The followers of the Issara movement seem to have understood, even with little or no Western education, the importance of both. They recognized the universal value of democracy and independence as it related to their own circumstances. They did not need years of schooling by the French to see the merits of these “Western” principles. The arrival of democracy in the country is all the more miraculous given the reaction of the West (especially France), which sought to violently uproot it as quickly as it could take hold. In confronting a far superior military foe, many Lao refused to be cowed, and rallied around the Issara, not accepting anything less than what they

¹⁸⁰ Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2002) p. 87-88 denies the movement reached more than urban elite, but it could not have sustained itself in as many parts of the country, much less in neighboring Thailand, over the years without doing so. The Issara efforts to reach the masses benefited from the earlier *Lao Nyai* campaigns. For the account of one non-elite Issara follower, see Nakhonkham Bouphanouvong, (trans.) Gregory Green, *Sixteen Years in the Land of Death: Revolution and Reeducation in Laos* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2003). Nakhonkham claims the Issara did enjoy popular support directly contradicting Evan’s source. Issara guerrillas operated throughout the country after reconquest, Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 71. The French never completely eradicated the Issara movement. Pathet Lao works describe how some of the sangha supported the Issara before 1949.

¹⁸¹ See for example Geoffrey Gunn, *Political Struggles in Laos, 1930-1954* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1988).

perceived to be a fully realized democracy.¹⁸² Lao democracy first arose only by resisting concerted efforts by the West (e.g. France) to uproot and destroy it.

Whatever one might say about popular support, the French, for all their criticism of the Issara as being elitists who were out of touch with the people, never held an election until after securing military hold of the country; and elections that were not truly free or fair in as much as the Issara were not allowed to participate.¹⁸³ The French choice of a military solution to an inherently political problem only fanned the flames of anti-colonial, anti-French resistance. The Issara movement would not have survived without wider support from the likes of urban workers and rural farmers, who began to wage a low-level guerrilla war that would outlast the French presence in the country.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Thus July 19, 1949 was celebrated as independence day in the RLG. The best illustration of this fact may be that on their return the Issara formed a political party, the National Progress party and their leaders Souvanna Phouma and Katay Sasorith held the post of Prime Minister between them until 1960.

¹⁸³ The French criticized the Issara as an elitist movement out of touch with the people, which is exactly how the British criticized the Indian National Congress movement in India. See Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 8th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p. 268. Criticisms about the degree of representation of either movement seem disingenuous when colonialism was itself only maintained by force. See also Arthur Dommen and George Dalley, "The OSS in Laos: The 1945 Raven Mission and American Policy" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 22(2) (1991), p. 344 which notes a US intelligence mission's findings in September 1945 that while both the Issara and French claimed to have popular support on their side, neither offered evidence so the report's findings on this topic were inconclusive.

¹⁸⁴ See Adams, "Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries," p. 113, which notes the Lao Issara "driven into Thailand in April 1946, immediately began armed forays back across the Mekong, seizing arms, kidnapping village notables, and harassing the French who crossed the Thai border in hot pursuit." See further Vatthana Pholsena, "The Early Years of the Lao Revolution (1945-1949): Between History, Myth and Experience" *South East Asia Research*, 14, 3 (November, 2006), which gives some idea of how active Issara supporters were in the south, where notably some elite like Prince Boun Oum supported French reconquest from the beginning. For one account of Issara activity in the north, see also Norman Lewis, *Dragon Apparent*, who himself encountered "Issarak" [sic] on the road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. See further Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 208, which notes the early Pathet Lao guerrilla campaigns began in 1951. Finally, one may consider the size of Pathet Lao forces by the time they were regrouped in Phongsaly and Sam Neua at the end of the First Indochina War. Although the nature of the anti-French resistance had changed greatly, it was still spread over a wide area of the country. There were 2,362 from lower Laos, 2,241 from the Vientiane-Sayaburi area, 670 from Xieng Khouang, 584 from Luang Prabang and 206 from Houeisai. There were another 1,000 in the two provinces although their presence dated from the 1953 Vietminh invasion. For these figures see Christopher Goscha, "Vietnam and the world outside: The case of Vietnamese communist advisers in Laos (1948-62) *South East Asia Research*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2004), p. 165. Ibid, p. 166, there were an additional 1,000 cadres in addition to the soldiers.

There is one account by an Issara cadre that provides rare insight into followers of the Issara movement in the semi-colonial years. Nakhonkham Bouphanouvong recounts in his autobiography the brutality of the French in their suppression of the Issara during their reconquest of the country, which continued even after September 1946.¹⁸⁵ He also tells of the Issara movement itself, recalling that it enjoyed wide popular support, at least in the areas he was active: Savannakhet, Xepon, Thakhek, and Mahaxay-Khammouane. He further provides an invaluable account of how the Issara movement was coopted by the Viet Minh, transforming from cooperation to control in 1950.¹⁸⁶ At an important meeting in August of that year relative unknowns like Nouhak Phoumsavanh and Kaysone Phomvihane were put in charge of the central committee of the Issara, whereas the true Issara were side-lined. Besides that, Nakhonkham writes in the preface about his friend, who went by the *nom de guerre* “steel pen” whom Nakhonkham praised for his ability to criticize the French. Steel Pen would have been a participant in the Issara-loyalist debates which I discuss in detail below.

For the semi-colonial years, most Western scholarship has consistently presented a narrative that has been biased in favor of the loyalists (i.e. those who supported France’s return after WWII).¹⁸⁷ Thus most works cite the date of the founding of the Royal Lao Government as 1947, not 1945. Yet the most extreme example of implicit bias in favor of the loyalist view of this

¹⁸⁵ Nakhonkham, *Sixteen Years in the Land of Death*. For a Issara leader’s memoir, see Oun Sananikone, *Lao Issara: the memoirs of Oun Sananikone*, John B. Murdoch (trans.) (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP, 1975).

¹⁸⁶ Bruce Lockhart has suggested the Pathet Lao appropriated the Issara name for a new “Issara” which had little to do with the earlier one. The Pathet Lao were founded in August 1950, yet the wider movement was known at the time as the Neo Lao Issara (Lao Issara Front). See further Christopher Goscha, “Vietnam and the world outside: The case of Vietnamese communist advisers in Laos (1948-62) *South East Asia Research*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2004), p. 149, which notes national resistance governments were created in 1950 to counter the new French Associated States.

¹⁸⁷ See for one typical example, Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*. See further Clive Christie, “Marxism and the History of Nationalist Movements in Laos” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1979); thus Christie says on p. 153 that “the transition to independence was peacefully achieved rather than against the French.” Even more recent advanced works follow this pattern like Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015). See *ibid*, p. 102 where Creak quotes a speech from the loyalist Prince Boun Oum, but never addresses who exactly the “rebel” is in Boun Oum’s speech.

period is that several historians were biased enough by their French sources that they themselves actually referred to the Issara as “rebels.”¹⁸⁸ These same scholars largely ignored Issara writings, silencing their voices just as the loyalists did at the time. Only recently did anyone seriously consider Issara writings, yet while Grant Evans translated a number of Issara and loyalist works of the time, his object of study remained the monarchy.¹⁸⁹ A biased view in favor of the loyalists has profoundly shaped our understanding of the modern country. From this filtered through the idea that all Lao politics was only motivated by selfish interests, totally devoid of any higher principles or ideals; the “family politics thesis” originated most strongly among French scholars who were themselves involved in the reconquest of the country and denied Issara demands for independence.

This period and the Issara especially have been studied in terms of “political struggle” or military campaigns, but there is more to say of them concerning other matters.¹⁹⁰ It is not the military dimension that will be studied here, which has received due attention in other works.¹⁹¹ Democracy at this early stage was not simply the result of a military action or a power struggle, although those were vital to its survival, but was foremost an intellectual task. It was fought by pen and paper, in the newspapers, in words, and in the realm of ideas by those living in exile (the

¹⁸⁸ Gunn, *Political Struggles in Laos*, p. 304. He specifically refers on p. 195 to the “rebel Issara” showing he had indeed become biased by his sources in the French archives. See further *ibid.*, p. 193, 195, 197, 201-202, 204-207. Dommen and Dalley, “The OSS in Laos,” p. 345 refers to the Issara as “the armed rebellion.” Deuve likewise described one Lao Issara who came over to the loyalists before 1949 saying he “returns to the king.” On the other hand, no scholar has referred to the Pathet Lao as “rebels.”

¹⁸⁹ Grant Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010), p. 158-170.

¹⁹⁰ Jean Deuve, *Le Laos, 1945-1949: Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement Lao Issara* (Montpellier: Centre d'histoire militaire et d'études de défense nationale, 1999), Gunn, *Political Struggles in Laos*. Stuart-Fox also focuses on the military fortunes and power struggles of the Issara, in his *A History of Laos*, p. 59-65, 70-74.

¹⁹¹ For an excellent summary, see Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 138-145.

Issara), those who had not yet taken a side and those who found themselves newly placed at the seat of power in Vientiane, working alongside the French (the loyalists).

Issara Government, the First Kingdom of Laos

There has been a lack of consensus over the actual date of independence of Laos.¹⁹² Was it April 8, 1945 when the Japanese sponsored the first declaration of independence?¹⁹³ Or perhaps August 27, 1945 when those who would later create the Issara refused to let the French return? Or could it only come later, bestowed by France, on October 23, 1953?¹⁹⁴ Or was it only really gained when France finally relinquished its power over Laos at the Geneva Conference in 1954? To choose a date is a political act that inevitably endorses one viewpoint or another in this highly controversial period in the country's history. Those who supported the Issara movement have in later years rallied around October 12, 1945 as the date of the country's true independence.¹⁹⁵ It stands as an event in which the Lao stood alone, without any foreign sponsor, to claim their

¹⁹² Bruce Lockhart, "Narrating 1945 in Lao historiography" in *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past: Lao Historiography at the Crossroads*, eds. Christopher Goscha and Soren Ivarsson (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2003).

¹⁹³ The Issara often cited this declaration rather than any of their own as they saw themselves as only upholding what had already come to pass. Katay Sasorith ed., *Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement d'Indépendance nationale Lao* (Bangkok: editions Lao-Issara, 1948), p. 173-174. The authorship of this work, like other Issara writings, is uncertain. It is certain Thao Katay is the editor, and he even appears to be the author of many writings, but some sections are written by anonymous others e.g. "a Lao Issara group." It is likely that Xieng Mao, among others, contributed some writings. One pamphlet was written by Singha Soukhaseum. Another pamphlet was written by Don Sasorith, William Rabbit, and Arsene Lapin. In some places Katay writes notes thanking these persons for their contributions, but in other places he claims to be the author of their works. Oudone Sananikone, who was director of propaganda for the Issara in exile, may also have authored some texts. It has been assumed Katay was the author of most Issara writings, but it also possible Katay was protecting others from facing any repercussions for their writings. Katay himself was not able to return to the country in 1949 with other Issara leaders, but remained exiled in Saigon until 1952.

¹⁹⁴ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 59.

¹⁹⁵ Sila Viravong, ບັດສາດວັນທີ12ຕຸລາ1945 ["October 12, 1945"] (Vientiane: 1975). Although the Issara at the time celebrated July 19, 1949 as their winning independence, which they saw as vindication of their long struggle against France in exile. July 19 was commemorated as independence day in the RLG. It was the date of the signing of the General Conventions between France and the RLG which devolved greater powers to the RLG, increasing its autonomy from France, while also preparing the way for the return of the Issara.

independence. On the other hand, those who remained loyal to the old French regime saw their country as only being “liberated” by the French in April-May 1946, rallied around the Modus-Vivendi of August 27, 1946 as the foundation of a New Laos, with real independence indefinitely delayed to some indeterminate time in the future. Yet there is an argument to be made in favor of rehabilitating the place of the Issara in the course of history. In hindsight, they were never just one faction in a power struggle, but had promoted a new basis of politics and political life in the country. Since this chapter treats the origins of democracy, it must begin with a consideration of the first democratic government constituted by the Issara, who commenced the democratic era (1945-1975) in Lao history.

Most accounts of the period begin with the Japanese coup of March 9, 1945, in which the French were dramatically ousted from power in Laos. By framing the events this way, the Japanese-French conflict has long overshadowed and side-lined the Issara, who would take major steps to profoundly change their country.¹⁹⁶ Not centering the discussion on the Issara has important implications for our understanding of modern Laos. The Issara’s aim was no less than to liberate the country from foreign rule, which, in their view, had badly governed the country. Yet a higher aim was already apparent: the Issara sought to rule the country in the national interests, for the good of the Lao people, an idea expressed in many extant Issara documents.¹⁹⁷ This was the fundamental idea of the Issara. They saw clearly that the French could never rule the country as well as them because the French would invariably rule it in the interests of France, which oppressed the Lao, and could never be as good as native rule which would give voice to the aspirations of the Lao people as a matter of course. To achieve this aim, the Issara initiated a

¹⁹⁶ This is not to say the Japanese were not a major influence on the Issara. That topic deserves further research.

¹⁹⁷ Caches of Issara government era documents are found annexed to some Issara works. See also Jean Deuve, *Le Laos*, 1999. The sources I use to present “Issara” views is derived from various pamphlets and collected articles mostly derived from the Issara newspaper, *Rocket*.

political revolution, the introduction of democracy, that was central to the RLG. This was the earliest appearance of what I call RLG ideology.¹⁹⁸ The Issara were decidedly nationalists, anti-colonists, and even anti-Western to a degree, but they were also democrats, who often articulated their views in the political language of France.¹⁹⁹

The main events of the rise and fall of the Issara government, which lasted for less than one entire year (August 1945 to April 1946), are sufficiently known to be recapitulated in brief.²⁰⁰ In late August, and early September officials of the Luang Prabang government moved to take power in the vacuum after the Japanese left, which was easier to realize in the north demobilized by the Chinese National Army than in the south where the British allowed the French to return. The Prime Minister of Luang Prabang, Viceory Phetsarath Rattanavongsa, took a lead in these activities, but was not acting alone by any means. When the government formed, the key members

¹⁹⁸ Related to this, the Lao-Pen-Lao movement renamed itself the *Phak Xat Lao* after being forced into exile by French reconquest in 1946. See Phinith Savèng, Souk-Aloun Phou Ngeun and Thongchanh Vannida, *Histoire du Pays Laos, de la préhistoire à la république* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), p. 134.

¹⁹⁹ Stuart-Fox's assessment that the Issara were too divided by regionalism and personal rivalries to "effectively" develop nationalism misses their larger influences over the country and mistakes their lack of success with practical matters for lack of sufficient patriotism; for example, see Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 60, 74. The claim that regionalism divided the Issara does not account for the fact that there were prominent Issara members from all regions of the country. I will address the issue of personal rivalries below.

²⁰⁰ For one fairly typical account see, Marc Askew, William S. Logan, Colin Long, *Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao landscape* (New York: Routledge, 2007) p. 112-115. On the role of the US in the Issara period see Dommen and Dalley, "The OSS in Laos," which describes early American support for the Issara in the face of French efforts to restore colonial rule. Yet Americans on the ground who supported the Lao Issara were not supported by policy-makers in Washington and as such were recalled before they could influence events further. This was an unfortunate, missed opportunity. Although the authors are critical of the OSS team's support for the Issara (p.345-346) in doing so they weigh the French against the Viet Minh without sufficient attention given to the Issara in their own right (which they view as a Vietnamese organization). This study does provide further information on the Issara, especially that Phetsarath believed after meeting with OSS agents he would receive US recognition and aid for the new government (p. 331); Phetsarath also told the OSS agents he "wants to be in a confederation of states including Siam, but does not want to be ruled under an Annamite Republic" (p. 337). Ibid, 335, the Issara military was woefully under prepared to defend Lao independence with only around 400 men between Vientiane, Thakhek and Savannakhet. Ibid, p. 336 the French claimed to have legal authority in Laos, completely disregarding the political issues, but ultimately the French settled the matter by force as they had in 1893. The Issara did attempt to negotiate directly with the French at Saigon via Baron Patrick Surcouf. The French ignored this effort. See Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, p. 29.

of the movement were: Xieng Mao (Phanya Kham Mao),²⁰¹ Prince Souvanna Phouma, Prince Souphanouvong, Prince Somsanit,²⁰² Katay Sasorith, Nhouy Abhay, Ngon Sananikone,²⁰³ Oun

²⁰¹ Born in 1892 in Luang Prabang, Xieng Mao had a leading role in the Issara movement. For his education he studied in France at Dijon at the École Pratique de Commerce from 1911 to 1916. He then worked in various companies in France, before returning to Laos in 1917. He served in the colonial administration as a clerk to a French Résident. He also was an interpreter for the judiciary. In 1922 he participated in a colonial exhibition in Marseille. By 1941 he was named Chao Muong (Mayor) of Vientiane. He remained in this position during the Japanese coup of March 9, 1945. On October 12, 1945 he became the first Prime Minister of the country in the Issara government. He remained in the country until April 1946 and then lived in exile in Thailand until 1949. On his return to Laos he cofounded the Progressive Party which became a major force in RLG politics in the 1950s. In 1950 he served as Minister of Justice and Health. In 1951 he added the Religious Affairs portfolio. In 1955 he was president of the Privy Council. He died in 1965. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965: Histoire événementielle de l'indépendance à la guerre américaine* (Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1984), p. 372.

²⁰² Born on April 19, 1913 in Luang Prabang, Somsanith was a member of the aristocracy of Luang Prabang and nephew of Souvanna Phouma and Phetsarath. He study at the Lycée Pavie in Vientiane and went on the School of Law and Administration where he graduated in 1935. He then served in the colonial administration, rising to be Chao Muong of Vientiane in 1942 and served the Résidence Supérieure in Vientiane. He joined the Issara in 1945 as a minister and went into exile in Thailand. In 1950 he returned to take up a cabinet post as Minister of Justice and Health. In 1952 he served as provincial governor of Nam Tha. From 1954 to 1956 he was the director general of the police. In 1956 he served as Vice-Minister of the Interior and Social Security. In January 1960 he was Minister of Interior again and after the elections that year he was Prime Minister briefly until the Kongle coup. From 1961 to 1963 he was deputy from Nam Tha and president of the National Assembly. In 1965 he was elected as a deputy. By 1973 he was a member of the Privy Council. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 366. See further Joel Halpern, "Lao Project Paper no. 19: Laos profiles" (1961), p. 21-23.

²⁰³ Born December 29, 1914 in Vientiane, a member of the Sananikone family. For his education he studied in Saigon and Hanoi. He thereafter served in the colonial administration as an instructor. In 1945 he was Chao Muong of Thakhek and in contact with the Lao Pen Lao. He then joined the Lao Issara, however he soon joined the loyalists at the beginning of 1946. Then he served as provincial governor of Thakhek in 1946 and then as governor of Vientiane from 1946 to 1948. In 1948 he went to Saigon as head of the Lao economic mission. In the 1951 elections he was elected as a deputy from Thakhek. He was made vice-Minister of Economy in Souvanna Phouma's government. From 1954 to 1955 he was Ambassador to the United Kingdom. From 1956 to 1959 he held various portfolios in various governments. In January 1960 he was Minister of Justice, Religion, Sports and Youth. From December 1960 to June 1962 he served as Economic Minister in the Boun Oum government. From then until April 1964 he was Minister of Public Works and Transport in the second coalition government. From 1965 to 1975 he was a minister in various governments. In 1975 he fled to France. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos*, p. 351-352.

Sananikone,²⁰⁴ Ounheuan Norasing,²⁰⁵ Sing Rattanasamay,²⁰⁶ Keouang Pathummarat, Thamsainya Sithsena,²⁰⁷ Sila Viravong, Phoumi Vongvichit and Phoumi Nosavan²⁰⁸ among

²⁰⁴ Born on October 12, 1907 in Vientiane Oun was a leading member of the Sananikone family. In the colonial administration he worked in the veterinarian service. During the Franco-Thai war he fled to Thailand where he worked for Radio Bangkok. He was an important leader of the Lao Pen Lao movement that emerged in Thailand. Then he joined the Lao Issara and formed a committee to liberate southern Laos. He returned from exile in 1949 and became a deputy from Vientiane in the Democrat Party. In 1951 he became vice-president of the National Assembly. In the 1955 elections he was re-elected as a deputy of Paksane and became president of the National Assembly. He may have had a role in the April 1964 coup. In 1973 he left the country for France and died in 1978. Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos*, p. 355. See further Oun Sananikone, *Lao Issara: the memoirs of Oun Sananikone*, John Murdoch (trans.), David Wyatt (ed.) (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP, 1975).

²⁰⁵ Born in 1920 in Luang Prabang, he was the son of a Chao Muong and later earned the title Phanya for his service. He served in the colonial administration as Secrétaire of the Résidences. By 1944 he worked in the Inspector of Political Affairs service. He joined the Issara and became Secretary of State. He returned in 1949 and served in a succession of important posts as Minister of Finances in 1950, Director of Customs in 1953-1954 and vice-Minister of Interior in 1954. In the 1955 elections he was elected as a deputy from Luang Prabang for the Progressive Party. In 1956 he served as vice Minister of Justice and Religion. He later joined the Rally for the Lao People Party. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos*, p. 355. See further Halpern, "Lao Project Paper no. 19", p. 48.

²⁰⁶ He was from Vientiane and joined the Garde Indochinoise, rising to chief warrant officer in 1945. After the Japanese coup on March 9, 1945 he was commander of the civic guard of Vientiane created by Phetsarath. In the Issara government he was minister of war from 1945-1946. He resigned the Issara in 1948 and returned to Laos. In 1950 he joined the Royal Lao Army as a lieutenant. In 1958 he was promoted to brigadier general and made commander of military region III (Savannakhet). In 1960 he was military attaché to France when he joined Phoumi Nosavan. He also supported the April 1964 coup against Souvanna Phouma. By 1970 he was a military adviser to the government. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos*, p. 362.

²⁰⁷ Originally from northeast Thailand, he led an anti-French protest at the Lycée Pavie in Vientiane in 1940 before fleeing to Thailand with some forty followers. In 1945 he was a member of the Lao Pen Lao. He then became a minister of the Issara. In 1950 he joined the Royal Lao Army. By 1959 he was Secretary General of the Ministry of Defense at the rank of lieutenant colonel. In November 1960 he was a colonel in Kongle's neutralist forces in Vientiane. One month later he was arrested by Phoumi Nosavan's forces and only released in 1963. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos*, p. 370.

²⁰⁸ Born in 1920 in Savannakhet he was a general in the Royal Lao Army. He graduated from the Lycée Pavie in 1940. He then served in the colonial administration as secretary of the Sûreté Fédérale and a youth instructor. He joined the Lao Pen Lao and Issara in 1945 and even joined the Pathet Lao for a time before returning to the RLA in 1950 where he was given the rank of lieutenant. In 1955 he rose to the post of chief of staff of the RLA as a major. Then in 1956 he served as commander of military region II when it included Vientiane. He was the first Lao officer to study at the French War College in 1957. He co-founded the CDIN in 1958, then a colonel. In January 1959 he joined the cabinet as Secretary of State for Defense and Veterans Affairs. In this same year he was promoted to brigadier general. He led the first coup against the Phoui Sananikone government with his fellow CDIN from December 24, 1959 to January 5, 1960. He led the anti-Kongle movement that emerged in Savannakhet and forced Kongle to flee from Vientiane during the Battle of Vientiane in December 1960. He then became Minister of Defense and wielded enormous power over the RLA, although this gradually waned as the RLA suffered military defeats on the battlefield and US policy changed under John F. Kennedy. In June 1962 he was deputy prime minister and minister of finances in the second coalition government. At the time Phoumi became involved in the illegal vice trades to provide alternate funding sources for his forces. His power was diminished in the April 18, 1964 coup. By January 1965 military officers associated with him were involved in a failed coup and he fled the country as a result. In 1967 he was sentenced to twenty years in prison in absentia. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos*, p. 358-359. See further Halpern, "Lao Project Paper no. 19", p. 107-108.

others.²⁰⁹ There were more commoners than princes in the government. They had served in the colonial administration and then participated in *Lao Nyai*, or *Seri Lao* and *Lao Pen Lao* movements prior to joining together as the Lao Issara. Yet a new Issara government was only formed when conflict emerged between the Issara and King Sisavang Vong, which superseded the Kingdom of Luang Prabang as government. It was a conflict between King and his nobles which has led to revolutions in government in many other places in the world. The Issara created an assembly of the people and promulgated a constitution creating the first democratic government in the country. One of the first acts of the Issara was to unify the country, creating the first national government in modern history.²¹⁰ Thus it was the first Royal Lao Government in history.²¹¹ In the eyes of the Issara, unification and independence were one in the same, especially because the south was directly administered by France and not ruled as a Lao kingdom as in the north. The government remained “provisional” before actual elections could be held. French invasion prevented this from ever happening.

The Issara constitution is a historic document on the introduction of democracy to Laos, which reveals the democratic nature of the Issara movement.²¹² The constitution above all placed

²⁰⁹ Khamman Vongkottrattana’s account suggests that Souphanouvong was only called to join the Issara after the outbreak of violence between Lao and Vietnamese, which he put a stop to. Noi Aphai and Ngon Sananikone returned to Laos in 1946. Deuve, *Le Laos*, p. 365. See also Jean Deuve, *Le Royaume du Laos, 1949-1965: Histoire événementielle de l’indépendance à la guerre américaine* (Paris: EFEO, 1984), p. 351-352.

²¹⁰ Khamchan Pradith, ປະຫວັດສາດການທູດລາວ [“History of Lao diplomacy”] (Vientiane: Pakpasak Press, 1971), p. 31. Khamchan wrote that Phetsarath was not acting unilaterally to unify the country, but in fact, “the assembly of the people’s representatives did agree unanimously to join the four southern provinces with Luang Prabang [kingdom].”

²¹¹ Lao kingdoms before the colonial era were the Lan Xang Kingdom (1353-1707), Luang Prabang kingdom (1707-1893), Vientiane Kingdom (1707-1828) and Champassak kingdom (1713-1893). The Phuan kingdom of Xieng Khouang and the Lü state of Chiang Khaeng were at times subordinated to the Lao. See further Snit Smuckarn and Kennon Breazeale, *A Culture in Search of Survival: The Phuan of Thailand and Laos* (New Haven: Yale University, 1988) and Volker Grabowsky and Wichasin Renoo, *Chronicles of Chiang Khaeng: A Tai Lu Principality of the Upper Mekong* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009). The “Kingdom of Laos” (ພຣະຣາຊອານາຈັກລາວ) was never the formal name of any state before 1945.

²¹² For one source on the Issara constitution see Jean Deuve, *Le Laos* (1992), p. 315-321 (Annex 10, provisional Constitution). It was dated October 12, 1945. Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), p. 129 notes that Vietnam’s first national assembly was only created in 1946. The Issara constitution is notably more democratic than the first constitutions of places like the Philippines (1898) or Thailand (1932).

the greatest power of the new government in the hands of the legislature, the Chamber of the Representatives of the People, and sought to limit the powers of the King in ways that did not appear in the later, French-sponsored 1947 constitution. In Article 4 the legislative power “belongs” to the people.²¹³ Yet when describing those who came together to form the first Lao parliament the democratic nature of the government was made explicit: “the Committee of the Representatives of the People, the army, the youth, the functionaries, the civil guard and all the civilian population are reunited in order to establish a constitution for the new administrative regime *which will be democratic*, the King placed under the constitution.”²¹⁴ While the executive power was partly entrusted to the King, it was limited, showing a distinct awareness of the new age of popular sovereignty among the Issara constitutional drafters. In Article 5, the King was “assisted by the Chamber of Representatives of the People” thereby limiting his power and forcing him to share power with the people through their elected representatives.²¹⁵ It was not a pure democracy, but a constitutional monarchy where the people’s power was a significant part of government. While the constitution was only provisional, it was the legislature that had the power to promulgate a new constitution.²¹⁶ Several other articles elevated the legislature over the King: in Article 8, when the throne was vacant the ministers of parliament would install the next King; in Article 9, when the King was not in the capital, it was the ministers who governed; and in Article 10, “a decision of the King, for it to be valid, should be counter-signed by a minister.”²¹⁷

²¹³ Deuve, *Le Laos*, p. 316.

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 317. Emphasis added. The constitution also described the circumstances by which the Issara government arose: “the King of Luang Prabang had signed a treaty in which Laos is again placed under French domination, contrary to the aspirations of the people whose ideal is independence and no longer desire to be placed under the dominance of any [other] people.”

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 316.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 317.

²¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 317-318.

In chapter three (“rights and duties of the Lao citizen”) of the Issara constitution key civil and political rights were enshrined; at the same time the notion of a Lao citizen was established. In Article 11 the rule of law was established: “all individuals are free and equal before the law.”²¹⁸ This language made no distinction between the King, nobles or commoners. This nascent ideal of egalitarian society was a key democratic principle, yet it would prove to be one of the hardest to uphold in practice in the post-colonial period. In Article 12, fundamental freedoms were protected including religion, “thought”, assembly and property rights among others.²¹⁹ In chapters four and five the powers of the legislative bodies were described in detail. The Issara constitution thereby marks the first time in modern history that Lao people were given civil and political rights. It is notable that it was given to them by the Issara movement rather than a foreign power.

In fact, the legislature was the single most developed branch of government in the Issara constitution. The section dealing with the King is the one that limited his powers and subordinated him to the legislature. Elsewhere his powers were only belatedly addressed and even his power to declare war was limited by the United Nations (i.e. only “with the United Nations”).²²⁰ The other key aspect of the Issara constitution is the role envisioned for elections. Elections were called for to elect members of the legislature who “should be the representative of the people of Laos” (Article 17).²²¹ Even meetings of the Chamber of Representatives of the People were required to be public (Article 28) thereby introducing new democratic values throughout the Issara constitution.²²² The later 1947 constitution in many ways could only follow what the Issara already had done, although it did shift power more clearly in favor of the monarchy thereby retreating from

²¹⁸ Ibid, p. 318.

²¹⁹ Ibid. “The freedom of worship, the freedom of thought, of property rights, the right of life, the right of exchange, public meetings, the creation of associations, complaints are authorized.”

²²⁰ Ibid, p. 320.

²²¹ Ibid, p. 318-319.

²²² Ibid, p. 319.

the fullness of the original democracy envisioned by the Issara.²²³ While we cannot know how the constitution might have evolved if the Issara government had been recognized by France, it is a remarkable document which reveals Issara thinking at the moment democracy was introduced to the country.

As fleeting and ephemeral as the Issara government was, it nonetheless confronted enduring issues which every iteration of the Royal Lao Government would come to face in time. Foreign relations were disproportionately important to the government. The Issara government never gained international recognition, which meant the Atlantic Charter would not be upheld in Laos and the Allies would give no aid. As a result, there was no money to run the government, much less to field an army to defend its sovereignty. The chronic underdevelopment of the French period disadvantaged the Issara in this respect. Nevertheless, the Issara did make a stand against the French at Thakhek on March 21, 1946. The Issara government, like many in such situations, tried to get around the funding problem by printing its own money, but it was as worthless as “dried banana leaves.”²²⁴ The Issara also struggled to find competent staff to run the government. The French had not prepared the Lao to govern themselves and their neglect of education would cast a long shadow over twentieth century Laos.²²⁵ Lack of competency in governmental affairs would plague the Royal Lao Government until its final days. At root was a weak, underdeveloped modern education system, which before 1940 was virtually non-existent, as the French relied instead on “pagoda schools.” Some anecdotal accounts have claimed the Issara failed to win

²²³ In the 1947 constitution, while Art. 3 stipulates that power emanates from the people, the king is the one who exercises it. The 1947 constitution places limits on the people whereas the Issara constitution was more concerned with placing limits on the king.

²²⁴ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 87.

²²⁵ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 68 observes this issue for the loyalists. See further *ibid*, p. 63.

popular support, but given the widespread anti-French guerrilla movements which appeared after reconquest, and the accounts of Issara leaders and followers, that claim bears scrutiny.²²⁶

The Issara government has most often been viewed as a collection of clashing personalities who acted more on personal interests and petty jealousies than on the basis of higher values of democracy or independence.²²⁷ This is evident in most accounts of the events leading to the Issara declaration of independence on October 12, 1945. Only two days before, Phetsarath was dismissed by King Sisavang Vong for unifying the country without the King's consent. In early November, the King himself was placed under house arrest by Issara supporters in Luang Prabang as they considered the future of the monarchy. Yet this account entirely misses that the earliest actions among those who would create the Issara government were to safeguard Lao independence and prevent the French from returning to power. In Khamman Vongkotrattana's account of August 27, 1945, Phetsarath announced the Lao would uphold their independence:

The French who fled the Japanese war then returned to be the master, to rule the Lao land again. Prince Viceory [Phetsarath] did not yield, making a communique guaranteeing the Lao people and the old rights (ປະຊາຊົນລາວແລະອາຊຍາສິທທິເກົ່າ) [and for] the French to know that the legal bonds between the Lao nation and the French nation were broken due to the state of the French who did cease to follow the treaty agreed on August 29, 1941 because [the French] were not able to protect the kingdom of Luang Prabang. When [the French] come, [they] must make a new treaty and [we] declare the Lao nation still should hold firm to its own declaration of independence thereby.²²⁸

²²⁶ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 87-88. On the other hand, for accounts of wide-spread anti-French movements in the country after 1945 see, Pholsena, "The Early Years of the Lao Revolution." Lewis, *Dragon Apparent*. See also Nakhonkham, *Sixteen Years in the Land of Death*.

²²⁷ For example, one of the main threads in Stuart-Fox's account of the Issara concerns personal rivalries and family politics, in his *A History of Laos*, p. 60-63, 73-74. This is also prominent in his discussion of the loyalists, *ibid*, p. 66-69.

²²⁸ Khamman Vongkotrattana, ພົງສາວດາຣຊາຕິລາວຄວາມເປັນມາຂອງຊາຕິເດດຕິກດຳບັນ ["Chronicle of the Lao race: Origins of the race from ancient times"] (Vientiane: National Library of Laos 1973 [1961]) p. 169. Khamman Vongkotrattana, who was himself a member of the "front palace" royal family related to Phetsarath, Souvanna Phouma, Souphanouvong, and Kindavong, wrote a sympathetic account of the Issara which was first printed in 1961, shortly after Sisavang Vong and Phetsarath died. Khamman was a prolific historian, who wrote a history of his family, but he also read the eulogy at Phetsarath's funeral. His account should be given more attention in understanding the Issara.

The earliest acts of the Issara were to realize one goal: to prevent the French from returning to re-establish their rule and so affirm Lao independence.²²⁹ Yet in order to do this it in a way that the West would acknowledge and respect it was necessary to speak of the “Lao people” and their rights.²³⁰ It is at the very moment when the Lao people became a new source of sovereignty from which authoritative acts could be derived, that the Lao nation itself appeared opposed to the French nation. Khamman’s account continues noting that Phetsarath then sent a messenger (Ngon Sananikone) to the south to find out if the provincial authorities wished to unite with the north “or will [they] return to depend on the French as before?”²³¹

Then Phetsarath tried to contact the King to get him to declare the unity of the north and the south, but he received a strange reply that the King will “make the kingdom of Luang Prabang a colony of the French.”²³² It was then that Phetsarath began to think that the French were “squeezing (ຮູບ) the King.”²³³ As will become clear, Phetsarath and the Issara never intentionally acted against the King, but in fact feared that he was already held hostage by the French and so was not acting of his own free will. In this account, there was never a petty squabbling over power between the jealous viceory and the King, but only the fear that the French were already subverting the nascent independence movement long before any military campaign to reconquer the country

²²⁹ See also, “Proclamation of his highness the prime minister of the royal government of Luang Prabang to the French population”, *Contribution*, p. 175-177. Phetsarath states therein, “This independence that we have proclaimed, we will preserve and defend it...” he also invokes “the interests of my country and in the [interests] of the Lao people...”

²³⁰ See also, “Proclamation of Lao unity” which invokes “the unanimous wish of the Lao people to form a single homeland and a single state” and “for the good and safeguarding of the Lao people,” *Contribution*, p. 179-180. See also, “Proclamations to the Lao of the southern provinces on the subject of Lao unity,” *ibid* pp. 180-182.

²³¹ Khamman, *Chronicle of the Lao Race*, p. 169.

²³² *Ibid*.

²³³ *Ibid*. Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 62 does acknowledge Phetsarath feared this, but does not grant it any weight in his account. The Issara later compelled the King to recognize their government in November 1945, but discerning the King’s actual wishes is very difficult. Bruce Lockhart suggested that Phetsarath contrived this explanation to avoid accusing the King of being subservient to the French directly, which is a stimulating possibility.

began.²³⁴ Certainly there were personal differences between the two men, but Khamman's account helps to show the underlying issues. Phetsarath himself thought that if he did not unify the country the people would "revolt" and even "do harm to the King" rather than miss the chance to unite and secure independence.²³⁵ Therefore Phetsarath kept the King's reply secret, "which did not obey public opinion foremost (ຊຶ່ງບໍ່ທົງຟັງສຽງມຕົມຫາຊົນເຮັດກ່ອນ)."²³⁶ Elsewhere, Phetsarath thought that "independence must be bought with blood."²³⁷ Even so Phetsarath did not act openly against the King but pretended to wait for a response. Phetsarath felt that even if he acted without the King's consent, he could not possibly be rebelling, because he was acting in the best interests of the Kingdom, and the King would surely do the same were he not held hostage by the French. Phetsarath and the Issara were ultimately vindicated and absolved by the King the day before the French reentered Luang Prabang, when on April 23, 1946 King Sisavang Vong recognized the Issara government as the legal authority of the country.²³⁸

Khamman's account of the Issara origins is important because it shows how the Issara period marks a clear shift within the country from a perspective holding the King as the sole source of sovereign authority to one that "the people" were the source. This shift happens not because of a petty rivalry between Phetsarath and the King as the French often said, in which case "the people"

²³⁴ Khamman, *Chronicle of the Lao Race*, p. 168, notes that the French commissioner had already returned to his former bungalow in Luang Prabang, "ເຂົ້າພັກຕຶກກອມມິສແຮຣ໌ເກົ່າ," which was a symbolic act to re-establish the colonial dominion of France.

²³⁵ Ibid, p. 169-170.

²³⁶ Ibid, p. 169.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Of course, Khamman's account was influenced by his own times, after Phetsarath's own return in 1957. See *Contribution*, p. 79-80. See also Thao Katay, ed., *Les Aspirations du Peuple Lao ou Les Revendications des Lao-Issara* (Bangkok: editions Lao-Issara, 1950), p. 13: "it [the Issara government] was lawfully recognized on two occasions, by his majesty the King of Laos as being "the sole legal and legitimate government of Laos". This last act by the King on the Issara has never been explained by those scholars who claim he remained loyal to the French during the Issara's time in power. Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 65, for instance offers no explanation but simply claims the King was "reluctant," however, the King's recognition of the Issara stands out as bizarre as Stuart-Fox repeatedly claims the King was "deferential" to the return of the French, p. 59, or p. 65, that the King was grateful for France's return.

could only ever be a pawn, but because at a practical level the Issara feared the King was held hostage by the French, not acting of his own free will. At a more abstract level, “the people” were invoked clearly as the source of authority for the new independent government of Laos. That is the case in the single most important Issara document, the one deposing the King on October 20, 1945. In this historic document the Issara invoked the people as the ultimate source of authority, higher even than the King. Thus the Issara listed grievances against the King, who had “manifested an attitude clearly pro-French,” to claim the King had acted against the will of the people (“despite the formal will of the Lao people unanimously decided to defend its unity and independence”) to submit to the French’s return.²³⁹ The whole dilemma stemmed from the King’s refusal to recognize “the higher interests of the Lao country.”²⁴⁰ The Issara continued “that the Luang Prabang King by ignoring the formal aspirations expressed by the entire Lao people failed in his most sacred duty as head of state.”²⁴¹ This conflict “between the king and his people cannot be prolonged any longer without harming unity and independence of the country.”²⁴² The sixth article contained the key passage: “If a king could not govern without a people, a people could perfectly govern without a king.”²⁴³ By this stroke, the Issara permanently transformed the country from traditional forms of power residing in the monarchy to the new era of popular sovereignty. Thus the Issara dared to depose the King: “the new Lao government respectfully requests his majesty Sisavang Vong to abdicate straightaway his powers of his own volition.”²⁴⁴ The King was left waiting “without effective powers” for parliament to decide on the “royalty question.”²⁴⁵ Thus in late 1945 a real

²³⁹ Official Telegram no. 6, Issara government to provincial governors, October 20, 1945, articles one and two, Deuve private papers, dossier no. 4. This telegram “publicized” the telegram no. 32 sent to Luang Prabang on the 18th deposing the king.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, article three.

²⁴¹ Ibid, article four.

²⁴² Ibid, article five.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

dispute between the Issara and the King arose as a misunderstanding over who should speak for the people in the new independent state, the King or parliament. The dispute was really an argument over the limits of monarchy in the new era of popular sovereignty, which is a conflict of principles and ideas, not one solely of personalities. Finally, one cannot render judgement on the Issara without giving due consideration to the considerable time spent in exile, where they had more time to refine their ideas than they did as the governing authority of Laos.

Era of Popular Sovereignty and the New Political Discourse

The origins of democracy witnessed during the provisional Issara government period introduced a new political discourse to Laos.²⁴⁶ In its earliest stages, a new vocabulary entered the Lao lexicon of “freedom” (*seriphap*), “independence” (*itsaraphap, ekkarat*), and “democracy” (*pasathipatai*).²⁴⁷ With a careful consideration of such terms one can see that the new political vocabulary was intimately connected to the transition from an era of monarchy to that of popular sovereignty.²⁴⁸ This transition was a necessary pre-requisite for the true arrival of democracy. Many of the roots of the new words in use in had older meanings that only made sense when sovereignty resided fully in a king. The new meanings taken on by these words is a clear way to observe the broader cultural and intellectual shifts which came as a result of the rise of democracy

²⁴⁶ On “discourse” as an analytical tool see Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1969]). My use of “discourse” follows Foucault, who spoke of it as a set of rules about what can and cannot be said on a certain subject, that ultimately shapes one’s thinking.

²⁴⁷ Somlith Pathommavong, *Laos: Pays du Million D’Eléphants* (Vientiane: Laopanit, 1950), p. 40. He is a strong critic of the Issara, but accurately captures the slogan’s they used to gain followers: *seriphap, itsaraphap, ekkarat*. Further study is required to understand exchanges between Thai and Lao ideas in this period, but these terms had been circulating in Thailand already for sometime by 1945. See further Michael Kelly Connors, *Democracy and national identity in Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007).

²⁴⁸ King Sisavang Vong was not a true monarchy during the colonial era, but the only antecedents for independent Lao political states were monarchs, so the Issara were the first to navigate and confront in reality this transition from monarchy to popular sovereignty. Perhaps the Issara were motivated to promote democracy in response to the French weakening of the monarchy as much as the influence of French learning and what they viewed to be a “modern” political state. Thanks to Bruce Lockhart for raising this issue.

in the country. In the semi-colonial years, the new terms had to be explained by various authors at different times, demonstrating that it was indeed a transitional period that gave rise to new thinking. This transition, which had occurred in Thailand since the mid-nineteenth century under an absolute monarchy, happened in Laos amidst an anti-colonial, democratic movement which had already limited the authority of the monarchy. Laos stands out for the fact that there never was a monarchical counter-revolution that pushed back on the circumscribing of the King's power; once the monarchy's *de jure* power was lost it was not regained, a trend which continued until 1975.²⁴⁹

In the old political lexicon, which existed in Laos as it did in Thailand, the terms *ekkarat* and *itsara(-phap)* did not have the modern meanings in use among Lao during the semi-colonial years.²⁵⁰ *Itsara* (ອິດສະຣະ) meant: “supreme authority,” “supreme power,” or “supremacy”; its Pali root meant “domination.” *Ekkarat* (ເອກກະຣາດ) literally meant “one king,” referring specifically to the power of the king and not the independence of the nation. Both terms were used exclusively in reference to the monarchy in earlier times. One would never think to speak of *itsara* if one were a mere commoner, as such terms only touched on low class people to the degree that they were subjects of the king. And over the course of the nineteenth century Laos was not *ekkarat* because it was divided among many kings (Luang Prabang, Champassak, Xieng Khouang) who themselves sent tribute to other more powerful kings (Siam, Vietnam, China).²⁵¹ But in the mid-twentieth century Laos was not *ekkarat* because it had been colonized by the French, and would only be *ekkarat* once they had left and power returned to the Lao, who called themselves *itsara* (Issara),

²⁴⁹ That is not to say the King was not a powerful figure, especially in the reign of the last king, Savang Vatthana. Yet Savang was a scrupulous upholder of the RLG constitution and refused to violate it – to the point that he was perhaps its main defender at pivotal moments.

²⁵⁰ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994) p. 135-137.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96-96: describes this phenomenon as it appears in Thai texts which call the area “*suaisongfai(fa)*,” “*suaisamfai(fa)*.”

which was an entirely different situation as power no longer resided solely in the hands of the king. Thus in the intervening period between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Lao sovereignty was altered by its encounter with the West. Sovereignty would never again return to the exclusive prerogative of the monarch as it had been in the old Lan Xang days, but would now reside in its new source of state power: the people. These people were not just any people of course, but a specific people, the people of the Lao nation, the Lao race (ຊາດລາວ). The mere fact that the Issara took up the word *itsara* for the name of their independence movement is an important indication of shifting notions of sovereignty within the country.

The term *seriphap* was a word with a Pali root in use around this time to mean “freedom.”²⁵² Yet in the earliest French-Lao dictionaries, other terms were used to convey this meaning, if only in a limited sense. Estrade’s 1895 work included an entry for “*libre (non esclave)*” for which the Lao equivalent given is not clear, but in any case was limited to one’s status in relation to slavery and would not convey the broader meaning of the Western political notion.²⁵³ Cuaz’s 1904 work lists *liberté* as “ອໍາເພີໃຈ”, not giving the later standard term *seriphap*. In this case, the idea was introduced at least partially, but the terminology was not yet stable or regularized. For *libre*, Cuaz gives “ເປັນໂທບໍ່ເປັນຂຽໂພ” which like Estrade refers exclusively to the condition of slavery and does not convey the Western notion.²⁵⁴ None of the early French-Lao dictionaries include any entry for democracy (ປະຊາທິປະໄຕ).²⁵⁵ Meanwhile, palm leaf manuscripts

²⁵² Allen Kerr, *Lao-English Dictionary* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1972) v.1, p. 386.

²⁵³ Estrade, *Manuel de Conversation: Dictionnaire et guide Franco-Laotiens* (Toulouse: Imprimerie G. Berthoumieu, 1895) p. 175. Estrade gives the Lao as “khon gnin?” the meaning of which is unclear.

²⁵⁴ J. Cuaz, *Lexique Français-Laotien* (Bangkok: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1904) p. 247. Tone marks are missing in the original.

²⁵⁵ Victor-Alphonse Massie, *Mission Pavie: Indochine 1897-1895, Mémoires et documents, vol. 2, pt. 2: Dictionnaire laotien* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1894). Estrade. Cuaz, p. 125. Guy Cheminaud, *Nouveau Dictionnaire*

of the nineteenth century often referred to people as the King's subjects calling them ໄພ່ພ້າຂ້າໂທ or some variation thereof; only later in the twentieth-century did ປະຊາຊົນ become popular.

By introducing the new language, the Issara government represented a jarring break from the political norm in Laos. According to its critics, the loyalists, the Issara slogan of “*seriphap, itsaraphap, ekkarat!*” was a major rallying cry that appealed to (or “seduced” as the loyalists would say) its followers.²⁵⁶ Therefore, it is necessary to account for how the Issara government introduced modern political forms to the national lexicon when assessing its impact, popularity and appeal to its followers, and its lasting influence over the country. Certainly, the Issara leaders had all been exposed to the modern Western political values in their school days learning about such topics as the French revolution.²⁵⁷ The Issara innovation was to appropriate these European ideas for their own purposes, and deploy them in a distinctly anti-French movement, in the classic anti-colonial move across Southeast Asia at the time. Critics of the new democracy, the loyalists, were sure to point out all the abuses, misuses, and misunderstandings of the new ideas. Chaos and confusion, the loyalists said, was introduced to the country because the people simply did not understand what the new ideas meant, and some even thought the new ideas gave them license to do anything they wanted at any time without being held accountable to anyone. However, notwithstanding such criticism, the fact remained that once the Issara appeared on the scene in Laos, even after its opponents regained ascendancy, try as they might the loyalists could not force the country to return to the old order. Once the Issara appeared, there was no going back. In this way the Issara represent

Français-Laotien (Tulle: Imprimerie J. Crauffon, 1906) p. 51. Cheminaud also does not include any entries for “liberté”, p. 99. Nor does Massie.

²⁵⁶ Somlith Pathommavong, *Laos: Pays du Million D'Eléphants*, p. 40.

²⁵⁷ This is an important topic for future research. The Thai may well have been another important influence and is also another important topic for future research.

a true watershed moment in the modern history of the country. This is due in part to the new political discourse the Issara introduced to the country.

Issara-Loyalist Debates

In January, 1948 a rare face-to-face meeting was held at Thadeua attended by representatives of the two contending sides, the Issara from Nongkhai and loyalists from Vientiane, to discuss the problems concerning the future of the country and the people.²⁵⁸ According to an Issara account of the meeting, the loyalists Ngon Sananikone and Prince Somsanit had come to sound out the local Issara committee concerning an offer of amnesty, seeking rapprochement and to offer an end to the hard life of exile. Ngon and Somsanit were disappointed to find the Issara recalcitrant, holding firm to their ideals for the future of the country, and unwilling to accept a mere amnesty to return home with no real prospect for change. An Issara by the name of Thao Loth rejected the loyalist offer, then denounced them, accusing Somsanit himself of treason for accepting French promotion to *chaokhouéng* (provincial governor) and went on to attest before the French deputy provincial adviser M. Vincens to his belief that “the aspiration of the Lao people for liberty and independence that expresses itself and symbolizes the resistance and struggle for the Lao Issara is not a fiction but a reality.”²⁵⁹

In the written account, the Issara went on to accuse the loyalists of being “boot-lickers” for being accompanied to the meeting by French officials.²⁶⁰ Such impassioned argument between Issara and loyalist supporters was fairly typical for the time. It is uncertain whether there were not more of these sorts of meetings. Nevertheless, after its close, Issara and loyalist followers would

²⁵⁸ *Les Aspirations*, pp. 4-5, 14-15.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 16.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 6.

return to their ideological battle-lines to rejoin their bitter debates part of which took place via the written word. Yet as each side spread its tracts, pamphlets and brochures, both would once again invoke the new democracy, albeit in service of their respective cause, but addressing remarkably different aspects of that same democracy as well. Since the return of the French, Lao democracy had been cleaved in two, but all sides spoke in the same language of their demands and aspirations for “freedom,” “democracy,” “independence,” proving these debates were the early intellectual battleground ground for Lao democracy, representing an almost imperceptible, yet immense tectonic shift underway in the country.

Though no actual public “debate” was ever held, the two sides remained in contact throughout the years of Issara exile, from April 1946 to their return in October 1949.²⁶¹ Nonetheless, it is appropriate to refer to these activities as a debate because there were two clear sides struggling in a clash of ideas, in which each side took sharply difference stances over a range of issues. Moreover, the two were not idly bickering, but felt the outcome of the confrontation had real and profound consequence for their country. Both were explicitly trying to win converts from among the other’s followers as well as from those not yet committed to one side or the other; they were each ultimately trying to turn hearts and minds to their own cause.

From the historian’s gaze, the primarily medium of the debate appears to have been the written word. Thus, Nakhonkham could recall his friend Steel Pen who was a brilliant, fierce critic of the French. Further, Issara spoke about loyalist propaganda efforts which included distributing copies of the 1947 constitution throughout the Thai side of the Mekong in areas of Issara exile.²⁶² Issara themselves read and criticized the major loyalist dailies, *Lao May* (‘new Laos’) and *Lao*

²⁶¹ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 65, notes that 2,000 Issara supporters accompanied the government into exile.

²⁶² Katay, ed., *Contribution*, p. 108.

Ratsamy ('brilliant Laos'), newspapers that were published in Vientiane. The Issara's own pamphlets and paper, *Bangfai* ('the rocket'), were very clearly meant to be read by more than just their own followers, some writings of which even directly appealed to people living under the French New Laos.²⁶³ It seems then that a lot of debate played out in newspapers, not all of which have been preserved. The Issara newspaper was a bilingual Lao-French paper, but most of the surviving collected pamphlets seem to be in French. The Issara were critical of press freedoms in New Laos at the time, even accusing the French of withholding paper and ink from loyalist papers, which no doubt remained under the supervision and control of the Ministry of Information. Though there certainly were efforts to spread each side's views by word-of-mouth (the Issara wrote that loyalists would send agents across the river, to seek out Issara exiles to implore them to return) yet the contours of the oral debates are harder to discern in the historical record.²⁶⁴

The rhetoric appears to have become quite heated in these debates. The Issara referred to the loyalists as "collaborators," "puppets," "lackeys," "sell-outs," or "traitors" among other insults.²⁶⁵ The loyalists for their part, simply called the Issara "rebels" and "criminals" who had duped fools and idiots to follow them.²⁶⁶ The strongest rebuke the loyalists made to the Issara was to simply ignore them, to cast them into obscurity, refusing to acknowledge or recognize them in

²⁶³ Dr. Lockhart has cautioned that most of the Issara writings were attributed to Katay, whose own idiocracies may have been influential. I am very grateful for Dr. Lockhart engaging my research on this important point. I do question the authorship of many Issara writings to suggest more than one person was responsible, although it was dangerous. On the other hand, Issara writings included certain stances that would be less than beneficial to Katay personally such as the promotion of ethno-centricism. The 'rocket' newspaper was the mouthpiece of the Issara movement. If there is any source that might speak for "the Issara" to my mind one could not do better than to refer to the movement's newspaper, which was written for the membership to read (in Lao and French editions) and also for opponents (those living in reconquered New Laos). While the Issara were a decentralized movement that defies broad statements, nevertheless I describe some messages and themes that are clear and persistent in my readings of the sources.

²⁶⁴ *Les Aspirations*, p. 4.

²⁶⁵ *Contribution*, p. 70. In one place, the loyalists are branded as enemies of the people, who "deserve to be nailed to the pillory and delivered to a vindictive public..."

²⁶⁶ Somlith, *Laos: Pays du Million D'Eléphants*, p. 40.

any way. In these tense times, loyalty became a key subject of dispute, with both sides questioning the other's loyalty, raising the larger question of what it meant to be loyal to the country and people at the time. How should one be loyal? And loyal to whom? Should one rebuild the country, accepting the French promises of a New Laos? Or should one hold true to the movement calling for independence and democracy in the country; and if so, should one refuse to deal with the French and even consider life as an exile so long as the French occupy the country? There were no clear answers to these questions that could satisfy everyone. Moreover, both the Issara and loyalists accused one-another of corruption, seeking personal benefit (money, glory, land, etc.) at the expense of the nation. The Issara, for example, accused the loyalists of corrupt personal enrichment, acquiring large land holdings, and growing fat while the rest of the country was starving.²⁶⁷ Issara criticism of the early RLG in the semi-colonial years had its echoes with the later Pathet Lao. In a broader sense, later scholars have not always been careful to avoid being misled by their sources when characterizing Lao politics, politicians or political parties as nothing more than selfish, out for personal gain, because it was a common accusation made at the time by all sides.

The Issara in particular were fond of slandering their opponents. While pillaring Ngon Sananikone and Prince Somsanith by name (previously unheard of in elite Lao society) they also targeted Roger Ourot Souvannavong and the Crown Prince Savang Vatthana, whom they called the “lackeys of imperialism.” One story the Issara repeated among their followers was an account of the Crown Prince's diplomatic mission to Washington D.C. in November 1946, when he went to witness the signing of the Franco-Siamese Conventions.²⁶⁸ During this trip, the Issara claimed

²⁶⁷ Thao Katay, ed. *Des Sots ou Des Traîtres?* (Bangkok: editions Lao-Issara, 1950) p. 7-8.

²⁶⁸ Thao Katay, ed. *Les Valets de l'Impérialisme français* (Bangkok: Editions Lao-Issara, 1948) p. 17-19. On the other hand, Savang worked to secure the return of territories lost to Thailand during the Franco-Thai War of 1941. See further, Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 162.

Savang Vatthana was kept carefully under French watch the entire time, to point of creating hilarious and embarrassing situations with the Thai.²⁶⁹ The Issara also created political cartoons of their enemies, like Savang Vatthana and Ourot, which may have been as damaging as any of their written polemics.²⁷⁰ The mere fact that the Issara were willing to personally impugn the Crown Prince's character is a sign of an emerging Lao democracy no longer constrained by blind obedience to the monarchy.²⁷¹



(Issara political cartoon portraying a subservient Roger Ourot Souvannavong²⁷²)

²⁶⁹ *Contribution*, p. 58.

²⁷⁰ See further Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty*.

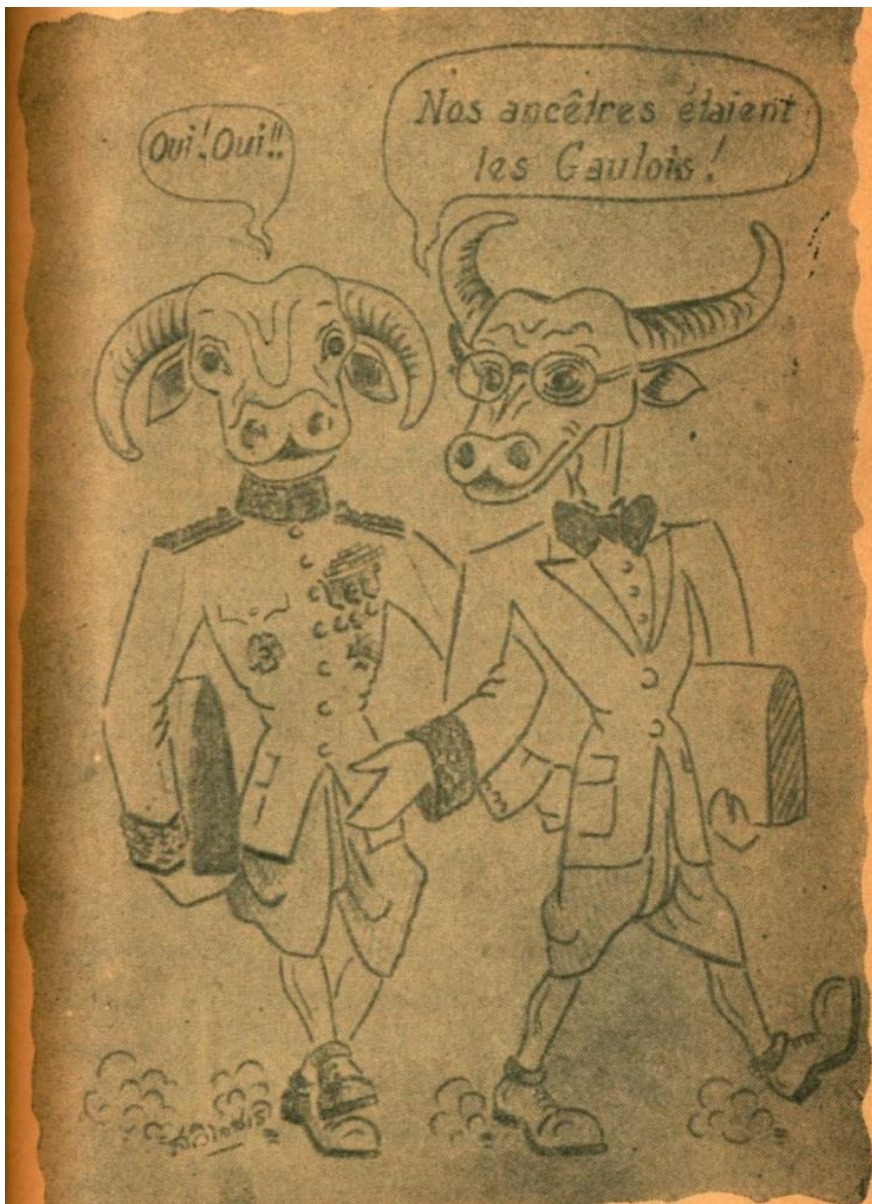
²⁷¹ See further Katay Sasorith, *Pour Rire Un Peu: histoires vécues* (Bangkok: editions Lao-Issara, 1947), which is dedicated to Prince Savang “To his highness Prince Savang Vatthana, the incompetent apprentice dictator and traitor to his country.”

²⁷² *Les Valets*, p. 40 (unpaginated).



(Issara political cartoon portraying a foolish Crown Prince Savang Vatthana losing at cards²⁷³)

²⁷³ *Les Valets*, p. 14 (unpaginated).



(Issara political cartoon portraying loyalists; one loyalist says to the other, “Our ancestors were Gauls!” and the other replies “Yes! Yes!!”²⁷⁴)

In a broader sense, the Issara viewed the loyalists, those who collaborated with the French, as young and with all the negative connotations that entails. They dismissed the loyalists as “simple

²⁷⁴ *Les Valets*, p. 56 (unpaginated).

typists [who] become mandarins and heads of administrative post.”²⁷⁵ At times the loyalists dismissed the Issara in similar fashion, calling them “young souls.” This suggests that there existed a generational conflict between two sides, or indeed, that the Issara-loyalist split along generational lines. The Issara frequently claimed to be the only true elite of the country, and their leaders were generally older, often holding the top Lao posts to be had in the colonial administration.²⁷⁶ In this case some younger, junior Lao serving the colonial administration may have had much to gain by working with the French. They could advance their careers in the absence of the top elite. At a deeper level, it may be that this dispute resulted from the older generation being too domineering in relations with the younger cohort, and that the schism in Lao democracy among the elite in the period could be in some degree a matter of youth in revolt against their elders. In this case, the youth stayed with the French to work for the New Laos.

The Issara in Exile

The Issara thought of themselves as true patriots seeking to save the country from French imperialism. They believed they were giving voice to the thoughts, feelings and opinions of the Lao people on a number of issues which the loyalists refused to hear. Their single greatest demand was for the immediate independence of the country (with some conditions). They also felt the Lao people did not need any period of tutelage under the French to be able to fully participate in a democracy. As the Issara wrote in one political tract, “all struggle sincerely and loyally for national

²⁷⁵ *Des Sots ou Traîtres*, p. 12.

²⁷⁶ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 68, lends some credence to Issara claims when he notes there were only 400 civil servants in the country after the Issara went to exile, and that they only had “minimal instruction.”

independence and against the return of French domination...[so long] as the legitimate demands of the Lao people have not been realized, we will continue our resistance and our struggle.”²⁷⁷

The independence movement is best summarized in a key work, entitled *the Contribution to the History of the Lao National Independence Movement*.²⁷⁸ In various places the Issara state their demands, but a key section of this work starts by listing the grievances of the Lao people against France to explain why the country must now be free. These grievances start under the heading “French oppression”, beginning with the dismemberment of Laos alleged to have occurred under the French with Lao divided up among those of Luang Prabang kingdom, southern Laos, those of Cambodia (Strung-treng), Vietnam (Darlac), and Siam (right bank of the Mekong).²⁷⁹ Added to this, the French permitted Vietnamese immigration to Laos, which contributed to the Lao becoming a minority in their own country; underlying this was a fear of the racial annihilation of the Lao as a culture, a state and a people.²⁸⁰ The Issara bristled at the French policy to grant the Vietnamese and Chinese communities their own headmen, effectively removing those peoples from Lao control. They further complained of “docile” Lao representatives who served French, not Lao interests.²⁸¹ Other complaints concerned the lack of adequate modern health, education, and social and economic advancement under the French, questioning the *mission civilisatrice*.²⁸² French officials themselves were seen as abusive, lazy, and incompetent; in other places the Issara accused France of sending the dregs of society to administer the colony.²⁸³ Finally, the Issara

²⁷⁷ *Les Aspirations*, p. 16.

²⁷⁸ *Contribution*, 1948.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 72.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 72-73. See *Des Sots ou Traîtres*, p. 12. where the Issara expressed fears the country would “disappear from the map of the world.”

²⁸¹ *Contribution*, p. 73.

²⁸² *Ibid*, p. 74.

²⁸³ *Contribution*, p. 74-75. See further Thao Katay, ed., *YA-T-IL UNE POLITIQUE FRANCAISE EN INDOCHINE?* (Bangkok: editions Lao-Issara, 1948) p. 2, which refers to Laos as “a convenient outlet for the ‘waste’ of metropolitan France.”

concluded that France failed to defend the Lao during the war, against the Thai, and against the Japanese, thereby failing to uphold its commitments under the protectorate, which the Issara said had the effect of nullifying it.²⁸⁴ The prime concern finally was that the French ignored the legitimate aspirations of the Lao people.²⁸⁵

As well as being anti-colonial, the movement was, to varying degrees, anti-authoritarian and democratic. The anti-colonial aspect of the Issara is too prominent to miss; but for one example they did not miss the opportunity to quote approvingly from the Atlantic Charter to criticize France for not following the examples of the British in Myanmar or the United States in the Philippines.²⁸⁶ The anti-authoritarian tone was best exemplified by the Issara's mocking attitude when they wrote to "tip [their] hat" at prospect that the French might consider their demands for independence only after the French-Vietnamese war was over; or to mockingly declare "colonialism is dead, long live colonialism!"²⁸⁷ Yet the fact that this movement was led by prominent members of the Lao elite certainly introduced tensions and limits to its avowed aims; although given that they were exiled, and living in poverty in Bangkok moderated their elite status to a degree. But, at the same time, the Issara was a wide-spread decentralized movement, growing beyond what the Issara leaders exiled in Bangkok could control. For example, there is scattered mentions in Issara writings of Lao emigre associations for major towns in northeast Thailand, to say nothing of the Issara followers within Laos at the time.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁴ *Contribution*, p. 76. Legalistic arguments were a favorite of the Issara.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 78.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 169.

²⁸⁷ *Les Aspirations*, p. 6. See also Thao Katay, ed. *Depuis Le Retour de la Domination Française Le Laos N'avance Pas* (Bangkok: Editions Lao-Issara, 1949), p. 17.

²⁸⁸ *Les Aspirations*, p. 4. See also the dedication in *ibid* to Thao Mok Phoumisavarn, president of the "committee of Lao emigres" of Mukdahan. There was another such committee explicitly mentioned at Nongkhai. Another sign of the decentralized nature of the Issara was the formation of the Committee for Lao Resistance in the East in 1947.

One sign of how the Issara addressed these tensions is illustrated by their handling of the flag used by the movement. The Issara had, in fact, abandoned the old three-headed elephant (*erawan*, Indra's mount) flag, in favor of a new banner with red borders at the top and bottom and a white circle over a middle blue bar (later appropriated by the Pathet Lao who saw themselves as the "true" heirs of the Issara). The rationale for replacing the flag is revealing, as they explained "that it [the old flag] being excessively complicated and that an emblem, for it to be truly national, must be simple, easy to make by hand to diffuse across the country" demonstrating a profoundly democratic spirit.²⁸⁹ They continue, "to develop national sentiment among you our countrymen, it is necessary, in effect, that each Lao town, that each Lao home, be able to display the Lao national flag on public holidays or collective festivals."²⁹⁰ They went on to complain that the French had not widely disseminated the previous flag which stifled the cultivation of national sentiment among the Lao. It is striking that the elite of the Issara were willing to dispense with tradition where it conflicted with the higher, modern values of democracy and nationalism.

There was in fact a more moderate edge to the Issara. They were not extremists and talked of cooperation with the loyalists in various places, although they clearly resorted to political violence, which they saw as legitimate in their circumstances.²⁹¹ They often called for new French-Lao relations: "the true Lao-French friendship can only be born on the death of French colonialism."²⁹² Moderation could even be found concerning the single most important issue,

²⁸⁹ *Contribution*, p. 112. On the other hand, several Issara pamphlets continued to feature *erawan*. This also raises the question of whether the Issara flag was at all influenced by the Japanese flag. The fact that the Issara flag is almost the exact opposite of the Japanese flag (white circle surrounded by red (and blue) bars) is suggestive. If that is correct it would point to the continuing influence the Japanese had on the Issara long after the last soldier had been demobilized and evacuated.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 113.

²⁹¹ *Depuis Le Retour*, p. 22 mentions cooperation with loyalists.

²⁹² *Ibid*, p. 23. The Issara said elsewhere that the death of colonialism would lead to a new Lao-French friendship and included in one work a depiction of a Lao and Frenchmen shaking hands, presumably to replace the hated Pavie statues.

independence for the country. There were limits to the Issara call for independence: in a list of minimum demands they called for “an external autonomy limited to neighboring countries (China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Siam, Burma).”²⁹³ They clarified their stance by explaining, “certainly the Lao people still needs the support of a great nation, but it no longer wants a master.”²⁹⁴ They could see some benefits to cooperating with a foreign power, even with their former foe, France, as long as it did not subvert the movement’s ultimate aims.

Finally, one can observe of the Issara from their many writings, they were not always writing solely to attack their opponents. They were by then above all an exile movement. Certainly, they sought to influence the loyalists and the uncommitted Lao living in the country, and to question the French, but they were also seeking simply to hold the movement together. In this regard, the primary audience for Issara writings was other Issara followers. The Issara wrote to their supporters as true believers of the cause, to rekindle or stir support during the long years of exile. The Issara hoped to keep their supporters engaged, to hold on, and to outlast their opponents as they waited for their demands to be met. Their obduracy, and refusal to go along with piecemeal solutions led to major changes in the status of the early RLG in relation to the West, that gained relatively more with less violence than the other states of Indochina, or even the later Pathet Lao movement could claim.

The Loyalists in Power

It is necessary to consider more closely the loyalists and their stances on various issues. I refer to them as “loyalists,” though they never used such a name and in fact had not taken any one

²⁹³ *Les Aspirations*, p. 17. See also *Contribution*, p. 79, for a similar list with a call for “limited external autonomy.”

²⁹⁴ *Les Aspirations*, p. 18.

name or coalesced around one movement, but were only ever a loose coalition at best.²⁹⁵ The Issara called them the “Lao who remained” (*lao resté*). Nonetheless what they stood for was clear. They stood for the New Laos which began when the French liberated the country from the “pro-Japanese” Issara, and gave the country some limited new liberties and freedoms. The return of the French marked a renewal of the colonial bond between them and the loyalists with the promise of a better future: now with more emphasis on the *mission civilisatrice*. An important aspect of this New Laos was that the French would guide the Lao, to modernize the country, with France as the model. This cooperation would maintain the spirit of the wartime *Lao Nyai* campaigns to revive the greatness of the Lao country with French aide.²⁹⁶ The loyalists were the proud inheritors of French culture and argued openly about the country’s need for French guidance. They promoted and defended the provisional *modus-vivendi* of August 27, 1946, and the May 11, 1947 constitution. Some loyalists went so far as to say the country was not ready for independence and needed the French.²⁹⁷ It should be no surprise then that the first assembly of the French-sanctioned Nation Assembly voted to formally join the new French Union in January 1948. In many ways, the loyalists gave their distinctive stamp on the shape and form of the early RLG.

If the Issara perceived that the colonial bond with France had been irrevocably broken in World War II then the loyalists sought to restore and renew it. The particulars of the renewed

²⁹⁵ One loyalist, Sisouk Na Champassak, defined them in terms of loyalty: “In times of distress true loyalty shows itself. The Annamites immediately became subservient to their new masters [the Japanese], without any provocation betraying all their former chiefs, but the Lao remained true to their friendship with the French... without the Lao, the French could hardly have survived, lost in the mountains, in the jungles, in a hostile land.” Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos* (New York: Praeger, 1961), p. 8. Sisouk adds that the loyalists and French acted in the spirit of the Brazzaville Declaration. Elsewhere *ibid* p. 13-14, presented a synthesis: “Half of them, convinced and sincere patriots, joined this adventure in reaction against the old colonial system, and with the desire to install in its place an autonomous government. Their national aspirations were the same as those of other Lao patriots who remained in the country, patriots who were just as convinced, but less impatient, and who knew that between the government of the protectorate and independence, there must still be some careful, intermediate stages.”

²⁹⁶ See further Creak, *Embodied Nation* and Ivarsson, *Creating Laos*.

²⁹⁷ Jean Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 3. Deuve quotes Outhong Souvannvong. See further Adams, “Patrons, Clients and Revolutionaries,” p. 109.

colonial bond concerned the shared experiences of French and loyalists during conflict with the Japanese during March to August 1945. The French who managed to escape the Japanese coup of March 9, 1945, and fled into the bush were aided by loyalists who helped them survive at a difficult time.²⁹⁸ After the French had secured their control over Laos once again, there existed a discourse among the loyalists and French concerning this trial “in the bush” in which both Lao and French suffered and fought side-by-side. This “union of hearts in the bush, where the French and the Lao shared the same joys and pains” was supposed to lead to a renewed Lao-French Friendship, a revived colonial bond “by treating each other on an equal footing.”²⁹⁹ However in the reportage of the Issara paper, once the fighting ended, the French did not live up to their promises made in the bush, which in peace time were quickly forgotten.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 60, notes there were 200 French and 300 Lao in the wilderness. Laos was the only country of Indochina where the French were able to effectively resist the Japanese after March 9, 1945 with the aid of local peoples.

²⁹⁹ *Depuis Le Retour*, p. 11-12.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

The major loyalist political figures included Prince Boun Oum, Prince Kindavong,³⁰¹ Prince Saykham,³⁰² Phoui Sananikone, Kou Voravong,³⁰³ and Bong Souvannavong.³⁰⁴ The loyalist leader, if anyone, was Crown Prince Savang Vatthana. Other important members of the loyalists included Touby Lyfoung,³⁰⁵ Ngon Sananikone, Ourot Souvannavong,³⁰⁶ Outhong

³⁰¹ Prince Kindavong was a son of the viceory of Luang Prabang Boun Khong. His brothers and half-brothers included Phetsarath, Souvannarath, Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong. He served in the French colonial administration and was Chao Muong of Kassy in 1945. In March 1945 he became the royal delegate for upper Laos and later the Representative of the King to the provisional government of the French Republic. In 1947 he served as Minister of State. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 346.

³⁰² Member of the Phuan royal family and grandson of Chao Noi, who became embroiled in the Chao Anou War (1827-1828), Saykham was a loyalist, staunchly anti-Vietnamese and strongly opposed to the Pathet Lao. He served in the colonial administration in Xieng Khouang. He also was an important anti-Japanese guerrilla resistance leader who aided French reconquest. In 1946 he became the provincial governor of Xieng Khouang. In 1975 he fled to France. See *ibid*, p. 362.

³⁰³ Born on December 6, 1914 in Savannakhet Kou was a leading member of the Voravong family. After graduating from the School of Law and Administration in 1933 he served in the colonial administration. By 1941 he became Chao Muong of Vientiane and the following year he was Chao Muong of Pakse. While serving the French he nonetheless called for a “laocisation” of the administrators and for greater autonomy for local administrators. Yet he was actively involved in anti-Japanese resistance and similarly resisted the Issara in Pakse. In 1946 he served as provincial governor of Vientiane and then Thakhek in the following year. He was elected to the Constituent Assembly yet was seriously injured on his way there in March 1947 by a “Lao-Viet” attack. He cofounded the first political party, the Lao National Union Party with Bong Souvannavong yet he later split from Bong to found the first opposition party, the Democrats. He served as Minister of Justice and Religious Affairs from 1947 to 1949. In 1950 he held the Economy and Interior portfolios. In the 1951 elections he was elected as a deputy of Savannakhet. He then served as president of the National Assembly. In 1954 he was Minister of Defense when he was brutally assassinated on September 18, 1954 while in Phoui Sananikone’s home by assassins from Thailand. His death has never been fully explained. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 348.

³⁰⁴ For a list of loyalists see Khamchan, *History of Lao Diplomacy*, p. 31-32.

³⁰⁵ Touby Lyfoung was a major figure in the RLG period. He was one of the first Hmong to be educated in the French system and thereafter served as tasseng in the colonial administration in Xieng Khouang province. In 1945 he was an anti-Japanese guerrilla resistance leader and rallied the Hmong to the side of the reconquering French. He was the only Hmong elected to the National Assembly where he served as vice-president. He also participated in the Constituent Assembly that wrote the 1947 draft of the constitution, which was maintained, with amendments, until 1975. In 1959 he was a member of the Rally for the Lao People Party. Speaking to the American anthropologist Joel Halpern in 1959 Touby made a point of noting that “he sided with the King [Sisavang Vong] and the French against Souvanna Phouma and Katay [i.e. the Issara].” See Halpern, “Lao Project Paper no. 19”, p. 141. By 1961 he served as Secretary of State in the Boun Oum government and was a member of the Privy Council. In 1975 he was sent to a re-education camp where he died in 1978 or 1979. For an excellent account of his younger years see further Mai Na Lee, *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom*. See also Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 371.

³⁰⁶ There is limited information about this person. He was a member of the prominent Souvannavong family that traced its lineage back to the local authorities of Vientiane after 1828. Later it was a Souvannavong who ruled Vientiane before 1893 and who turned to serve the French thereafter. Ourot was a son of this elder Souvannavong’s second wife along with Oudom, Outhong and Oukeo. Ourot studied abroad in Cambodia and then returned to serve in the Ministry of Interior. He later served as Ambassador to the United States, and South Vietnam. See Halpern, “Lao Project Paper no. 19”, p. 38.

Souvannavong,³⁰⁷ Prince Souvannarath,³⁰⁸ Prince Somsanith, Leuam Insixiengmay,³⁰⁹ and Kou Abhay,³¹⁰ among others. Whatever criticism one may level at them (and they were savaged by the Issara), the loyalists did in fact have a number of concrete accomplishments to their name. Most of the Vietnamese had fled during the recent fighting, which left the major cities and civil services largely in Lao control, and gave wide scope especially to the loyalists.³¹¹ They held the first

³⁰⁷ Born on September 25, 1907 in Vientiane Outhong refused to join the Issara when they first formed. Like his peers, Outhong had studied in the new French schools and went abroad to study in Saigon at the Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat, from which he graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1927. Thereafter he joined the colonial administration in Laos working as a clerk for the resident of Thakhek. He rose to become provincial governor of that province in 1941. The next year he served as Minister of Finances and Education in the first modern government of Laos at Luang Prabang. By 1947 he served again as Minister of Finances in the first loyalist government after the loyalist constitution of May 11, 1947 was promulgated. From 1947 to 1949 he served as Minister of Interior and Defense. In 1950 he held several portfolios in foreign affairs, education and information. In 1953 he again served as Minister of Education and Information. By 1954 he was Minister of Education and Health, but was not a member of any political party. That same year he became president of the Privy Council. Later in 1964 he was called to serve as Minister of Health. In 1975 he left the country for France. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 356.

³⁰⁸ Born in 1890 in Luang Prabang, he was a member of the Front Palace branch of the Luang Prabang royal family. From 1941 to 1945 he served as a minister in the first western-style government of Luang Prabang. He was ousted from this position by the Issara movement in October 1945. After French reconquest he served as prime minister of the provisional government established by the Modus Vivendi of August 27, 1946. He went on to become prime minister of the government from 1947 to 1949, after which he retired from politics. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 370.

³⁰⁹ Born on August 7, 1917 at Kengkok in Savannakhet province, he later became a leading member of the rightwing after Phoumi Nosavan fled in early 1965. He was a brother-in-law of Boun Oum. For his education he studied abroad in Cambodia where he earned a bachelor's degree in Phnom Penh. He began his service in the colonial administration in 1937. From 1942 to 1944 he served as chief of the cabinet of the Prime Minister (Phetsarath) of Luang Prabang. In 1945 he was the Chao Muong of Savannakhet when he joined the Franco-Lao anti-Japanese guerrilla resistance and fought against the Issara. After French reconquest in 1946 he was the provincial governor of Savannakhet. He was next year a member of the Constituent Assembly that wrote the French-sponsored constitution promulgated May 11, 1947. From 1947 to 1949 he served as Minister of Finances. From 1949 to 1950 he held the Interior and Justice portfolios. In 1950 he was Economy Minister. In the 1951 elections he was elected as a deputy from Savannakhet. At the time he was a member of Phoui Sananikone's Independents party. In 1953 he became Minister of Health, and then from 1954 to 1960 Minister of Finances. In January 1960 he was a vice-president of the Rally for the Lao People party. After Kongle's coup, he sided with the counter-coup forces led by Phoumi Nosavan and subsequently became a vice-president of the Boun Oum government (1961-1962). In the second coalition government he served as Minister of Education, Fine Arts, Sport and Youth. In 1965 he became deputy prime minister and was a prominent member of the rightwing in its opposition to Souvanna Phouma's neutralists. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 348-349.

³¹⁰ Born on December 7, 1892 at Khong, Kou was a leading figure of the Abhay family in the 1940s. For his education he studied at Saigon, Phnom Penh and from 1911 to 1915 in France. On his return he served in cabinet of the Résident Supérieur from 1915 to 1929. Then he was Chao Muong of Khong until 1941. Then he became provincial governor of Pakse until 1947. From 1947 to 1949 he served as Minister of Education and Health. In 1949 he became a member of the Privy Council. Later in early 1960 he headed a care-taker government during the general elections of April 1960. He died in April 1964. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 347-348.

³¹¹ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 94. Askew, et al., *Vientiane*, p. 119. It is somewhat ironic this would arise under the more cosmopolitan-minded loyalists; or that the ethnic-chauvinist Issara were forced to cooperate with Vietnamese, with whom there existed clear tensions, in their guerrilla war against France during and after reconquest.

elections of representatives to write a new constitution with French guidance. They formed political parties after the return of the French, including the Lao National Union party led by Bong Souvannavong and Kou Voravong, the latter of whom later split to form his own party, the Democrats, thereby creating the first opposition party in Lao history. The loyalists ran the first openly political newspapers under Lao direction in the country, the *Lao May* and *Lao Ratsamy* papers. Yet they struggled to address their closeness to the French, and many of their acts were simply derived from what the Issara had already done in power. It remained difficult to find competently trained officials.³¹²

There was an intellectual elite among the loyalists, foremost among whom included Pierre Nginn and Thao Nhouy Abhay. Somlith Pathammavong, Phouvong Phimmasone and Thao Kéne also made important contributions among the intellectual loyalists.³¹³ They were the heirs of French learning in the country, and they more than anyone else argued for France to continue to be the model for modernity for the country going forward. They produced a number of works on Lao culture.³¹⁴ While they had a tendency in these works to essentialize the Lao, they were seeking to rediscover an authentic Lao culture that could form an equivalency and counter-balance to French, and Western culture. When they were not publishing works in *France-Asie* or *Sud-est* or other French magazines, they published their work in the country in the *Kinnari* magazine. The loyalist elite had an interesting contrast with the Issara in that the loyalists were more likely to champion or even celebrate the cross-cultural currents of their time. They did not often invoke an eternal Lao state as the Issara did (although they were not above essentialism regarding culture),

³¹² Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 94.

³¹³ Biographical details for Lao intellectuals who held no major political or military post are difficult to find and not currently forthcoming in my research to date.

³¹⁴ Phouvong, *Initiation à la littérature Laotienne* (n.p., EFEO, 1948); Thao Noi Aphai, "En marge de l'Histoire du Laos: Le Royaume de Champassak" *France-Asie*, no. 25, April 1948. P.S. Nginn, *Politesse Lao* (n.p., 1949). Pierre Nginn, "Politesse laotienne ancienne et moderne" *France-Asie*, no. 58, March 1951.

but spoke instead of a multiethnic country, as one finds in an article written by an anonymous Lao author writing under the pseudonym “Lao Blood” (ເລືອດລາວ):

Since ancient times a country might have people of the same race, but in the present it is not like that because communication connects [peoples] back and forth together easily. Clever countries that have exceedingly powerful weapons have the ability to collect small tiny countries to unite them and keep [them] with itself. Therefore, in the present [one] does not see any country at all in the world that may be entirely only people truly of a single race living together.³¹⁵

This alternative view of post-colonial Laos, as much as it may have been a product of a colonial discourse that in some ways legitimized foreign domination, would have arguably provided for a more inclusive form of nationalism among the loyalists. Such a nationalism would have addressed the multi-ethnic realities of the country far better than the ultra-nationalist Issara who tended to deny any minorities even existed. Among the Issara, Katay Sasorith explicitly denied the existence of minorities. He was likely influenced by the Thai who at the turn of the century abolished minority labels like “Lao” and declared everyone as simply “Thai.”³¹⁶ Katay’s doomed efforts at a similar move in Laos would gravely harm relations between the RLG and ethnic minorities.

Debating New Laos, Democracy and Modernity

To turn now to a consideration of the substance of the debates, one of the most pressing issues between the Issara and the loyalists concerned a debate on the New Laos and the Issara campaign against it. In the broadest sense, the Issara and loyalists argued about the merits of the New Laos inaugurated by the *modus vivendi*, and further solidified by the 1947 constitution, and

³¹⁵ “Lao Blood”, [“Principles of Democracy”], *Kinnari*, no. 5, July 1947, p. 25.

³¹⁶ David Streckfuss, “The mixed colonial legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai racialist thought, 1890-1910” *Autonomous histories, particular truths: Essays in honour of John R.W. Smail*, ed. Laurie J. Sears (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison Center for Southeast Asian Studies Press, 1993).

the underlying promises made by France to work with the Lao on an equal footing, granting them democracy, a constitution, some civil and political rights, some autonomy and so forth.

The Issara were highly critical of the provisional *modus vivendi* branding it a fake reform, in their words a “mere deception”, a “vast bluff”, or a “façade of reforms”, especially because the French never actually respected it in any real situations.³¹⁷ They also accused the French of not treating the Lao in good faith by creating a “puppet government” that they then entered into mock negotiations with and signed agreements (the *modus vivendi*) legally binding the country.³¹⁸ These negotiations recalled the gun-boat diplomacy of an earlier era where “legal” agreements were entered into even as one side coerced the other with threats of violence. Thus, the Issara pointed to the impossibility for any real negotiations while the French military occupied the country. Moreover, the French never thought to negotiate with the Issara concerning these agreements. The Issara actually considered themselves to be the only legitimate government of the country, even in exile (“free and independent”), being the only government to actually give a voice to the Lao people, and which the French could not legitimately exclude from deciding the future course of the country.

The Issara leveled a number of serious criticisms at the New Laos the foremost of which was their claim that the “new Laos” was not “new” at all, but really only the return of the same old imperialist French control and exploitation of the country for its own ends as before. As the Issara said, “the same men are returned, with naturally, the same ideas, the same imperialist mind, the same conqueror mentality.”³¹⁹ To the Issara, nothing in fact had changed, and only the most

³¹⁷ *Contribution*, p. 70, 82-83, 87.

³¹⁸ *Les Aspirations*, p. 12-13.

³¹⁹ *Contribution*, p. 82.

superficial of changes were introduced: “all or almost all of the former organization were maintained. Only the names were changed.”³²⁰

The Issara were highly critical of one key element of the New Laos, which was the role of French advisers in the country, who were placed throughout the new government.³²¹ The Issara contended the advisers were the means for France to maintain real control under the guise of “foreign aid.” According to the Issara, these advisers were not simply restricted to the upper echelons of government where they could be watched closely by loyalist leaders, but were in fact at every level of government, watching even the lowest level officials. Thus, the Issara spoke of “advisers of [Lao] functionaries of the most insignificant authority...”³²² To the Issara, the French advisers were not just providing guidance, and technical expertise, but were actually micro-managing every single Lao official such that the New Laos was itself being overwhelmed with “advice,” crowding the loyalists out of any meaningful role in their own government. The Issara gave an idea of scale of the problem:

The fact that all the advisers must be obligatorily consulted, who are, by right, [given] access to administrative and court buildings, who must obtain all documents retained by the Lao authorities, and who ultimately fall directly under the commissioner of the French Republic, adviser of his majesty [King Sisavang Vong], we do not see well where the great change is, the great reform corresponding to the great principles stated in the preamble of the modus vivendi.³²³

In this way, the Issara claimed the French advisers did not merely advise, but held real control over the new government, or as they put it, the advisers allowed France “to maintain its right to close control at all levels.”³²⁴

³²⁰ Ibid, p. 83.

³²¹ *Les Aspirations*, p. 17, in a list of demands includes a call of “free choice by the Lao government of its technical advisers.” Even as late as 1953 there were still two hundred French advisers working in the RLG. See Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA’s Secret War in Laos* (Paladin Press, 1995), p. 17.

³²² *Contribution*, p. 84.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

The loyalists defended the New Laos in a number of ways. Pierre Nginn wrote about the new constitution only a few months after it passed into law, and he took the opportunity to boast about its major achievements.³²⁵ He reported on the nascent democracy as the first formal elections took place, remarking that “the elections of the first Lao constitutional assembly unfolded in all provinces of Laos in the month of January 1947.”³²⁶ He concluded that the election “had brought to parliament the most educated candidates and the representatives of the local bourgeoisie.”³²⁷ An election in which the elite were chosen by the people would have to be considered as a major success in the eyes of the loyalist elite. When the first assembly was seated on March 15, 1947, not every member was present due to the poor travel conditions in the country. More dramatically, Nginn recounts that three deputies and a French adviser were attacked on the road to Vientiane by “Vietminh.”³²⁸ Nginn makes a point of noting that the French adviser and two deputies died in the attack, while the only survivor, Kou Voravong, was seriously wounded.³²⁹ Political violence had been a fact of life in the country since reconquest, but the attack showed it would become far more commonplace. In the succeeding years, political violence would only worsen. Kou Voravong would himself be slain by his political enemies only a few years later.

In this way, Nginn rather deftly portrayed New Laos as having already been granted all the rights, liberties and freedoms that the Issara had demanded. In the loyalist view, Laos already had a functioning democracy, obviating the need for the violent and subversive campaign of the Issara, whose followers should if anything stop rebelling and return to their homes. At various times, the loyalists tried to convince Issara followers to give up their life of exile, arguing that all their

³²⁵ Pierre Nginn, “La Constitution Lao,” *Kinnari*, no. 6, November 1947, pp. 9-11.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

³²⁸ Nginn refers to this event as a Vietminh attack quite possibly because he refused to acknowledge the existence of the Lao Issara.

³²⁹ Deuve, *Le Laos*, p. 348.

demands had already been granted by France.³³⁰ The Issara themselves complained frequently of being weakened by such offers from the loyalists. But in Nginn's account he made no mention at all of the Issara movement (only "Vietminh"), thereby casting it into silence and implying it was not legitimate.

There was also a debate between the Issara and loyalists about the place of democracy, independence and freedom in post-colonial Laos. On the new democracy, and political rights in the country, the loyalists were much more skeptical. While generally positive, they nonetheless were highly skeptical of it in its early days. In Nginn's discussion of the first election ever held in the country in January 1947, he observed numerous defects:

...no electoral campaign properly speaking was conducted by candidates in the election in order to make known their program. No party was formed...³³¹

which he said was due to the "embryonic" politics in the country. He went on to say that the Lao, "who had not yet attained the stage of an advanced evolution," were not able to understand the constitution, or even the values stated in its preamble, or as he put it, its "constitutional principles are foreign juridical notions to the Lao people."³³² Even the deputies in the first assembly seemed not to fully grasp the constitution according to Nginn, as when the deputies considered it in the assembly it "was not the occasion of any real disagreement."³³³ These issues concerning the introduction of democracy to Laos were not unique to other experiences across the region.³³⁴

It is uncertain how many of his fellow loyalists shared Nginn's views, but he strongly believed that masses of the Lao people were not ready for the rights of a democracy. This was not

³³⁰ *Les Aspirations*, p. 4.

³³¹ Nginn, "La Constitution Lao," p. 9.

³³² *Ibid*, p. 9.

³³³ *Ibid*, p. 11.

³³⁴ For one example see, Michael Aung-Thwin and Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), p. 242 which notes that democracy in early post-colonial Myanmar was not understood by the masses who did not have egalitarian values.

simply attributable to the absence of a constitutional tradition. For Nginn the problem ran deeper.

He saw the masses to be totally unmodern, nearly un-redeemably so:

The Lao people join to its proverbial nonchalance a firm attachment to the style of life archaic and rural, [it] totally ignores and is still very far from imagining in what direction the modern world evolves. About to be integrated, he [the Lao] had not yet had the time to become aware of its [the modern world's] realities, of its laws, of its requirements. On an easy soil, he lives without great worry of the next day, little prepared for the faculties of abstraction that are demanded by the notions of public-minded and the future. He does not know, no doubt, that he is being asked suddenly also to be a "political animal," and the new role toward which history gives rise, no doubt, has not yet been explored and the meaning and content [is also not explored].

It is why there is no need to fix by a text its [the Lao] status [i.e. a constitution], he who lived entirely and profoundly according to custom.

Thereby, the draft constitution, which was submitted to the King [and] then to the high commissioner of France, did not arouse any controversy, no murmur among the public.³³⁵

To Nginn, the Lao have not accessed modernity because the average person has lived indolently without abstract thought. Therefore, there is no civic mindedness and no concern for the future of the temporal world. As for democracy, they could only hope to grasp it gradually over time by seeing it in practice. The majority of the Lao people were then incapable of the new responsibilities in a modern democracy. One must note here that Nginn was talking past the Issara rather engaging them in any meaningful dialogue.

Nginn's views are vitally important to understanding the early RLG in the hands of the loyalist elite. Although the loyalists wished to institute a new democracy to compete with the Issara, some among them held deeply anti-democratic notions about the average citizen. Nginn closed his account of early Lao democracy by proposing the only workable, realistic solution he could see:

We have the deep conviction that after the promulgation of this constitution which regulates in a reasonable fashion the political organization of the country, the French adviser will continue to

³³⁵ Ibid, p. 11.

exercise a benevolent influence on the slow march of the country toward progress, by initiating the Lao people in the life of modern nations.³³⁶

Thus, for Nginn, the French would need to play a vital role in guiding the Lao to the modern political life. The source of modernity for Laos, including democracy, in Nginn's estimation, must be France. If the country moves slow, that cannot really be the blamed on France. Nginn first published his essay on the Lao constitution in a magazine specifically for a loyalist Lao audience, but then a year later gained a much wider audience in the West by republishing it in the pages of *France-Asie*, therefore giving the Western world its first account of Lao democracy. The reprint is itself an important moment, as from then on RLG politics, politicians and political parties could be dismissed by Westerners as non-existent, the Lao deemed woefully unmodern and too primitive to have any real sort of democracy, only a game among the elite for the spoils.

Another loyalist wrote a unique account on democracy, which appeared only a few months earlier in July 1947 in the *Kinnari* journal under the pseudonym “Lao Blood” (ເລືອດລາວ) on the “Principles of Democracy” (ຫລັກປະຊາທິປະໄຕ).³³⁷ The author opens by proposing to explain the new ideas:

Now, every Lao already knows that anyone who is a citizen of a free country in the French Union, that person has what kind of duties to the country? [And] what rights and benefits does a person receive from the country, please?

In order to understand with certainty the new thinking (ລັດທິໃໝ່), [we] invite every Lao to abandon reverence of oneself, of “the good” that is those descendants of village headmen, sub-district heads since time immemorial... Then also thoughts that [in] all affairs that one is a person of that village, that city, [who] wants the interests and wants to be great that which is from the that locality.

That which is said here is the old thinking, which [has] made the Lao country drown. If Lao certainly believe [in the old thinking] for a long time, how will it progress?³³⁸

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Lao Blood, ຫຼັກປະຊາທິປະໄຕ [“Principles of Democracy,”] p. 21-25.

³³⁸ Ibid, p. 21.

Laos in the opening paragraph is referred to as a “free” (ເສຍ) country, however, no explanation of the term is provided. The author’s discussion of the old thinking, suggests one is supposed to abandon their own parochial views in order to attain the “new thinking” but what that actually entails is not explained.

The author’s purpose throughout the article is to explain the rights and duties of the new political order of a modern democratic state. Yet rather than explain these ideas, much less the new rights Lao would enjoy in a New Laos, instead the author presents his or her readers with a much more authoritarian reasoning for the new order, such as their comments on the new constitution:

The Lao country, because of French aid, did obtain a high state already and because of the royal favor of the foot of his majesty the king Sisavang Vong. The Lao country thus did see a constitution arise which is the popular theory all over the civilized world.

[illegible]...the king and of that divine lineage, every Lao person should respect and preserve [it, i.e. the constitution] his or her-self. Similarly [all] persons must surrender [and] sacrifice some things for the benefit of the national community.³³⁹

The author seems more concerned with gaining the people’s acceptance of and obedience to the 1947 constitution than to explain even the values enshrined in the preamble. Based solely on this article, the constitution does not appear to be a social contract between the people and state in which the people grant certain powers to the state and whose rights are safeguarded. Instead, the reader would understand from this article that they should obey the constitution because the King had ordered them too. The reader can perhaps content themselves with the fact that they now rank among the “civilized” (ສີວິໄລ) world.³⁴⁰

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ For the Thai context see Thongchai Winichakul, “The Quest for “Siwilai”: A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Siam” *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 59, no. 3 (2000).

Only at the end of the paper does the author reveal the paper's real purpose, which is to explain the concept of citizenship (ສັນຍາຊາດ). He explains it mainly in terms of the duties that the people owe to the modern state, to serve as a soldier, to pay taxes, etc.:

A person in any country accepts to be a strong wooden beam of that country. People who live in their country submit to be the force in their country [in] peace time or in war time because [that person] has a duty to pay tax to the government the same as to be a soldier and a government official also. Therefore, [one] is called a citizen which translates as force (ກຳລັງ) of the country (ບ້ານເມືອງ) or force of the nation (ປະເທດ).³⁴¹

Japan created its constitution in 1889 by purposely modeling it on that of Germany, which emphasized state power over individual rights. Japan offers an interesting point of comparison to loyalist notions of the May 11, 1947 constitution. Lao Blood adds further:

In ancient times, the word “citizen” meant original people of the locality (ຄົນເດີມພື້ນເມືອງ); not people who came from outside (ນອກ) the country or [who were] forcibly-taken from other countries; this group of people was called: war-slaves (ຊະເລີງ), temple slaves, slaves (ທາຕ, ທາສາ, ຂັງຂ້າ) or guests (ແຂກ) of the country.

In the present day, the world progresses fully already then Everyone in their own country is a citizen of their country [who] submits (ອອມ) to have freedom [and] rights fully and completely.³⁴²

This presents an interesting explanation of a multiethnic state. But the language of the last paragraph is suggestive: according to the author, a person must submit to the state in order to have “freedom” and “rights,” which do not actually seem to be the familiar Western political values, but instead are the people's obligations owed to the state as citizens of that country. The author therefore appears in this way to misuse the terms “freedom” and “rights.” Lao Blood adds that “not every country needs to be completely independent” which is an idea found in other loyalist writing.³⁴³ He concludes by explaining the new term of “nationality”:

³⁴¹ Ibid, p. 25.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ See further Pierre Nginn, ອະນາຄົດຂອງປະເທດລາວ [“Future of the country,”] *Kinnari*, no. 8, September 1948, pp. 31-40.

A country has duties to control its own citizens in order to show that anyone in the control of any country thus must have a harness (ສາຍຈ້ອງ) [on] the people, those kept with their own country. This harness is called nationality (ສັນຍາຊາດ).³⁴⁴

The account written by Lao Blood is a rather poor effort to explain the “Principles of Democracy.” The rights and duties of citizens in a modern “free” state turns out to be nothing more than a harness saddling the people, who must pull the state forward. At any rate, this article is important for being written in Lao and so not primarily intended for a Western audience, which provides an important counterpoint to those documents explicitly written for Westerners.

Finally, the loyalists felt that the arrival of democracy had, in fact, caused much disorder in the country and it seemed to be little more than a disturbance. Kou Voravong, leader of the Democrats and director of *Lao May* newspaper, wrote in that paper about the troubles introduced into the country by democracy; he complained about:

...lack of authority, discipline, respect for the constituted authorities, [and] the meaning of hierarchy originating from the misunderstood idea of liberty and equality, sense of slumber, of inertia, mind more of profit than of duty, such are the dominant characteristic signs in Laos currently...³⁴⁵

While Kou mentioned issues not germane, he nonetheless pointed to key ideals of the Issara: liberty and equality, which he interpreted negatively. To the loyalists’ dismay the embers of democracy continued to burn in the country in the guise of indiscipline and anti-authority. Kou’s complaint is as clear a sign as any that the Issara had inspired a more widespread movement among people generally. It suggests that such cases were in part manifestations of a desire to not collaborate with the French in a silent campaign of protest against the New Laos.³⁴⁶ Whatever the case, democracy had clearly unsettled things in the country.

³⁴⁴ Lao Blood, “Principles of Democracy,” p. 25.

³⁴⁵ *Depuis Le Retour*, p. 20.

³⁴⁶ Geoffrey Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos: Peasant and Politics in a Colonial Backwater* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990) notes a similar “passive resistance” among Lao during the colonial era.

The Issara, as I have suggested, were a deeply democratic movement. They claimed that independence was the true aspiration of the people.³⁴⁷ The Issara portrayed themselves as the embodiment of those aspirations and that the people and the independence movement were one and the same. They even claimed that the French were secretly proud of the Issara demands for freedom, independence and democracy.³⁴⁸ The Issara felt that Lao had to cease being servile to the French: “But we will never again allow the France imperialist to lead us to be eternal minors and that they drag us behind them as lowly slaves, good only for *corvée* and requisitions...”³⁴⁹ Ending the “eternal” Lao servility to the French was the only way one could ever truly act in the best interests of the country.³⁵⁰

The Issara were relentless in their call for real freedom and independence. In their view, there could be no real democracy, freedom, or independence in the country if it were to remain under foreign rule:

Finally, there is nothing more grotesque than this ostentatious enumeration of all the freedoms given to the Lao people in the preamble of this fabulous constitution: individual freedom, freedom of conscience, freedom of property, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of education, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of professions.

These freedoms have no meaning as long as we have not obtained our independence.

Can a people say it is free when it is placed under the domination of another people, when it is still bound to a foreign power by all kinds of servitudes?³⁵¹

The Issara were very good at pointing to the basic contradiction inherent in seeking to establish a democratic state still under the rule of a foreign power. They added further that the New Laos still lacked basic freedoms for that very reason:

And could one say that the Lao are free when they are formally forbidden to read foreign newspapers, when they see [for] themselves all their radio receivers confiscated, when to go from

³⁴⁷ *Les Aspirations*, p. 7.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 3.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 2.

³⁵⁰ *Des Sots ou Traîtres*, p. 7.

³⁵¹ *Contribution*, p. 114.

one province to another of their own country (we do not even speak of foreign countries), they must obtain a prior authorization, when the least criticism addressed to French imperialism leads them straight to prison, if not to the execution post?

Therefore, dear compatriots, you do very well not to listen to this French propaganda which tends to make you believe that all your aspirations are executed, that the ideal for which you struggle so courageously is already attained, and that you no longer have anything better to do than to dispose your arms and return peacefully to your home to help the French to rebuild a new Laos.³⁵²

To the democratic Issara, the ultimate source of sovereignty, and any civil or political rights must be the Lao people themselves. Yet the people living in the New Laos were oppressed by the French; they were not able to express the full rights of a citizen in a democracy. As such, they would always have their most basic rights infringed under foreign rule. Only a Lao government could safeguard the rights and freedoms of the people.

The last subject of the debate was the set of questions surrounding the recent projects to modernize the country, which was inextricably linked with perceptions of both its future and the aspirations of the people. In what direction should the country move to progress? What is progress? Under the provisional Issara government, the major questions for Lao had not concerned “family politics,” but really wrestled with the weighty issues facing the country.

One of the key demands of the Issara was for a state that was politically and economically viable.³⁵³ The Issara sought to bring real modernity and development to the country, but their basic notion of modernity was distinct from that of the loyalists. They could point to other countries as exemplars in the drive to modernize besides France or even look beyond the West. Notably the Issara pointed to neighboring Asian countries like Siam and Japan. Thus, the Issara did not believe that modernity could only come solely or exclusively from the West. In Siam, the Issara saw a country rich in rice compared to New Laos that itself had lost self-sufficiency under French rule. The Issara were influenced strongly by the central Thai, who were important to their developing

³⁵² Ibid, p. 114-115.

³⁵³ *Les Aspirations*, p. 3.

views on anti-colonialism; they even talked about forming a confederation with Thailand (or a larger confederation on mainland Southeast Asia).³⁵⁴

The Issara lamented that the French modernizing project had failed, leaving the Lao a people who were starving, unable even to feed themselves.³⁵⁵ Ultimately, the Issara contended that the French by maintaining their grip on the Lao made “us a minority *and backward* people,” the latter of which resulting from the failure of France to modernize the country.³⁵⁶ To the Issara, the French modernization project in Laos had failed, and the colonial presence in the country was in fact the major obstacle to attaining a true modernity. Since the French could only maintain their power by suppressing the Lao, they would always stymie any true modernization efforts.

The loyalists had more narrow ideas concerning modernity, but these conceptions may have been refined by their practical experiences in the governing of the country while the Issara were in exile. They believed that Lao aspirations could be satisfied without full independence and frequently questioned the need for independence. In this way, the loyalists valued modernization above political reform and attaining full independence. In their view, the best solution remained to focus on modernizing and developing the country without severing the connection to France. They would argue in fact that France offered the best way to modernize the country in real terms through aid, technical experience, and training in France for the budding Lao elite that was not forthcoming elsewhere. The loyalists, holding power and tasked with solving the real challenges facing the country, looked to France.

³⁵⁴ However, the Issara were not above criticizing the central Thai, which was a bold move considering they owed their safe refuge to them. In discussing the confederation with Thailand the Issara stressed they must be equals, and pointed to the potential for central Thai domination in such a polity (recalling historic domination by them). Even though the central Thai could be a model of modernity, the Issara had to guard against the possibility of foreign domination of the movement by purported “allies”.

³⁵⁵ *Des Sots ou Traîtres*, p. 3.

³⁵⁶ *Contribution*, p. 85. Emphasis added.

Whatever anti-democratic views notwithstanding, the loyalists also could still speak of a place for democracy in modernizing the country. As Nginn observes:

The deputies judged that it is by the proclamation and respect of fundamental liberties that will be introduced little-by-little to the masses the great ideas which formed MODERN nations: the USA and France in the eighteenth century, the rest of western Europe and the Americas in the nineteenth century as well as Japan. And now all the Asian states: India and China, Burma and Indonesia, Vietnam and Cambodia.

THUS IN DEMOCRACY WE REJOIN OUR BROTHERS.³⁵⁷

Laos could finally take its place in the concert of nations as the latest country to adopt and thereby participate in the global expansion of modern democracy. Such a move would also serve to catch up with its closest neighbors. Of course, this account ignores the profoundly anti-democratic role France had played in the country prior to World War II, but it was an important plank to the fashioning of post-conquest New Laos.

Conclusion: Democracy and the End of Foreign Rule

Democracy was at the center of major events in the early years of the RLG. Indeed, the origins of the modern state were inexorably connected to it. Yet why did democracy arise at this moment so strongly? The old political order had failed to save the Lao from foreign domination, but the new order might deliver them from this fate. Some of the elite strongly believed that democracy was the best way to answer the dire needs of the country, to give voice to the people, to modernize, to strengthen and unite the country, but it also clearly resonated at the popular level. The elite could not simply impose their views on their followers or they would not have attracted such a wide following.

³⁵⁷ Nginn, "La Constitution Lao," p. 9. The British and the Philippines are curiously absent from Nginn's account of modern democracy.

The Issara brought major change – especially the new political discourse of freedom and independence – in their quest to establish a Western liberal parliamentary democracy for the first time. The loyalists were no less important than the Issara in this period. They confronted many of the issues at a practical level, concerning themselves with the details on ground, and engaging the difficult work of government, holding elections, forming parties, managing newspapers, and so forth. The Issara-loyalist debates led in many ways to a further refinement of views on all sides, unmistakably shaping the early forms of democracy. Yet when the Issara leaders returned in 1949 they could not bring all their followers to the government side, showing that the Issara was indeed a decentralized movement. Democracy's arrival was difficult, and in many ways not fully understood by all. While some were skeptical of democracy, and others were critical of the lack of freedoms in the New Laos, by 1950 all sides (except the Pathet Lao) came together for the good of the nation. There would be a continuing dialogue on the Lao democracy throughout the life of the RLG, in which the Lao never grew complacent, but were always striving to improve.

In the semi-colonial years (1945-1954), the major recurring features of RLG are already apparent. The French had burdened the country with the legacies of colonialism, without infrastructure or industry, and with little education, or few competent staff to run the government. This created a dependence on foreign aid and experts. The new democracy was celebrated in some quarters, but it was already tarnished in others. Politics and politicians were selfish, and did not uphold the national interest, so the critics said. Political violence was growing. Yet as the conflicts of the period show, there were many Lao who felt so strongly that they were willing to go into exile and form a dissident group to seek the violent overthrow of a “puppet” government controlled by foreigners. The Issara notably created the mold for the later Pathet Lao, which was one of violent dissent. These groups appeared and attracted followers who believed the government was

not nationalist enough. In this way, the RLG did not suffer only from a lack of nationalist sentiment; but rather if anything suffered from an overabundance of nationalist spirit, which appeared in splinter groups like the Issara, and later the Pathet Lao.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁸ Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 24, is insightful in this respect. He notes the Pathet Lao “swore not to lay down their arms until the last Frenchmen had left Laos.” They strangely “pretend to be more patriotic than their king. But strangest of all was a patriotism so suspicious of even a provisional collaboration with France..., but able to accommodate itself so easily to a powerful ally like the Viet Minh.”

CHAPTER THREE: EARLY CULTURE AND MODERNITY

Introduction

The early years of democracy in Laos brought not only a host of political and military struggles, but also marked a major shift in culture and society that drew much less notice at the time, but which ultimately was of great significance in the shaping of the modern country. Other studies of the period, and especially those concerning the Issara, have not fully considered the implications of the social and cultural changes the Issara inaugurated in the country.³⁵⁹ The most profound social and cultural changes emerged from the introduction of democracy. While the Issara introduced (and the loyalist more or less sustained) the norms of Western liberal parliamentary democracy, including notions of civil and political rights and the rule of law, the egalitarian values undergirding the new political order inevitably clashed with existing traditions and culture. As such, the new cultural trends were refigured, especially by the loyalists, who were no less important to the emerging democratic culture of the early RLG.

The loyalist voiced important criticisms of the new democracy, which raised deeper, vexing questions for society. Some perceived the new democracy as nothing more than a carnivalesque overturning of established order, in which a whirlwind of destructive chaos propelled by the worst drives in human nature were unleashed with no higher purpose, dressed up in the garb of new political freedoms by those who fundamentally misunderstood them. As such, the loyalists perceived the Issara as guilty of the worst excesses and abuses of democracy. To them, the Issara were nothing more than demagogues who led fools and idiots among the people as mere sheep, helpless victims of beautiful speakers or great orators. Even after 1949, ex-loyalists

³⁵⁹ For example, Gunn, *Political Struggles* and Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*.

continued to voice perceptive criticisms of the nascent RLG democracy, pointing to enduring conflicts and tensions with established culture and customs. The social order was in flux in the semi-colonial years.

Democracy was not the only source of new cultural trends in this period. New sources of cultural change emerged in the new and expanding French schools. There was an emerging class of Francophone Lao who were proud heirs of French learning. Thousands of Lao students were for the first time confronted with a deeper and more enduring contact with French language and culture than had ever before been possible in the country. These experiences were no longer confined to a tiny elite, but became much more common during the period; they were a hallmark of the culture taking shape in the semi-colonial years. Yet the most accomplished students were confronted with fundamental questions about the nature of identity as they became highly Westernized. Those most fluent in French experienced difficulties fully expressing themselves, while at the same time becoming more isolated, even alienated, from their own culture. Others argued about what the proper appellation of the country should be, which was really a proxy for discussing the influence of the French on the Lao. Nonetheless Francophone Lao were afforded unprecedented opportunities in these years as some emerged on the modern world stage as they traveled to the metropole, Paris.

Democracy itself was seen as one of the most important ways to modernize the country at the time and some form of it was included in several variations of modernity circulating at the time. The country did modernize more in the 1940s than at any time previously as the French and their loyalists followers put great effort into forging a New Laos. New technology such as radios and airplanes began to be introduced to the country. Yet the heavy burdens of modernizing the country was largely in the hands of the young pupils, who, their French instructors said, had to

first shed their traditions before progressing in their task. The Issara talked at length about modernization, and had a number of grand ideas, but prior to their return, the loyalists were the ones actually directing the early modernization and so ended up playing a more prominent role in its early years. The loyalists worked in partnership with the French as their guide, and looked to France as their model of modernity. The Issara were more likely to look to Asian exemplars like the Thai or Japanese for their model of modernity, although they too had a guarded admiration of France in this period.

Finally, the Issara contributed to the democratic culture in more ways than just the political domain. They made the first moves in the cultural field to question the role of France in recent history. In particular they questioned the founding myth of French colonial rule, the “conquest of hearts.” The loyalists and the Issara fundamentally disagreed over the role that France had played in the country: the former saw the French as a benevolent force uplifting and modernizing the Lao while the latter perceived them as the despoilers of the land, who took power by violence and sustained their rule with lies. The role of the French in the country’s history would be debated until the fall of the RLG in 1975. Yet the most important contribution by the Issara to RLG culture in this period was to provide the first sustained articulation of Lao anti-communism. To the Issara, the Lao were naturally resistant to communism due to their traditions, society, culture and observance of Buddhism. The notion that communism was “un-Lao” cast a long shadow over the RLG. It was an idea that continued to be expressed by some Lao in the country even after 1975. The Issara were therefore responsible for creating the two central pillars of the RLG: democracy and anti-communism.

Loyalist Cultural Struggles

The loyalists have largely been ignored outside the political arena; they are not regarded as having made any significant contribution to Lao culture in this period, and in fact are demonized in some works for a perceived promoting of French culture at the expense of their own Lao culture. Recent Lao history works have gone so far as to refer to this period as one of French “cultural pollution.”³⁶⁰ Those loyalists who became educated, and were familiar with French learning were perceived to have in the process forgotten their own culture in their fascination with the new Western culture. Their willingness to transgress cultural boundaries was cause for anxiety for some and was reviled by the Issara who felt themselves so deeply Lao. In one Issara appeal to the loyalists, they went so far as to say, “never forget you are Lao.”³⁶¹

In a rumor prevailing at the time, Crown Prince Savang Vatthana was said to have returned from an extended period of study in France, and according to the rumor, could no longer remember how to speak Lao well, but his French was flawless. Whatever the truth of the rumor, for the average Lao it served to alienate them from the out-of-touch globe-trotting elite who were more concerned with the happenings in the metropole than in their own country. But was it possible that there was a genuine Francophone Lao identity forged in this period? Could one support the French presence in the country and be a nationalist at the same time? Could one speak French fluently and still promote the Lao language and culture? Due to the expanding education system this question was posed to a wider segment of society than at any time in history.

³⁶⁰ Souneth Photisane et al, ບະຫວັດສາດລາວ [“History of Laos”] (Vientiane: 2000).

³⁶¹ *Contribution*, p. 91. Of course, the Issara themselves were highly Westernized, but their demands for political independence buttressed by anti-colonial cultural works served to delineate important boundaries which they perceived the loyalists lacked culturally and politically. Likewise the Vietnamese sought political independence from China while remaining part of the Chinese cultural world for centuries.

In the semi-colonial years, these issues began to appear strongly in the country due to the fact that the pace of modernization had quickened noticeably.³⁶² For the first time many Lao came into contact with not just French officials, but French culture itself in greater depth. Since Lao had previously been governed by only a few hundred Frenchmen, in many areas of the country the French presence was being felt for the first time.³⁶³ This trend is most visible in the development of a modern education system since many more Lao pupils were studying in French schools than ever before and more schools were built in this period than in the entire preceding half-century (1893-1940) of French rule.³⁶⁴ From 1940 to 1949, the number of government primary schools increased from 92 to 641, an almost three-fold increase.³⁶⁵ In the same period the number of students enrolled in French schools rose from 7,062 in 1940 to 36,716 in 1949, a five-fold increase in enrollment.³⁶⁶ The Collège Pavie in Vientiane was upgraded to a full *lycée* and junior high schools were opened in Pakse, Savannakhet and Luang Prabang. In these new schools the Lao were confronted with a dramatically different curriculum from that of the pre-colonial period, in which they were exposed in depth to French language, history, and culture more than ever before.

This trend, as much as anything else, spurred the modernization of the country. But it was accompanied by profound cultural change, which one can observe in the pages of *Kinnari*, a contemporary French-Lao cultural review. While several writers who appeared in the magazine engaged in debates with Issara, other contributors were also engaged in the continuing intellectual endeavors of cultural nationalism that had begun in the 1930s at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute.

³⁶² Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 69.

³⁶³ The widely cited 1907 census included 189 French, including 17 women. See McCoy, "French in Laos."

³⁶⁴ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 78. For a detailed study of the education system see Bruce Lockhart, "Education in Laos in historical perspective" (2001) unpublished manuscript.

³⁶⁵ Kingdom of Laos, *Primary School Statistics: School Year 1965-1966* [ສະຖິຕິປະຖົມສຶກສາ ປີການສຶກສາ 1965-1966] (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, n.d.), p. 27.

³⁶⁶ For the 1940 figure see *ibid*, p. 28. For the 1949 figure see Kingdom of Laos, *Annuaire Statistique du Laos: Quatrième Volume, 1953 à 1957* (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, 1961), p. 119.

Unlike the Issara's cultural studies, those in *Kinnari* had not cast off the earlier French-Lao Friendship trope to frame their works.³⁶⁷ Cultural studies appearing in the magazine presented works in which French influence predominated. The contributors to *Kinnari* were proud to see themselves as heirs of French culture and learning, but there were also tensions in these loyalist cultural works. This was most evident in the name and symbol of the magazine, which was a *kinnari*, described as a kind of chimera with the body of a bird, but with a human face.³⁶⁸ Maha Phoumy Chitaphong also referred to a *Kinnari* as a being whose “head is Vietnamese, chest is Lao, body is French...one may not say with certainty, truly what it is.”³⁶⁹ Thus in *Kinnari* one finds tensions between essentialist notions of Lao culture juxtaposed with more transgressive views. Related to this was a new tension between striving to preserve tradition and the drive to modernize everything in the country, even what had been traditional culture.

One essay presented the experiences of a Lao pupil who was the product of the French educational system, and was deeply impressed by French culture in the course of his studies. In an article entitled, “Will Lao [language] Be Learned?” by one Phouvong, the writer gives a careful account of his own experiences as a student in the French schools.³⁷⁰ He begins by describing the difficulty of his study in a bilingual context, torn between two languages:

I feel a great difficulty to express myself in French, the French language not being my mother tongue. I often would like to write. I take the pen. I make effort to construct phrases. The ideas come to me, but the vocabulary and the ease I lack in order to make a useful work.

Why then not write in Lao? The difficulty is still greater, when it comes to translating Lao thought by a truly Lao mind. For a Lao out of French-Lao schools, it is the habit to envision things according to the French mind. To express his ideas, he is obliged to make two efforts: to express himself first

³⁶⁷ This trope is best exemplified by the *Bulletin des “Amis du Laos”* journal (1937-1940).

³⁶⁸ Maha Phoumy Chitaphong, ກິນນະວີ [“Kinnary”] *Kinnari*, November 1946, p. 11-12

³⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 11.

³⁷⁰ Phouvong, “Apprendra-t-on le Laotien?” *Kinnari*, no. 6, November 1947, pp. 7-8. This author does not give his surname but may in fact be Phouvong Phimmasone who was a prominent member of the loyalists.

in French, then translate then his ideas expressed in French into Lao. The task is not easy. We spend to this effect, twice the time.³⁷¹

The inability to express oneself seems to be one dilemma that loyalists point to as they become more exposed to Western, especially French culture and language. If Phouvong speaks for the experiences of the new Francophone Lao emerging at the time, it is an identity fraught with difficulties.

Phouvong's experiences start with difficulty, but lead eventually to him becoming alienated from his native culture and language. He continues by describing the rendering of his thoughts into meaningful expression which becomes difficult, even impossible to express to Lao not touched by French learning:

The translation of a French text to Lao is not often faithful. The ideas distort themselves more or less. One could maintain the French thoughts, but the Lao expression becomes defective and perfectly unintelligible for those who have not received French instruction.³⁷²

If a Francophone Lao identity can be marked off as a distinct separate sub-culture from the majority Lao, then it may have some historical validity at least in the semi-colonial years, though its distinguishing mark appears in this case as alienation from the majority Lao:

We learn to speak Lao correctly, avoid the habit that seems a little ridiculous to the eyes of foreigners of speaking gibberish in mixing Lao with French.

We speak French among Lao, we use French words to express certain ideas, because most often the Lao word does not come spontaneously to the mind, [by] lack of frequent use. We joke, we mock ourselves. We search [for] the means to remedy it.³⁷³

While only one person's story, Phouvong's struggles lead him in a larger sense to raise the question of whether the Francophone Lao identity might ever become fully whole.

The French mind does not conceive an idea [in] the same manner as the Lao mind. I cite an example

³⁷¹ Ibid, p. 7.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid, p. 8.

“d’où revenez-vous? [where are you coming from?] CHAO PAY SAI MA (you – to go- where – to come)

It is a clear example of the phenomenon in question. Of the two sides, in French like in Lao, the notion of return (*render*) – that of return (*retour*) is the same ...which French pay particular attention to the idea of the return (*retour*), the Lao adopt on the contrary a different method, the chronological walk. The [Lao] notions render the one following the other in a chronological order.

“Where is-you go for to return?”

One could render the same idea by the same words: Chao Kap Ma Te Say (you return from where?). But it is bad Lao. This example shows that this is a general case, the Lao language and the French language *render the same ideas, not only by different words, but also by a difference of construction and by a different order, resulting in the difference of operations of the mind.*³⁷⁴

To Phouvong, his many years of study of French led him inevitably to witness the many gaps and disjunctures between the two cultures. He no longer held the optimism that comes from naively regarding the possibility for greater cross-cultural connections. In his account of his own experiences, he must to a degree give up his Lao mind, where it is incompatible to the French mind, in order to competently express himself in the new language. But doing so loses full access to his own native tongue, leaving him stranded somewhere in the middle of two cultures, speaking utterly unintelligible pidgin phrases with un-Francophone Lao.³⁷⁵ At the end he is drawn to go so far as to say that it is not a matter of different vocabulary or even grammar but of a different mind entirely, or as he puts it “the Lao mind, to conceive things, follows a different route from that employed by Westerners.”³⁷⁶ To him a true meeting of Lao and French at this stage is impossible, each isolated, not able to access that of the other; and those who try are dislocated, feeling somewhat lost.

³⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 7-8. Emphasis added.

³⁷⁵ Bruce Lockhart has suggested this situation may be characteristic of almost any colonized elite who had been entirely educated in the colonial language from secondary school onward. This is an important point to contextualize the Lao experience.

³⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 8.

He concludes his short article by recounting an episode which happened at a gathering of elite loyalists in Vientiane. He does not name anyone besides himself in attendance, leaving the reader only to guess:

I remember one of these meetings of elite men who want to impose an academic rule. We discuss. We are eloquent, we improvise the speech. Silence. Someone interrupts. Absolute PROHIBITION on the use of a non-Lao word in the course of the discussion under pain of a fine of five piasters per word for every violation of the rule. General endorsement followed by resounding applause on the part of the assistants. We continue. The discussion becomes more and more harsh. Sometimes it is the brouhaha where all speak at the same time. A general burst of laughter. What is happening? The discourse is interrupted by a protestation, vehemently by one of the assistants. A French word pronounced '*aporitif*', five piasters fine!³⁷⁷

From Phouvong's account one sees that among the elite circles in loyalist Laos, there are limits to the appropriation of French culture. Even among the loyalist elite, they did not want to abandon or even disadvantage their own Lao language. This episode, if it actually happened, shows that not every loyalist was blindly pro-French, but took a more nuanced approach. Especially among the older generation of loyalists, not everyone accepted the use of the new French language, whatever its new modes of expression, its opening of the West, or its access to new learning and culture. There is in Phouvong's account a certain disconnect between his younger generation, who have throw themselves into their studies with abandon and the older generation who exercise more reserve in regard to the French language.

Finally, according to Phouvong, the meeting ended with the "small academic society" declaring a new initiative. It would, "outline a program of work to undertake in the literary domain to realize a work of intervention and of popularization of Lao literature."³⁷⁸ This would become, during the new independent era, the Literature Committee which would produce many works to preserve and promote Lao literature. It would require "the collaboration of the elite" or "men of

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

letters” as Phouvong recorded it. Its avowed aim, however, was even greater: “It will lay the first stones which will constitute now the foundations of a Lao academy to build.”³⁷⁹

The dilemmas confronting the loyalist Lao to fashion a new cultural identity in the semi-colonial period was revealed in another issue of *Kinnari* in which the author, T. N. Singharaj, debated the issue “should we say *Laotien* or *Lao*?”³⁸⁰ In his treatment of the term *Lao*, Singharaj must first explain the impact of the French on the Lao: “the first French [who] came to Laos would have certainly said the “country of Laos,” but he notes that this had no impact until later.³⁸¹ To find the original, authentic form, Singharaj needs to go back to a time before the French arrived in the country, but at the same time he inevitably marks how deeply the French had impacted the Lao, in this case symbolized by the addition of the “s” to the name of their country. “Here it is, in a word, the origin of “Laos”, [of] purely French origin...”³⁸²

To Singharaj, the French by adding the “s” and obscuring the true form then introduce a question of authenticity as a number of other variants were introduced, “Laocien or Laosien” etc.³⁸³ The French arrival to the country introduces a measure of confusion and ambiguity about the proper terminology, but to the loyalists it strikes deeper to question their identity in the semi-colonial years, symbolized by the cloud of uncertainty surrounding the proper appellation. This rupture introduces what could only be regarded as an identity crisis felt among some loyalist Lao,

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ T.N. Singharaj, “*Faut-il dire Laotien ou Lao?*” *Kinnari*, July 1947, p. 1-2.

³⁸¹ Ibid, p. 1.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid.

whom mainly resided in urban areas where French education was most accessible, which Singharaj feels must be addressed.³⁸⁴

Nonetheless, Singharaj posits that there remained a level of discourse among Lao that was in no way affected or impacted by the French, or even the Thai:

Whatever this term “Laos” be imposed in the administrative and international milieu, it does not prevent the Lao and their neighbors of the right bank of the Mekong of saying between them and always “MUONG LAO” (country of Laos).³⁸⁵

To Singharaj, the Lao remain unaffected after over half a century of colonialism, and despite efforts to divide them to live under numerous states and different administrations. They have an eternal, unchanging identity which survives, immutable and expressed in the local vernacular, neither elite nor popular, which excludes French, Thai, Vietnamese, and Khmer. Singharaj is thus confident about his own Lao identity. One is surprised to find such an idea in the French-Lao cultural review *Kinnari*. This notion was quite popular among the Issara, who frequently claimed that there existed a real Lao people divided up among Thai, French, Cambodia, Vietnam governments.³⁸⁶ The article continues:

It is right therefore for a new Laos that is organized and to which the liberating French come to grant generously democratic liberties, to fix, for all time, the choice of the one or the other term. SHOULD WE SAY LAOTIEN OR LAO?³⁸⁷

After he mentions additional reasons to discard *laotien* he concludes:

Finally, the wish dearest of all, this would be to see used only the term “Lao” to designate the inhabitants of Muong Lao, both by the administration as by foreign nations. One could, strictly,

³⁸⁴ Pierre Somchine Nginn himself wrote his own name a number of ways, and in his autobiography complained that Lao would often hear his name “somchine” and assume it meant “mixed with Chinese.” His father was in fact one of the Cambodian assistants of Pavie who settled in Luang Prabang and took a Lao wife.

³⁸⁵ Singharaj, “*Faut-il dire Laotien ou Lao?*” p. 1.

³⁸⁶ Katay Sasorith, *Le Laos: Son évolution politique et sa place dans l’Union française* (Paris: Editions Berger-Levrault, 1953) p. 9. See also “3349” *Iron man of Laos: Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa*, trans. John B. Murdoch, ed. David Wyatt (Ithaca: Cornell SEAP, 1978), pp. 1-2. See further, Soren Ivarsson and Christopher Goscha, “Prince Phetsarath (1890-1959): Nationalism and royalty in the making of modern Laos” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, 1 (2007).

³⁸⁷ Singharaj, “*Faut-il dire Laotien ou Lao?*” p. 1. Emphasis in the original.

keep the word “Laos” in place of “Muong Lao”, a very practical name about which no one has any plausible comment.³⁸⁸

Even though he has already said “Laos” is from a foreign external discourse imposed on the Lao, and that the Lao themselves have never changed, the author still engages the New Laos by raising the problem of its current appellation and suggesting a solution to an elite loyalist Lao audience. To Singharaj the dilemma is either for Lao to accommodate to the French, and submit to the usage of *laotien*, or for the French, and the West to follow local usage of *lao*. To raise the question of terminology in this way really was a subtle means to query whose interests would predominate in the New Laos: French or Lao? Thus Singharaj’s made his call to refer to the country and people as *lao*, but it remained still a narrow form of nationalism, like the Issara, and did not begin to address the problems of inclusion in a multi-ethnic state. The author here was busy enough confronting the French to consider a more inclusive form of nationalism, much less worry about the non-Lao minorities living within the territorial boundaries of the country.

Singharaj concludes by discussing what possible meaning ‘Laos’ would have in Lao. Given that the French ‘Laos’ with its final ‘s’ is unpronounceable in the Lao language, Singharaj reads it as “Lao-ot” (taking the “o” as a final ‘v’ and ‘o’ vowel, and the final “s” as a final “t”), by which he derives the “patient Lao” (ລາວອົດ). He continues:

Thus, the meaning of the word “Laos” denotes exactly the proper nature of the Lao people. Laos being the last of the great Indochinese family, a country patient, young, eager for gentleness and tranquility, not wanting anyone rough and expecting only the disinterested and sincere counsels of the protective France, *it belongs therefore to the latter to extend her hand for her Lao children to live.*³⁸⁹

In general, one can conclude the loyalist Lao dealt with significant cultural issues. They were the first to mediate with West in a major way, that was not simply restricted to a tiny elite as in most

³⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 2.

³⁸⁹ Ibid. Emphasis added.

of the preceding colonial era.³⁹⁰ They also raised serious questions about the prominence and spread of French culture, often in terms of language, in their country. Simply because some Lao elite decided to remain in country after reconquest, and to participate in the government of the early RLG, did not preclude the possibility for these ‘loyalists’ to ever express an attitude or views that might be in any way anti-French, or anti-colonial, or even to radically question the French role in the New Laos. Some among them did express ideas held in common with the Issara. In the culture field, the loyalists expressed dissenting views about the French far more than might be suggested by simplistic labels as “loyalist” or “pro-French.” Furthermore, as much as the Issara might wish to stand apart from the loyalists, these cultural issues did not go away with the return of the majority of the Issara, who themselves quickly became entangled with them on their return to the country at the end of 1949.

Issara Anti-Communism in the Early Cold War

The Issara published one unique pamphlet of far reaching importance that would outlast the movement itself as the earliest example of a Lao anti-communist tract.³⁹¹ It is significant evidence showing that Lao anti-communism originated several years before the United States became deeply involved in the country. The Issara form of anti-communism was primarily informed by Francophone literature and would influence all later anti-communist movements in

³⁹⁰ In the 1949-1950 school year there were 38,593 students enrolled in government schools with 396 students earning a *Certificat d'enseignement primaire complémentaire* and 69 a *Diplôme d'enseignement primaire supérieur*. See Kingdom of Laos, *Annuaire Statistique du Laos: Quatrième Volume, 1953 à 1957* (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, 1961), p. 119.

³⁹¹ Thao Katay, ed., *Le Laos, pivot idéal de la lutte contre le Communisme dans le Sud-Est Asiatique* (Bangkok: Editions Lao-Issara, 1949). See further Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 100. He does not mention the date of the pamphlet’s publication, but instead contextualizes it incorrectly in the post-1954 country. He also focused on it as an example of seeking aid from the US, but by late 1948 the US had already written off the Issara long ago. The pamphlet also played no role in the Issara’s negotiations with the French. Portraying it as nothing more than cynical aid-seeking by the Issara misses its real importance as the origins of Lao anti-communism.

the country. When in the 1950s prominent Royal Lao Government officials would say, privately and publicly, that communism was “un-Lao” they were only repeating what the Issara had already said on the subject. The Issara argued that Lao culture, tradition and Buddhism made the Lao naturally resistant to communism. They even foresaw the country being at the forefront of anti-communism in the region, proposing an anti-communist alliance with the US. Dated the 28th of December 1948, the work was a remarkably perceptive early analysis of communism in the region.

The Issara began with a general discussion of communism, which they conceived mainly as a fight between Western liberals and communists over who had the better form of democracy.³⁹² Communists, the Issara said, claimed to offer a better form of democracy, whereas liberals had “usurped” that term. This led to a discussion on the meaning of democracy, including its etymology, and suggested its meaning was becoming blurred because all sides claimed it. The Issara also discussed the meaning of the terms communism, socialism and collectivism. They noted that it was difficult to provide one definition for these terms because it was, to a degree, conditional and subjective. In this discussion one can glimpse the mood of times when the Issara mention those who raved about various political systems from around the world while examining which was best for Laos, although the Issara themselves are dismissive of these persons, describing them as naïve and ridiculous.

The Issara at times did present the communist cause in a sympathetic light, saying it “is aimed at nothing less than the happiness of men, the fraternity of people, and universal peace.”³⁹³ The Issara even pointed to educated people in Thailand who “ask themselves if the doctrine of *sakya-mouni* would not be the same as the essence of communism.”³⁹⁴ Thus, from its beginnings,

³⁹² Ibid, p. 3.

³⁹³ Ibid, p. 6.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

the major dilemma posed by communism to those opposed to it was already present in the earliest discussions: that Buddhism and communism were related or bore important similarities.³⁹⁵

Yet the Issara claimed that while communism may have laudable goals, not too dissimilar from liberalism or various religions, it was seriously flawed in its means. For one thing, communism was utopian: “most of the ultimate goals which it pursues are too beautiful, too fantastic, too idealistic not to be utopian.”³⁹⁶ It did not allow for basic human nature, nor the yearning for “spirituality.”³⁹⁷ In other places the Issara were more direct in criticizing the atheism of communism, saying it was “interdicting all religious practice” and sought even to break-up the family.³⁹⁸ Ultimately, the Issara took issue with the means employed by communism: it lacked the appeal of religions so “it is required to resort to the use of subversive means, to disturbances, to revolution, to class struggle and to war.”³⁹⁹ Finally, the Issara would never accept communism because it called for a complete leveling of society, and a rejection of social hierarchy, “which is the negation even of progress and of civilization.”⁴⁰⁰ If there was no elite, then there could be no progress, no civilization, no way to ever attain the aims of modernity and development that both the communists and liberals claimed to offer and that the country so desperately needed.

Much of the Issara views about communism were derived from their views on the Soviet Union. The USSR had aimed to be a utopia, but fell far short in reality. By resorting to any means necessary it had become a totalitarian dystopian nightmare. It was the rule of “inhumanity.”⁴⁰¹ Its

³⁹⁵ The idea that Buddhism and Communism shared certain core values was later promoted by U Nu and Sihanouk to support what they called “Buddhist socialism.” Thanks to Bruce Lockhart for this comment.

³⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 7.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 2.

³⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 8.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 9.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

power “could only maintain itself by bloody repression and systematic oppression.”⁴⁰² It was under the control of a “merciless” dictator, Joseph Stalin, holding power in his “iron grip”, and who was “jealous of his authority.”⁴⁰³ It pursued grand projects yet employed terrible means to realize them:

...only by the means of brutal constraint and forced expropriations, of persecutions, of arrests, of imprisonment of all kinds, of mass deportations, of condemnations to forced work and executions more or less summarily, through an immense and infinite field of suffering, tears and grief.⁴⁰⁴

The Issara cite a French author who studied the USSR, Victor Serge, and especially his *Destiny of a revolution – USSR 1917-1936* published in Paris in 1937. They also referred to Jean Pellenc’s *Moscow Lie* published in 1936. Being part of the Francophone world was an important source of information on communism for the Issara and crucial to the origins of Lao anti-communism. Developments in Bangkok may also have been important.⁴⁰⁵

The Issara then moved on to a very perceptive analysis of the early global Cold War as it was taking shape, describing the “communist expansion, so dreadful and dreaded.”⁴⁰⁶ They saw that it had already begun to spread around the world from its source in Russia, such that, “communism now extends its tentacle grip and menaces” the world over.⁴⁰⁷ Communism was on the rise in central Europe, Greece (“the country of Socrates and Aristophanes”) and China. The situation in China was most desperate for the Kuomintang (KMT) nationalist forces of Chiang Kaishek. The Americans provided aid, yet the KMT were “sagging and succumbing each day a little more before the communist forces of Mao Zedong, supported by Soviet Russia.”⁴⁰⁸ The Issara

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 9-10.

⁴⁰⁵ The Issara wrote elaborated their views on anti-communism while living in exile in Thailand. In Bangkok from 1945 to 1947 labor unions were active as was the newly founded Communist Party of Thailand. One can only speculate on how this context influenced Issara views. See further Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 141-142, 181.

⁴⁰⁶ Thao Katay, ed., *Le Laos, pivot idéal de la lutte contre le Communisme dans le Sud-Est Asiatique* (Bangkok: Editions Lao-Issara, 1949), p. 14.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 15.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 16.

took an alarmist view of the communist threat, seeing the emerging Cold War well before many others did, including some officials in the US State Department. The Issara saw that Southeast Asia was also in danger of the “red peril,” adding that “communist movements emerge pretty much everywhere.”⁴⁰⁹

The Issara formulated the first articulation of a cultural anti-communism in the country, which became an important statement whose particulars came to be repeated many times in later years among the RLG elite. The Issara’s own views on Lao were that they had a special resistance or in their words an “immunity to the communist virus”:

In any case, it is permissible to assert that the Lao ... is, by his secular atavism, his beliefs, his traditions, and his culture strongly pervaded by Buddhism, as by the great fertility of his country, and the particular structure of his social environment, absolutely RESISTANT to a doctrine of materialism as total and disappointing as communism.⁴¹⁰

Lao are, the Issara contended, protected from communist subversion, and are even naturally anti-communist in their essential tradition, culture, and religion. Buddhism is a central aspect of Lao anti-communism as the belief in reincarnation and the law of karma would prevent any Lao from ever truly accepting communism. Or as the argument was made in the Issara paper *Bangfai*, the Lao would never accept “a doctrine too exclusively materialist which condemns him...to find his reason-to-be and his ends in a single earthly existence commonly made of dissatisfaction and injustice.”⁴¹¹ In the Issara analysis, however, no consideration is given to minorities, especially those living along the border with Vietnam.⁴¹² The Issara’s blindness to any minorities in the country was a major oversight in their response to communism that later Royal Lao elite would have difficulty correcting.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid, p. 17. Emphasis in the original.

⁴¹¹ Ibid, p. 18.

⁴¹² It is interesting to speculate whether the Issara were in contact with any anti-French ethnic minority groups, perhaps via the proto-Pathet Lao or Viet Minh. Thanks to Bruce Lockhart for this comment.

The Lao were also protected, so the Issara said, by the country's abundant natural resources. This was a particularly romantic, idealized view of the country, in which poverty did not exist.⁴¹³ Elsewhere the Issara denied there even were any social classes in the country, wherefore no class conflict can arise:

...there does not exist in Laos, [an] essentially agricultural country, social classes properly speaking, nor of enough difference of fortune. The earth is fertile and abundant, so that the Lao, thus knew moreover the simple and frugal life, arrived easily to satisfy all his vital needs. Large property is unknown, the same as the proletariat and pauperism. The most modest family among us possesses his house, his plot of land, his buffalo, his gun or crossbow, his fishing gear, see his pirogue, his ox and his cart...

The struggle of the classes, which constitutes the principal arm of the communists, cannot thus conceive itself among us.⁴¹⁴

This deeply essentialist view was a denial that Lao would be or ever could be susceptible to communism. When confronting communism, which the Issara really did abhor, they were dismissive of the country's poverty. They were perceptive enough to anticipate the common anti-communist argument that communism thrives in poverty, but they refused to apply it to their own circumstances, which they knew better than anyone. For all they did foresee, they never expected that rising inequality from modernization and foreign aid would become a major problem.

Finally, the Issara called for a "crusade against communism" in which Laos had a special role to play, as the "ideal pivot against communism in Southeast Asia":

Of all these countries, a single one has no access to the ocean. It is Laos, which extends along the upper and middle Mekong – one of the greatest rivers of the world – between Burma, China,

⁴¹³ Amazingly the "red prince" Souphanouvong said much the same in a meeting with Americans in 1949, suggesting just how widespread Issara views on communism were at the time. In meeting with US officials in July and August 1949 Souphanouvong said "Laos was a classless Buddhist society where Communism had no future." This comment suggests even Souphanouvong subscribed to the Issara notions that Lao were naturally resistant to communism. See Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 182. Whatever flaws of Issara anti-communism, their assessment of communisms' prospects among the Lao nevertheless was accurate for the time. By 1951, while there were 1,591 communist party members in Laos most were Vietnamese. Communism among other ethnic groups in the country remained weak until 1954. Thus no Lao communist party existed until 1955. See Christopher Goscha, "Vietnam and the world outside: The case of Vietnamese communist advisers in Laos (1948-62) *South East Asia Research*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2004), p. 166.

⁴¹⁴ Katay, ed., *Le Laos, pivot idéal de la lutte contre le Communisme dans le Sud-Est Asiatique*, p. 18.

Vietnam, Cambodia, and Siam, and whose political boundaries [are] in great part natural, permitting a relatively easy control of immigration.⁴¹⁵

Laos, resistant to the red virus for reasons that we have explained above, would be thus the ideal pivot of the team.⁴¹⁶

The Issara imagined Laos as a kind of natural fortress in mainland Southeast Asia, set comfortably behind natural barriers. It was also centrally located, making it the “ideal” base of anti-communism. Yet they exaggerated their ability to control movement along the borders, and certainly never foresaw the Ho Chi Minh Trail. At any rate, the Issara were already proposing a Lao-US anti-communist alliance in 1948, foreseeing several years before the Eisenhower administration the centrality of Laos to one of the greatest conflicts of the global Cold War.

Disputing the Recent Past

The loyalists’ offer of amnesty to the Issara, which cleared the way for their return in 1949, is often regarded as a watershed for the early RLG. Before this moment, the elite was fractured into two contending camps, which greatly undermined the new post-colonial state. Despite the truce and amnesty for all actions taken during the fight for independence, tensions between former Issara and loyalists did not entirely disappear, but in fact lingered on. This diversity of views had the effect of enriching the intellectual discourses of the country’s elite, but at times the earlier disputes reemerged defying easy resolution. One of the most difficult tasks for the former loyalists and Issara to find common ground on was how to narrate the recent past.

As discussed above, the loyalists were not the only ones to continue the cultural studies started in the 1930s. The Issara in exile, having broken from France, charted an entirely new direction in the culture field, in some ways going beyond what had been possible at the Vientiane

⁴¹⁵ Ibid, p. 31.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid, p. 33.

Buddhist Institute, yet still clearly building on these earlier experiences. Rather than working in the spirit of Lao-French friendship, the Issara instead began to seriously question the role of the French in recent Lao history. The works of French colonial historians, whom the loyalists were apt to cite approvingly, were questioned by the Issara. In some places it seems even that the Issara sought to decolonize the mind and culture of the Lao: they could see it was not just a matter of getting the French to physically leave the country, but that the Lao, to safeguard true independence, must begin to view themselves differently than they had become accustomed to under the French.⁴¹⁷

The single most significant act of the Issara in their new cultural studies was to question the founding myth of colonial Laos, Auguste Pavie's so-called "conquest of hearts."⁴¹⁸ In this famous event in the colonial history of Laos, Pavie had travelled to Luang Prabang in early 1887 to serve as the French vice-counsel and while there reputedly managed to save the life of the King Oun Kham from an attack on the palace led by the son of the ruler of Muang Lai, Deo Van Tri (which killed the Luang Prabang viceory Souvanna Phouma among others). At this point Pavie said the King asked for French protection.⁴¹⁹ The Issara were the first to question the French account of this event, and were highly critical of the "commonly accepted version" given by French colonial historians.⁴²⁰ The Issara knew of the event's importance because it was repeatedly invoked by the French to legitimate their rule in Laos. Moreover, in the "conquest of hearts" story, the Lao

⁴¹⁷ For a discussion of this tendency in Vietnam after 1954 see Patricia Pelley, "'Barbarians' and 'Younger Brothers': The Remaking of Race in Postcolonial Vietnam" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1998), especially p. 374-375.

⁴¹⁸ Auguste Pavie, *A la conquête des cœurs: le pays des millions d'éléphants et du parasol blanc* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1947).

⁴¹⁹ However, Oun Kham and his son the heir Sakkalin went directly to Bangkok after arriving at Paklai, showing they had no intention to end vassalage to the Thai. At any rate Oun Kham's request for French protection would have no bearing on southern or central Laos, which were not under the control of Luang Prabang. Moreover, the French military campaign of 1893 belies the peaceful image projected by the "conquest of hearts" story.

⁴²⁰ *Contribution*, p. 35.

are portrayed as willing subjects of the French empire since it was the King himself who had called for France's protection. This myth served to portray all Lao-French relations under the halo of "friendship" and cast the French presence as unassailably benevolent. The Issara complained that even noted French anti-colonists were won over by Pavie's "conquest of hearts," thereby insidiously concealing French domination of the Lao. The Issara revisionist view on this episode is aptly conveyed in the pamphlet title, "the truth of the sack of Luang Prabang by Deo Van Tri in June 1887 – the Machiavellian role of Auguste Pavie in this historic event which decided the fate of Laos, by bringing the country under the protection of France."⁴²¹

In this work, the Issara allege that Pavie was responsible for engineering the attack on Luang Prabang, which positioned him to "save" the Lao king, thereby winning a foothold in Laos for imperial France. They question the "commonly accepted account" which "only comes from the account of Auguste Pavie" and which no historian has tried "to verify."⁴²² The Issara presented what they called a "second version" of events. This was based on investigations by the princes of Luang Prabang who collected information from the family of Deo Van Tri and the people of Muang Lai.⁴²³ The Issara had also questioned the "old people" of Luang Prabang about various points of Pavie's version of events.⁴²⁴ The Issara said they tried to "examine objectively and impartially the facts, to reconcile" the different versions.⁴²⁵ And they concluded that the version given by Auguste Pavie was "strongly subject to caution."⁴²⁶

⁴²¹ Ibid, p. 35-50.

⁴²² Ibid, p. 36.

⁴²³ Ibid, p. 39.

⁴²⁴ Ibid, p. 43.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

Part of the Issara study involved an investigation of Pavie's own accounts, especially as he recorded it in the *Mission Pavie*. By doing so, the Issara were attempting to re-read the colonial era documents available to them to create a counter-narrative of events; however, they were left in some places with their only source being the very colonial era documents which they sought to challenge. Yet the Issara did challenge the narrative in places: such as when they constructed Pavie as an imperialist. They quoted from his journal in which he wrote of "the idea, which I am enamored – to make Laos – a French country..."⁴²⁷ The Issara did get outside the colonial records at times such as when they related that many people in Luang Prabang were already suspicious of Pavie ("*thane nam oy*", or "Mr. Sugar Cane") even before the disaster. They pointed to entries in Pavie's journal which they saw as providing evidence that he was planning to destroy Luang Prabang, such as an entry from May 31 1887 which records that the Thai official in the city accused the French of arming Deo Van Tri's men.⁴²⁸ In other places the Issara denied outright certain accounts in Pavie's journal, such as his claim to have offered to defend the town before the impending attack saying "this assertion is formally denied by the old people of Luang Prabang."⁴²⁹

The most serious accusations focus on Pavie's activities in the lead-up to the attack from April to May during which he toured the areas north and east of Luang Prabang: especially the Nam Ou valley and Muang Ngoi, which were both on the invasion route taken by Deo Van Tri.⁴³⁰ The Issara accused Pavie of contacting Deo Van Tri during this time to plot the attack. They alleged that even though he was warned of the danger of bandits in the area he still traveled north anyway with some unspoken goal in mind.⁴³¹ They suggested he wanted "precise information" on the

⁴²⁷ Ibid, p. 37.

⁴²⁸ Ibid, p. 38.

⁴²⁹ Ibid, p. 46.

⁴³⁰ Ibid, p. 44.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

movement of Deo Van Tri's troops. They focus especially on a ten-day period he spent at Muang Ngoi, when he was already on his way to return to Luang Prabang. They point to his journal, which was kept so "meticulously" yet gave no reason for his stay there or what he did in the intervening time.⁴³² In other places they openly accused him of inciting Deo Van Tri to attack Luang Prabang:

It would be at the instigation of Auguste Pavie that Deo Van Tri undertook the sack of Luang Prabang. Auguste Pavie had said (or made to say) to Deo-Van-Tri that his brothers and brother-in-law were taken in secret to Luang Prabang to the house of the Phaya Muang Saen (an official of the court), [and] that he must hasten to free them if he did not want to see them taken to Bangkok, that the city of Luang Prabang, emptied of all its young elite...was no longer able to defend itself, that it contained treasures sufficiently important to cover the cost of an armed expedition etc.⁴³³

When the final attack came, Pavie's assistant was "miraculously" ready to intervene to succor the King in a boat ready and waiting for the purpose. This assistant woke up early in the morning and waited near the palace. The Issara called this a "well planned scenario."⁴³⁴

The Issara noted further that Pavie never returned to Laos after he left in September 1895.⁴³⁵ To them it seemed to show that Pavie never really cared about the country, but only saw it as a gift to bestow to imperial France. They even suggested he may not have returned because he was ashamed and feared the Lao would have figured out his deception.⁴³⁶ At any rate, "many Lao, young and old, are convinced" of the truth of Pavie's role in the destruction of Luang Prabang. The Issara did not limit themselves to writing a critique of Pavie. Even before gaining power in 1945, the Issara boasted of having torn down a statue of Pavie in Vientiane "the day after the entry of Japanese troops."⁴³⁷ Later when in power, they also destroyed another Pavie statue in Luang Prabang when they seized that city in early November.⁴³⁸ The statue in Vientiane had stood in "the

⁴³² Ibid, p. 45.

⁴³³ Ibid, p. 39-40.

⁴³⁴ Ibid, p. 46.

⁴³⁵ Ibid, p. 49.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Ibid, p. 43. This would be March 10, 1945, one day after the Japanese coup which removed the French from power in Indochina in the last year of World War II.

⁴³⁸ Gunn, *Political Struggles*.

garden of the Résident-Supérieur's residence" since 1932 to commemorate Pavie's death.⁴³⁹ The Issara concluded that it was likely that Pavie had incited the attack of Deo Van Tri and thus, "the French occupation of Laos is vicious in its origin. So that the 'unanimous consent of Laos to place themselves under the protection of France' does not arise in truth from a will freely determined..."⁴⁴⁰ The Issara argued the colonial bond was never based on anything but deception and violence.

It should be no surprise then that at the very same time in the pages of *Kinnari*, an announcement was made of a celebration being organized to mark the anniversary of Pavie's 100th birthday on June 1, 1947.⁴⁴¹ The committee was constituted in Paris, but there was no mention of any similar event in Laos. Activities were to include what the magazine called a "series of public events" such as erecting a stone bust in his home town of Dinan, and another in the National School of Overseas France, and a re-issue of his work *À la Conquête des Coeurs* by the publisher Plon. There would even be a commemorative stamp. The announcement itself also included a short retelling of the "conquest of hearts," the romanticized story of Lao-French affection which had been so important to forming the colonial bond. While the article closes with an emphasis on the enduring bond "in joy as in pain", claiming that both French and Lao "remained faithful," the fact that the occasion would only be celebrated in France also left room for lingering doubt.

In 1950 Somlith Pathammavong wrote a new history of the country, one that would take a sympathetic view that he felt was lacking in previous works.⁴⁴² Nevertheless it stands out distinctly as a work from the earlier loyalist faction. In general, Somlith celebrated French learning. In many

⁴³⁹ Askew et al., *Vientiane*, p. 93. Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 64.

⁴⁴⁰ *Contribution*, p. 50.

⁴⁴¹ "Le Centenaire d'Auguste Pavie" *Kinnari*, November 1946, p. 1.

⁴⁴² Somlith, *Laos: Pays du Million D'Eléphants*.

places he interweaved French and Lao learning on various aspects of the country; such as inserting French and Lao maxims throughout the work, or writing history using a mix of French scholarship and local chronicle accounts. He noted that he chose to write the work in French because he said it was a more universal language, even though he addressed his forward to his “compatriots.” His modernist zeal was evident as he aimed to use history as a means to study the decline of the country “and judge the effort necessary to raise it.”⁴⁴³

The loyalist sympathies become clear in places where Somlith discusses the recent past. In a chapter entitled “the evil of the time” he mentions important historical events in the country that even a student devoted to their studies should know:

But you, young Lao students, no preoccupation should divert you from your studies. However, as you should not ignore national events, here is a small list:

April-May 1946 :	Liberation of Laos
27 August 1946:	French-Lao Modus vivendi...
11 May 1947:	Lao constitution
14 January 1948:	Confirmation of the joining of Laos to the French Union
19 July 1949:	French-Lao convention, signed at Paris
6 February 1950:	Annexed conventions signed at Vientiane ⁴⁴⁴

This list of recent historical events, that every Lao student should know was not an objective account of recent events, but a highly polemical one in view of the controversies of the late 1940s. The Issara were completely absent, casting them into deafening silence as the loyalists often did. The list is highly selective, and taking its starting point as the French military campaign to “liberate” Laos is tendentious. The Issara are by implication nothing more than a pro-Japanese

⁴⁴³ Ibid, “Avant-propos.”

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 39-40.

militia. The only constitution is the one made with the French. For the young student, one would hardly know there was any conflict at all over the recent past.

Somlith then goes on to denounce the recent Issara movement for independence and democracy in highly negative terms: “The evil of the time breaks in the calm Lao sky like a clash of thunder. And ... the good independence, so coveted, introduces a malady to the mood: indiscipline.”⁴⁴⁵ To him, the Issara got out of line, caused chaos, and broke everything the loyalists and French worked to build in the New Laos. He focuses on the key terms of the era which stirred up so much trouble, being misunderstood by the Issara’s followers:

It is thus the words Ekarath, Issaraphab, Seriphab – independence, liberty, equality. Ideologies particularly seductive among the volunteers and the young, unfortunately also among the ignorant and the fools...

– All men are equal? Thus, the Chaokhoueng equals me and I equal the Chaokhoueng, said the un-informed.

– Liberty? Very well! Why then must [one] be exact and punctual, devoted and conscientious, said the lightweight functionary.

– And me, said the defective secondary school pupil, would not I have the right to Bal-Lamvong as everyone else?⁴⁴⁶

Instead of offering to the country any new freedom or rights for the people, the Issara, in Somlith’s view, bring only a carnivalesque overturning of the established order which unleashes a wave of destruction with no higher purpose than to satisfy one’s own narrow, misguided personal drives. The arrival of modern democracy to the country not only created chaos that the Lao can ill afford, but its abuse by the Issara made it impossible to ever truly achieve the vital aims of the country. Somlith’s criticism is valuable for its argument that the new political discourse was misused and abused by those who were out for their own personal gain, or was itself simply misunderstood.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 40.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

Somlith went on to describe the Issara as misguided youth, “young souls.”⁴⁴⁷ As much as the Issara leaders may have duped fools to follow them, they were themselves foolishly following the Japanese, believing their propaganda, and later even admiring the Chinese Nationalist Army. But the Issara was not able to maintain its popular appeal and its followers gradually became disillusioned with it. The Issara were anti-authority to such degree that they were unable to run the government which was staffed by underqualified persons, who had a “smiling disdain of technicians”, and held class biases.⁴⁴⁸ Somlith accuses the Issara of being motivated not by nationalism, but by base desires for “riches, authority, titles.”⁴⁴⁹

At a deeper level, Somlith accused the Issara of so deeply subverting the social order in the country that it led to a reversion of values: “good was made to be bad.”⁴⁵⁰ Or further: “Here it is, the discouraged young souls who ask themselves sadly ‘what good is it to do well?’”⁴⁵¹ And he added of the Issara:

Where are we going? What to do when doing well is not enough? What to do when moral honesty and professional conscience are rather a handicap, to the point of making the malicious say:

“too good, too stupid”⁴⁵²

Somlith also pointed out the darker aspects of the new democracy during the Issara’s brief reign when he wrote of the: “naïve trust of the masses and exploitation of this innocent good will by the beautiful speakers,” painting the Issara as a group of demagogues and the people as their helpless victims.⁴⁵³ In this light, the Issara would be something like a cult, with Phetsarath their messiah.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 41. Stuart-Fox, p. 58, also notes some Issara followers were excited youths.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Ibid, p. 41.

Somlith concludes by making the case for the loyalists in power since the return of the French to the country. He notes that while the Japanese modernized the country in three generations, the loyalists had only been in power for five years “so do not ask too much.”⁴⁵⁴ Even so, “much has been achieved” yet he is not explicit.⁴⁵⁵ He simply says that “pessimism destroys and separates, optimism constructs and unites; the one leads to suicide, the other to prosperity.”⁴⁵⁶ He ends this chapter by noting the good fortune of the country to not be at war, about which “no failure can be tolerated.”⁴⁵⁷

Early Quest for Modernity

It is often observed that modernization began to pick up pace during the post-war semi-colonial years as France tried to win over the people to its continued presence in the country. Scholars who point to this phenomenon have studied it by enumerating the number of construction projects started, new buildings erected, and so on.⁴⁵⁸ But one can also consider the drive for modernity in this period not only as a material phenomenon, but also in its social, cultural and intellectual dimensions as well. Considering the shifting attitudes and beliefs deepen our understanding of the quest for modernity as it began to manifest itself in the semi-colonial years. In terms of continuities and discontinuities, the contours of the modernization drive which began to take shape in these years continued to resonate throughout the Royal Lao Government era. Finally, the quest for modernity was, in fact, one of the defining features of the Royal Lao Government; although it was at times more aspirational than fully realized.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 42.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 43.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 69, specifically mentions new school buildings and hospitals.

One can get an idea of the cultural and intellectual dimensions of the quest to modernize the New Laos from a speech celebrating the inauguration of a new school for public works on October 15, 1947 by Robert Lekyhuong, its administrative head.⁴⁵⁹ The school was created by Bong Souvannavong, the economic affairs minister, to train technicians for the public works department. The indomitable terrain of the country had long been a major obstacle to modernization efforts, but those serving the public works department would be tasked with overcoming the untamed terrain and turning it to serve the ends of the RLG.⁴⁶⁰ The announcements promoting the new school emphasized further that all students at the new school were Lao, therefore also addressing the educational aspirations widespread in the country at the time.

However, at the opening of his speech, Mr. Lekyhuong said the new school was a small effort lacking sufficient funds to tackle the enormous problems of the country:

Highness, excellencies, gentlemen,

Your presence at this intimate inauguration ceremony supplies the shine of this place without a chandelier. See: the ground is of clay, the walls of mud, the doors openwork, some desks and cupboard sit askew. That is already a lot, but still see the poverty of our condition and you will agree that it is the symbol even of our modest debut.⁴⁶¹

Using French examples, he goes on to speak about the major European scientific advances, in which humanity made great strides in the fight against disease to show how science can grant new powers over nature and uplift the human condition. He recalls the efforts of Louis Pasteur who “saved millions.”⁴⁶² While he admits that he does not expect such high achievements from Lao students, he feels it is necessary to the project of modern technical education in Laos to invoke

⁴⁵⁹ Robert Lekyhuong, “Allocution prononcée le 15 Octobre 1947 à l’occasion de l’inauguration de l’Ecole des Travaux Publics de Vientiane” *Kinnari*, November 1947, p. 17-18. Bruce Lockhart suggests Lekyhuong may well have been a Vietnamese Catholic due to his Christian name.

⁴⁶⁰ For a study of this issue before 1940 see Ivarsson, *Creating Laos*.

⁴⁶¹ Lekyhuong, “Allocution prononcée le 15 Octobre 1947,” p. 17.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

French science as an “example because it is sometimes necessary to aim very high in order to elevate oneself a little.”⁴⁶³

Nevertheless, Lekyhuong says French science and learning cannot take root in Lao soil without first addressing the culture of the Lao pupils of the new school. He calls on the Lao elite to bridge the gap and support the pupils in the difficult task of appropriating a foreign, culturally strange body of knowledge:

But regardless of the force of our ambition, regardless of the smallness of our school, we will not reach our goal if you, excellencies, do not join your high moral authority to the development of our efforts.

We represent here a form of western model: the technical... we are aware that it is, here, an anomaly. Let me explain. A country which is itself engaged for more than a millennia in mystic ways, we seem to direct it in the way of logic. To contemplation, we are led by the very nature our of profession, to substitute reason [in place of magic]. To those who had known to adjust their needs to their means, their requirements to their efforts, we tell them to reverse steam: We teach them of new needs and ask them of repeated efforts in order to satisfy them. It is here that I pose the problem.⁴⁶⁴

To Lekyhuong the French school and the Lao pupil are on a collision course without some type of intervention to ensure a successful meeting of the minds. The contrasting essential difference appears between the Lao “mystical” and “magical” mind to that of the “logical,” “rational” French mind. As elsewhere in loyalist writings, the Lao and French difference is essentialized, yet must be mediated and negotiated regardless of the irreconcilable gap. The Lao pupil will learn to think in the logical, rational fashion of the French by assimilating “new needs” and by old fashioned repetition on the part of their French teachers.

The cultural problems facing the new public works school were typical of the modernization efforts of the time. Lao are too soft, Lekyhuong continues, to survive in the modern

⁴⁶³ Ibid, p. 18.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

world without French help. Lao cling to tradition when faced with confronting the modern world, but now must change their thoughts and actions to be modern:

It is then, excellencies, that appears the primacy of your role, better than ours: you can make understood to our students the necessity of hardening themselves for themselves to survive in a world of iron. You are even better than us to know the mental strengths of these young minds, in order to indicate to us the underlying ways which would allow us to address them without too much hurting their traditions; to inculcate their habits of thought and action [that] often little conforms to their ancestral comportment. It is by this, that, changing roles, we will solicit your counsel and we will pray you to be our guides.⁴⁶⁵

Lekyhuong appeals to the Lao elite, who have already mastered and overcome such struggles in their education, to help the next generation of Lao students to succeed. He points to the “mental resorts” which pupils will use to resist change, and that this change is itself harmful to them. He finally proposes a temporary inversion of the semi-colonial edifice in New Laos: Lao elite will serve in the role of the adviser and the French are the ones to be guided, in the task of preparing and ensuring the success of Lao pupils in a modern Western school. The French school in the New Laos is a space of profound cultural change and the conflicts inherent in that.

Lekyhuong concludes by invoking the historic mission of the New Laos:

Finally, since you represent here the unified Laos, that you are determined to return it its destiny, you are highly qualified to make our young people understand that the road of glory or simply prosperity, is made above all in thousands of everyday efforts, accomplished without respite, without discouragement, and without loss of time. You alone can say, with enough weight, to them, like to all the Lao nation who are outside of this arduous path, there is only perils and death for the homeland [without modernity].

This mission which history confides to you, at the crossroads of the past and the future we ask that you please fulfill it for us. We express our gratitude to you in advance. We also thank you, gentlemen, for coming: The school...opens today...so that the modern Laos is born, lives, and grows.⁴⁶⁶

Modernity is the only possible destiny of New Laos. It can be reached by the young Lao pupil only by diligence, high morale and unflagging effort. The loyalist elite can claim their elite status by

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

leading their country along this “arduous path”, saving the country from disaster. If Laos is to become modern, it will do so in the school house.

France, the Model of Modernity

The year 1950 represents a major turning point in the life of the Royal Lao Government. Major figures of the Issara had already returned to join the government. The French had devolved major additional powers to the Lao elite. The Lao celebrated this momentous occasion as their long-delayed independence.⁴⁶⁷ The government now enjoyed more autonomy from France. The country’s new status of greater autonomy was recognized internationally by fifteen countries including the US, France and others in the “free world.”⁴⁶⁸ A peace treaty was negotiated with Japan in San Francisco. The government began the process to join the United Nations. The national army was created on March 23, 1950, under the command of Sounthone Pathammavong. A national police was also created. The Lao elite also gained control over information, including the government newspaper and the national radio. They also ended racist policies associated with the colonial regime.⁴⁶⁹

New political parties were formed including the National Progressive Party (ພັກຊາດກ້າວໜ້າ) and a new loyalist party, the Independence Party (ພັກເສສີ).⁴⁷⁰ The National Progress Party, formed by “old Lao-Issara” Katay Sasorith, Xieng Mao and Souvanna Phouma won a substantial

⁴⁶⁷ Creak, *Embodied Nation*.

⁴⁶⁸ Khamchan, *History of Lao Diplomacy*, p. 33. The country remained an Associated State within the French Union until full independence was granted by France on October 23, 1953.

⁴⁶⁹ Kathryn Sweet, “Limited Doses: Health and Development in Laos, 1893-2000” (Ph.D. diss., National University of Singapore, 2015), p. 132, which notes the old policy of separate beds at Mahosot hospital in Vientiane was ended.

⁴⁷⁰ For an informative discussion of the new parties see Mongkhol-Katay Sasorith, “Les forces politiques et la vie politique au Laos” (Ph.D. diss., Pantheon-Sorbonne University, 1973) p. 161-163.

number of seats in the National Assembly in next elections held in 1951.⁴⁷¹ While the ex-Issara and loyalists competed for political power they did work together boding well for reconciliation and the future. Yet Katay Sasorith was not able to return with the other ex-Issara, but was exiled in Saigon – not allowed to return until he apologized to the King for his “anti-royalist” pamphlets.⁴⁷² Next year in 1952, the new government sent the old Issara prime minister Xieng Mao as the diplomatic representative to France. His wife, Princess Khamla was the Royal Lao government representative to the French Union and would later represent the RLG at the UN when it was fully admitted in October 1955. By the end of 1952, construction was also begun on the new National Assembly.

This period represented a major moment in the work to modernize the country. The new Royal Lao Government leaders were fascinated with technology. They had already become accustomed to radios, airplanes, telegrams and other innovations. They believed new technology could finally solve the most pressing problems facing their country, and seemed to give special attention to such technology as air planes, and radios. There was, for example, an airmail service that linked Vientiane with five provincial capitals.⁴⁷³ There was also a similar service to Hanoi. There was even an expanding telephone system in the cities.⁴⁷⁴ In January 1951, Radio Lao was transferred to Lao control. Broadcasts in the evening included: “recorded music, live music by Laotian orchestras, talks and a daily news bulletin twenty minutes long.”⁴⁷⁵ This was followed by

⁴⁷¹ In the August 26, 1951 elections the Progressive party won 15 of 39 seats. Kou Voravong’s Democrats won 4 seats, while Bong Souvannavong’s National Union party won 3. Phoui Sananikone’s Independents made a strong showing, winning 17 seats. See Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 207.

⁴⁷² Ibid, p. 161. Mongkhol-Katay does not specify how long he spent in Saigon. But on his return he joined the National Progressive Party.

⁴⁷³ Frank Lebar, *Human Relations File 23: Laos* (Chicago: 1955), p. 140-141.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 143.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 152.

programs in French and Thai. Using technology, the Royal Lao elite sought to master the untamed terrain of Laos and offered the possibility to bind the people in an entirely new way. Thus, the RLG could finally extend its reach over the impassible terrain of the country, to now dominate it with the new technologies.

Even at this very moment of major change some of the old loyalists continued to advocate a continuing role for France as the model of modernity in the country.⁴⁷⁶ Somlith Pathammavong wrote a story of a Lao's visit to Paris to promote images of French modernity. In a chapter titled, "Paris," Somlith presents a fictional account of a Lao father Ta Phim and his son Phuong Phim who travel to the French capital.⁴⁷⁷ They fly from Laos on a French commercial airliner. They meet there a Lao, only referred to by his title Than Houana Suksa, who had formerly been the head of the education service, and who was now serving as the president of the Lao Students in France, a diaspora association. The Lao visitors compare their visit to Paris with the De Lagree mission's arrival to the ruins of Vientiane in 1867, recalling the French discovery of the (ruined) beauty of Laos at the moment they begin their discovery of France.

The drama of the story concerns the fear that by living in the diaspora the characters will lose their connection to Laos. The father Ta Phim questions Than Houana Suksa as to whether he has "forgotten his homeland?"⁴⁷⁸ The anxieties of life in the diaspora must be first addressed in Somlith's story before the Francophone Lao can fully take advantage of all the possibilities afforded by French modernity. But Than Houana Suksa quickly dismisses such a suggestion and

⁴⁷⁶ For another, very similar account of Francophone Lao in the early 1950s see Panivong Norindr, "On Photography, History and Affect: Re-Narrating the Political Life of a Laotian Subject" *Historical Reflections* vol. 34, no. 1 (2008), which describes the life and career of Pheng Norindr. See especially *ibid* p. 95-96, which describes Pheng's education in France from 1950-1953: "it is there, in Paris and other European capitals that he [Pheng] gained a modernist view of the world." Thus Pheng Norindr took photos of French industrial sites which revealed a desire to modernize his own country.

⁴⁷⁷ Somlith, "Paris," *Laos: Pays du Million D'Eléphants*, pp. 36-38

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 36.

replies by invoking the natural beauty of Laos to prove his enduring devotion to it. He conjures up an image of the eternal Lao, a romantic self-view common among loyalists and Francophone Lao of the time. Yet still the question of France or Laos remains: “when one eats on plates of silver and brass, one forgets the old plate of bamboo.”⁴⁷⁹ Asked if Ta Phim regrets coming to Paris he replies: “I would rather regret not coming Than! If I had known, I would have come long before. Now that my hair is grey, that my eyes refuse to see and my ears to hear, it is for my son to realize my dream.”⁴⁸⁰

Ta Phim takes his son around Paris, asking him “how will you tell all of this when you return to our compatriots?”⁴⁸¹ To this the son Phuong replied: “What do I know? Since there are too many houses, too many roads, too many cars, too much everything, too much noise...an infinite horizon, a marvelous country, the earthly paradise!”⁴⁸² Phoung represents the other view to be found in Laos in the semi-colonial years, that Paris is one of the greatest place on earth, and the Francophone Lao moving in the French cultural milieu are empowered to travel the world, becoming themselves worldly. In this way France offers Lao a unique way to reach out to the world, to act on the global stage, to find new opportunities for education, work, and personal enrichment, or in Phuong’s words “an infinite horizon.” The perspective captured in this work of fiction is an important voice from Laos in the semi-colonial years.

The son writes a series of letters home to his family. These letters become a homage to French modernity, of which Paris is the center. In a letter to his cousin Xiengdy, he writes of his impressions of the city starting with at the material level, noting the many buildings, boulevards,

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 37.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

cathedrals, bell towers and such to celebrate modern Paris. He continues by observing the statues of famous historical figures, the sports stadiums holding international matches, the Champs Elyees, Versailles, public parks with fountains, even the changing of the tree foliage in the four seasons. He then writes of the Eiffel tower, “the highest edifice in the world” and of trains, subways, buses, great factories, and “the innumerable shops,” elevators “which by simple press of a button, transport you to the highest floor,” metal “as commonly used as our bamboo” and of course airplanes which “on a journey of ten thousand kilometers, connect in three days France to our Lao country.”⁴⁸³

Phoung portrays the modern world in some distinct ways. In the modern world, there is plenty for all: “as a natural consequence of the prodigious industrial development, we had everything at [our] discretion.”⁴⁸⁴ He advised “do not ask what is there in Paris? say what is there not in Paris? it will be easier to respond.”⁴⁸⁵ Or “Paris is the great market where one finds it all, within reach of all purses...”⁴⁸⁶ This modern world is ruled by time, where “time is money”, “where some minutes must be won...in order not to miss his train at such time, his movie at such street or his meeting at such station.”⁴⁸⁷ The modern world does not stop at night, but is illuminated like the Champs Elysee, by “thousands of lamps, our starry sky of November.”⁴⁸⁸ Elsewhere he says: “Paris, it is the city of light, the city of the most rich ways and the most sure taste.”⁴⁸⁹ Later when Vientiane will be electrified, it would have to be to some Lao their own Paris at night, a fulfillment of their own dreams of the future, that had been circulating in country since the late

⁴⁸³ Ibid, p. 38. He does note in a footnote that the Eiffel Tower was by then no longer the tallest man-made structure in the world.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

1940s, if not earlier, long before Lao had the means to realize the dream. In these sections of Phuong's letter dealing with the material culture of French modernity, he appeals for the continuing role of France to help the Lao modernize, progress, develop, and bring to it the scientific and industrial advances of modern society to solve its most pressing needs to feed, cloth and educate its populace, to provide healthcare, schools, transportation, communication, sanitation, and everything else demanded by modern society.

Phuong's "Paris" shows, whatever else, that France had made a deep impression on Lao visions of modernity, what a modern city, society, and life should be. He talks of upper crust Parisian society as "the brightly washed, in cars of dazzling luxury, at night heading for the opera or the racetracks on Sunday."⁴⁹⁰ Paris is also "the political capital, where the citizens, enjoying their liberties and confronting their opinions through the hundreds of reviews and daily news, [they] retain always the greatest civility in their relations and the most discrete helpfulness in regard to foreigners."⁴⁹¹ One notes perhaps a mild criticism of the Issara in Phuong's praise of "civil" politics. Paris is the center of nationalism: "where each French citizen knows the cause he defends and the ideal for which he dies; it is the country where one knows to honor the dead in order to exalt the living."⁴⁹² Paris is "the intellectual capital," as well:

With its College of France and its Sorbonne, its Institutes and its Museums, its Lycées and its Collèges, its scholarly groups and its maternal schools: a genuine hive of activity where each individual, in the atmosphere of ancient setting and modern installation, receives his part equally in training, without any distinction of color, race, and religion.⁴⁹³

Education was the key to unlock modernity in Laos. Yet one observes in Phuong's account the odd contradiction that Francophone Lao would present themselves in essentialist ways, yet see

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

French culture as universal. One imagines that any Lao who actually went to Paris would find their actual experiences to be quite different from this idealized version.

Phuong's letter closes with an account of the republican ideals, the French national myth, and France as the bastion of liberty. Yet one does not detect any note of irony as Phoung describes these nor any hint of the condition of Lao as colonial subjects denied the same liberties enjoyed by French citizens.⁴⁹⁴ If Phoung did not broach the subject it remained nevertheless an inherent contradiction apparent to even the most un-educated "backward" country farmer. The last line of the letter ends with Phoung determined to study at the Sorbonne, declaring finally "I will do some things for the Lao country."⁴⁹⁵

Even though the loyalist, Francophone Lao may be derided or dismissed for collaborating with France, one sees in Somlith's writing in particular that the loyalists too loved their country, thought that what they were doing was right, thought that France really was the best way to help the country, especially since the rest of the world hardly knew Laos existed, except for menacing neighbors. To dismiss the loyalist, Francophone Lao as just out for their own narrow self-interests is too simplistic, missing the deeper structural issues that existed throughout the RLG era. Phoung's entrance to a French university to help his country would be repeated time and again as Lao students traveled the globe in search of progress, to the United States, the Soviet Union, and other "Free" and Eastern Bloc countries in the West, not to mention neighboring countries like Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia among others.

⁴⁹⁴ There were some in Laos who gained French citizenship in the semi-colonial years. This topic deserves further research.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

Origins of the Literature Committee

Reflecting the desire for modernization by loyalists and Issara alike, in August 1951, the Literature Committee was first formed by royal decree. In the succeeding years it would go on to produce many of the most important works of Lao literature and history in the twentieth century. By the early 1970s it would transform itself into the Royal Lao Academy. In the meantime, it would produce one of the first modern Lao dictionaries and a modern Lao grammar, thereby making significant contributions to the standardization of the Lao language. It thus strove to provide a national language, literature, and culture for the Kingdom of Laos. Yet the Literature Committee's task was a paradoxical one: to form a culture that would be recognized by the West as civilized yet would also serve as a bulwark against excessive Westernization; at times seeking equivalency with the West while at other times seeking alternate, indigenous sources of culture not exclusively derived from the West. While it did blaze a new path in many respects, many of the issues it confronted were linked to earlier efforts, like those found in *Kinnari*, Issara cultural studies, the *Lao-Nyai* campaigns of World War II, and even earlier to the first project of cultural nationalism at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute in the 1930s.⁴⁹⁶ Yet in the early 1950s the Literature Committee also confronted issues unique to the new post-colonial situation.

The Literature Committee brought together members from across the political divide, including former loyalists and ex-Issara, who now worked together in what must have been at times quite a fiery atmosphere.⁴⁹⁷ The committee began to produce a literary magazine in these years called *Literature* (ວັນຄະດີສາບ). While it only appeared intermittently in the 1950s (1953-1954, 1958) it was an important venue for the works of the newly unified elite in the independent

⁴⁹⁶ The Vientiane Buddhist Institute continued its own work in the early 1950s, publishing a number of works, although its focus seems to have been more narrowly concerned with Buddhism in this period.

⁴⁹⁷ *Literature*, no. 1, August 1953, p. ໑ includes a membership list of the standing committee.

era. The editor of the journal in the early years was the old Issara Sila Viravong, but the ex-loyalist Pierre Nginn was the head of the Literature Committee and a regular contributor. Thao Kéne, another loyalist, had a recurring feature in which he addressed cultural issues. Together the elite would now address matters of diverging viewpoints of the post-colonial nation, and work to forge a new post-colonial national identity. With the loyalists making up the majority of the standing members of the Literature Committee, one would expect that the outcome would be different, and that a more inclusive form of nationalism would come to the fore, but that was not the case.

The journal may have had a short life, but it did preview many important future works that appeared in print only years later. For instance, certain issues included many earlier versions of works that were later published by Maha Sila Viravong, including his translations of *Sin Xai*, *Sieo Savat*, *Thao Hung Thao Cheuang*, and his guide to composing poetry. There were even draft entries for Sila's forthcoming Lao dictionary and grammar.⁴⁹⁸ Sila was a dominating presence in many of the journal's issues.⁴⁹⁹ Also one can see the Literature Committee was already taking up the huge task of translating Western (French) technical terms, before much of it was published separately in the 1960s and later in the 1970s by the Royal Lao Academy. Many of the early terms were related to the new technical positions in the government, but other entries included new occupations and Western military ranks and terms as well.⁵⁰⁰ The essence of this publication effort involved a search for equivalency as well as standardization.

⁴⁹⁸ For entries on the dictionary see for example, *Literature*, no. 4, January 1954, p. 36-41 and *Ibid* no. 5, March 1954, p. 15-20.

⁴⁹⁹ See for example the second issue from October 1953, where Sila authored seven of thirteen pieces or forty pages out of sixty-eight total pages.

⁵⁰⁰ See for example, *Literature*, no. 5, March 1954, p. 63, the heading of which states: "Lao military ranks and military order vocabulary in Lao language follows here. The committee on the Lao military did compile [the terms] and the Literature Committee did meet, discuss, amend and correctly view [it] already per letters number 35-36, written the 8, the 11, and the 16 of February 1954."

One should note that at the same time that the activities of the Literature Committee picked up there were many loyalists who continued to actively publish their work in French magazines, especially *France-Asie*, which included such writings as a memorial to Gandhi by Nginn and Thao Nhouy Abhay or studies on the That Luang monument by Phouvong Phimmasone.⁵⁰¹ Phouvong may have captured the mood of the time among the elite when he criticized the French for early efforts to “clumsily” restore the monument that instead erected a “Norman belfry.”⁵⁰² For several decades it then deteriorated further from neglect and the ravages of time, only properly restored in the 1930s. But Phouvong ended by noting the continuing needs of Lao heritage (“glorious vestige of the historic past of the Lao people”), showing that the young state was now acting as a responsible steward of its heritage. He concluded by setting the future agenda for the country in this area. The future of the country was in the hands of the elite.

Greater understanding of the origins and purpose of the Literature Committee can be found in the inaugural issue of the journal *Literature*, which first appeared in August 1953. Pierre Nginn wrote in the first issue on the importance of language.⁵⁰³ He was in fact explaining the motivations and rationale not just of the study of language or the magazine, but for the entire program of the Literature Committee itself:

An alphabet counts as the foundation or is the flag signifying the nation. All nations of men that have civilization must have an alphabet for writing one's own spoken language. Any nation that does not have an alphabet for writing one's own spoke language, that nation is counted as not having a foundation, not having a flag that is a sign of being a nation: thus [some] truly think that is a nation that does not have civilization. Our Lao nation is a nation that has an alphabet of our own since ancient times. Thus [we] count as a nation that has a firm foundation, [we] count as a true nation. This is the major merit and benefit of letters.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰¹ Pierre Nginn, “Hommage à Gandhi” *France-Asie*, no. 32, November 1948. Thao-Nhouy, “Le Mahatma Gandhi au Laos” *France-Asie*, no. 32, November, 1948. Phouvong Phimmasone, “Le That Luang de Vientiane” *France-Asie*, no. 82, March 1953.

⁵⁰² Phouvong, “Le That Luang de Vientiane” p. 152.

⁵⁰³ Pierre Nginn, ຄຳຖາວອນຂອງປະທານກັມການ [“Announcement of the President of the Committee”] *Literature*, No. 1, August 1953.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 1.

The journal was a forum for works of cultural nationalism, now taken up by former Issara and loyalists. Yet now the mission was something different, representing an evolution from earlier projects. Now that independence had been achieved, the task of culture was to attain a civilized status, especially in the eyes of the West. In this way, Lao culture would serve to promote the Lao as civilized, but by the same token it was also to be a shield against the flood of Western culture. By providing an indigenous source of language, history, law and so on, then one might not need to borrow from the West. The revival of Lao culture would continue, but would now be put into the service of shaping the state, and even government policies. This would be most evident in the RLG schools.

Yet this program of cultural revival overseen by the Literature Committee was not without its problems. As reflected in Nginn's essay, there were tensions that appeared once again in the clash of the impulse to preserve tradition and the drive to modernize. While one may preserve speech for thousands of years in writing, literature is also something that can be lost and must be revived, albeit in an invariably altered form:

Besides that letters still have innumerable benefits. All written-knowledge has not disappeared because [it] relies on these letters to be preserved in writing. The spoken word of ancient peoples which were spoken already thousands of years ago that we are still able to recall also relied on letters. Therefore, books are a necessary thing for all peoples. All people must know them by study...

The Lao Literature Committee that was established by royal order no. 107 on August 27 1951, has the duty to carry out activities concerning matters of Lao books and the Lao language, by making a revival and supporting them, to vastly develop [them] going forward, aligned to the status of the country that is continually developing.⁵⁰⁵

The development of language and literature was linked to the vital development of the country. Yet the tension between tradition and modernity remained. Nginn went on to say that anytime a country falls to a "disastrous fate" the literature of the country suffered too, concluding that "in

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 1-2.

any era that the nation may have progress and prosperity, being independent, the letters and language then must also be independent.”⁵⁰⁶

The new work of the journal *Literature* also had a democratic bent. Although it was an elitist preserve that styled itself as “the mold” or a “lamplight,” it was also published so that the people could stay informed of the Literature Committee’s activities. Thus, it worked in the public sphere and led to development of early civil society in the RLG era. Ngin encouraged readers, imploring them “to share one’s thoughts and opinions in a candid mood.” He also addressed his readers colloquially as “brothers and sisters.” Similar sentiments were expressed in the earlier *Kinnari* magazine, but the language carried more meaning now that the country was indeed an independent democracy.

It is notable that the basics of a democracy continued to have currency among the elite, remaining a topic of discussion even after several elections and changes in government. Thao Kéne, in his regular culture segment, wrote about the terms “freedom” (*seriphap*) and “independence” (*itsaraphap*). His contribution is notable for the many observations he made on the new values, which in his account were at times in conflict with the norms of Lao society. He first discusses the meaning of the words:

Freedom or independence, according to the words have the [following] meanings: to be large oneself, to be one’s own boss, to not rely on anyone, to do anything that accords to one’s liking, not having things that prevent [you], not having a way to be compelled. In brief, then [it] is self-reliance or one’s own “happy body,” “contented mind”.⁵⁰⁷

As seen in the work of other writers, Thao Kéne has to begin with an explanation of the still somewhat foreign ideas. While the new political discourse appeared in 1945, and its basic elements was understood immediately, it was nonetheless also something that continued to be discussed for

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 2.

⁵⁰⁷ Thao Kéne, ວັທນະທັມ [“Culture”] *Literature*, No. 3-4, November-December, 1953, p. 67.

years at a deeper level. Even as late as October 1953, members of the elite were still making explanations of these terms. There was a continuous dialogue on democracy that existed throughout the RLG era.

While Lao democracy was several years older, it and associated values of egalitarianism or Western individualism were still met by skepticism from some quarters.⁵⁰⁸ Thao Kéne used a number of metaphors to describe the new values of *seriphap* and *itsaraphap*. Unlike earlier writers, he had observed it in practice for several years. For how the new values caused people to act, the most salient metaphor Thao Kéne used was the lack of control:

...like the large elephant in the forest that does not have a mahout riding at the neck, or taking the elephant hook [to] the head, [but] not having a chain, or...when thirsty [the elephant] then just goes to search to drink, when [it] is sated then also rests, sleeping comfortably, or on tour coming and going with ease, not afraid of another being coming to oppress or do harm to it because the large elephant has the full force of its body.⁵⁰⁹

Thao Kéne further explained the issues of how such values played out in society. In an earlier issue, he had written about how Lao were fundamentally social people. They did most activities with others and even their feelings depended on a strong sense of sympathy (ຄວາມເໝາະ). But the new democracy fundamentally clashed with this basic pattern in Lao society:

As for good persons, [if they] do anything [it] may make [them] be like the elephant. In time it is necessary [they] must join with all the neighbors and sometimes also [they] must join with the village, with the house, be associated with one another, have fun together, build benefits jointly. By necessity [they] must compel themselves to enter the group, and sometimes [they] reach the need to abandon the things that they want to hold on to, or take things that they are tired of. Freedom or independence of the individual must disappear gradually, but [they] should not worry.⁵¹⁰

To be a good person, he argues, one must participate in society and not be isolated or anti-social. Yet the new values of *seriphap* and *itsaraphap* often seemed to demand one stand separate from others. To align with the basic values of society without forcing, or imposing one's own values on

⁵⁰⁸ Thanks to Bruce Lockhart for helping me to clarify this point.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 67-68.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid, p. 68.

others involves finally abandoning *seriphap*, and *itsaraphap*. Existing society and the new values seem to be fundamentally at odds in a zero-sum game where only one can prevail.

In other places, Thao Kéne points to the inequalities appearing in the new democratic society where *seriphap* and *itsaraphap* are championed. For instance, he speaks of people who “have independence or freedom fully” that “these good people are people that are the boss of themselves, and sometimes also the boss of the group.”⁵¹¹ But all this leads Thao Kéne to a deeper insight. He says, “when [a person] must be careful to always pay attention to and wait to force oneself always like that, may it be called “freedom” or “independence” in anyway? This also is one type of question that we should discuss and solve according to the truth.”⁵¹² His question concerning the limits of democracy in RLG society is a fundamental question that remains relevant in any modern democracy the world over.

Conclusion: Democratic Culture in the Early RLG

The rise of democracy in the country augured not just political but also cultural change. A more democratic culture arose as the first elections were held and new political parties emerged. In this regard, the successful reintegration of the Issara in 1949 contrasts with later failed attempts to reintegrate the Pathet Lao. There was also the beginnings of a free press and the earliest signs of a civil society. More works were published in the country as the French devolved more powers to the Lao. The RLG gained control of the schools, the radio and the press. Yet the very same Western democracy was tempered by many skeptics among the elite, especially the loyalists. They saw all the misuses and abuses of the new political order that sought to control the people as much

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² Ibid.

as it offered them any semblance of real power. Democracy was only another battleground in which the strong dominated the weak. The corresponding Western political values, especially egalitarianism, were perceived to be in basic conflict with existing customs and traditions. Democracy, like modernity, threatened the old ways. Yet democracy was not abandoned, but became central to the young state as people's ponderings of its many contradictions continued.

It is notable that as one Western political system was enshrined as central to the young Lao state that another was rejected: communism. Thus, already in the semi-colonial years the first articulations of Lao anti-communism appeared. Indeed, the Issara erected the twin pillars of the RLG: democracy and anti-communism. One may speculate as to why one succeeded where the other failed during the RLG period. The Francophone elite, steeped in French learning, chose to build a Western parliamentary democracy rather than a Russian soviet. One was familiar, esteemed and admired, whereas the other was foreign and strange. Yet both presented fundamental challenges to existing society. It is truly remarkable that Western educated elites came together to form a democracy which held the possibility of their own disenfranchisement. Yet in doing so did they ensure their own privileges as some scholars have suggested?⁵¹³ The answer would depend on how much power was shared with new elites that emerged over the course of the 1950s and '60s. Certainly, the elite who founded the democracy were not always ready to upend society, to change popular culture to forge a new egalitarian society, but nonetheless challenges arose organically from broader segments of society as development progressed. At the same time, democracy was recognized as a way to obtain legitimacy in the eyes of the West. No one seriously

⁵¹³ Nina Adams, "Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries: The Lao Search for Independence, 1945-1954" in Nina Adams and Alfred W. McCoy (eds.), *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 110.

advocated reviving old Lao political institutions from the pre-colonial era. All agreed implicitly in the democratic future of the country.

Nationalism continued to evolve in the cultural field even as modernization progressed rapidly. The Issara and the loyalists themselves had very different views on nationalism. The Issara believed there was a true Lao nation and race, nearly lost but now reviving, yet they offered little room for minorities in their vision of the new nation. While some like Katay Sasorith, who was a Lao-Vietnamese from Pakse, would rise to become Prime Minister, the Issara simply denied any minorities existed. The loyalists, by contrast, were more open to cultural diversity and so fashioned a multi-ethnic nationalism that fit their own Francophile culture while also offering real possibilities to the minorities of the country. The loyalists were at the forefront of important cultural issues in these years as they mediated with the West and modernized the country along French lines. On the other hand, the Issara began writing an anti-colonial, nationalist history which called into question France's role in the recent past. By 1950, the Lao elite entered a new phase as they began the task of buttressing the independent nation. They might disagree on different issues, but they worked in the same offices, and were already influencing schools, taking to the airwaves on Radio Lao, printing books, newspapers, and taking up other works around the country. The stage was set for the next phase in RLG history.

PART TWO: NEO-COLONIAL YEARS (1954-1962)

CHAPTER FOUR: APOGEE OF ANTI-COMMUNISM

Introduction

Lao anti-communism became central to the RLG's ideology at the height of the Cold War, yet it had already been on the political agenda of leading members of the RLG elite for over a decade, long before the Americans wielded much influence in the country.⁵¹⁴ In this way, early interactions among the elite and American officials were more akin to a meeting of the minds, at least on the subject of communism; the real effect the Americans had in this period was to promote an already existing tendency among the elite and society at large.⁵¹⁵ In this period, anti-communism began to influence a wide range of domains across the Kingdom, notably in politics, but also in religion, and in the wider society in civic organizations. Its influence is a distinct feature of the time. Yet its ascendancy was mixed up with new American influences (and resistances to them) as well as its political opposite, neutralism. However, as will be shown, neutralism was a strategy of anti-communists in this period. Whatever else one might observe about the RLG, one must admit that anti-communism profoundly shaped the country in the neo-colonial years. Yet study of this phenomena has remained limited, leaving unchallenged a number of assumptions and understandings that must be addressed.

A unique feature of this period was that all major political parties pledged to be anti-communist, except for the political wing of the Pathet Lao, the Neo Lao Hak Xat (NLHX, ຄູ່ງອລາວຮັກຊາດ). I discuss at length the most important anti-communist movement of the time, the Committee for Defense of National Interests (CDIN). Yet even the so-called “neutralists” and

⁵¹⁴ This is contrary to among others Martin Stuart-Fox who has portrayed anti-communism in the RLG as an “American” phenomenon.

⁵¹⁵ This does not mean there were no conflicts between Americans and RLG Lao, but those were more like intra-party fighting than a conflict between those with different fundamental beliefs.

“leftists” were anti-communists who did not want to see their country fall under the influence of such an ideology including the likes of Bong Souvannavong, the one-time leader of the Peace and Neutrality Party and whom some scholars have portrayed as a communist-sympathizer. To the elite as a whole, communism was a foreign ideology and not their own belief in an anti-communist Laos. As much as this stance may have been fraught with difficulty, that is how they felt, a belief they expressed over and over again, whether in the conference rooms of superpowers, or at popular mass rallies of their own people. Yet this fact, which should have drawn the RLG and the US closer together, also brought new tensions. US ignorance of the true nature of Lao anti-communism was the major obstacle to its successful collaboration with the RLG during the Cold War, which had far reaching consequences for both the country and the wider world. The Americans did not accept Lao anti-communism for what it was, but rather sought to impose their own ideal-types onto it.

There was a major intellectual struggle between communism and anti-communism over the fate of the country, which was not finally resolved until 1975. In this regard, Buddhism was contested by both the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao. This contest was much more lively than previously thought and Buddhism remained contested until 1975. There were important anti-communist monks who rallied to the government cause, who have received too little attention. The Royal Lao Government was essentially a Buddhism state, while the elite saw it as central to Lao civilization. Nevertheless, the Pathet Lao made efforts to penetrate the sangha, and some communist sympathizers among them fled to the “liberated zones.” While these pro-Pathet Lao monks could point to the perceived similarities of Buddhism and socialism, others on the government-side claimed that Buddhism was the sole defense to resist communism, which was irreligious and dangerous.

But if anti-communism can be regarded as a positive force in the RLG, the neo-colonial years were still a time of great hardship, manifest by the return of war in 1959.⁵¹⁶ The neo-colonial years presented a severe test to the nascent Lao democracy. Some of that was due to the particulars of the situation in the country, yet the Lao did encounter problems of a modern state that are universal. Wartime democracies are always difficult to maintain, whether in the Civil War-era US, Chiang Kaishek's Republican China, or in many states amid the Global War on Terror. Civil and political rights, the very ideals one is fighting for, are often sacrificed in the name of security and military expediency. That the Royal Lao Government would survive this trying period and retain its democratic form of government is, in retrospect, nothing less than remarkable (see chapter eight). It is even more so given that many of its neighbors like Myanmar, South Korea, Indonesia, or South Vietnam failed to maintain a democracy, but instead witnessed the rise of dictatorship, turning to the strongman to guide the country through the turbulence of the Cold War.⁵¹⁷ Thus, the RLG would continue to have one of the strongest post-colonial democracies in the region until 1975, alongside the likes of Japan and India. While it had its share of pretender strongmen, unlike its neighbors, the RLG failed to devolve into a lasting dictatorship. Even those Lao leaders seen as pliant clients of the US (e.g., Katay Sasorith, Phoui Sananikone or Phoumi Nosavan) resisted the US at pivotal moments, foiling US efforts to install a dictator.⁵¹⁸ The US was forced to retreat

⁵¹⁶ Fighting between the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao was renewed on May 19, 1959, erupting at the failure to peacefully re-integrate a single Pathet Lao unit into the Royal Lao Army. The subsequent arrest and escape of the Pathet Lao leaders from jail made the break between the two parties irrevocable. For an account of the prison break, itself as a key mythos of the LPDR, see Oliver Tappe, "The escape from Phonkheng Prison: Revolutionary Historiography in the Lao P.D.R." in Adams, Karen L. & Thomas J. Hudak (eds.) *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Lao studies* (Tempe, AZ: Southeast Asia Council, Arizona State University, 2010).

⁵¹⁷ This will be addressed more fully in the concluding chapter.

⁵¹⁸ See especially Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 357-358. The CIA made efforts to install Phoumi Nosavan as a dictator in 1959-1960. Especially during the first coup in RLG history in December 1959 Phoumi Nosavan used the army "to cow the king into giving him a ministerial position." Phoumi "managed to maneuver his backers in the CIA (and in the Pentagon by that point) into furnishing him the means to overthrow the legal government..." Dommen further suggests the US was preparing Phoumi to take such a role as

from its neo-colonial intervention in Laos and to change strategy because prospective strongmen proved to be too unbending, too unpopular, corrupt or otherwise problematic.⁵¹⁹ The restoration of democracy in 1965 was a rare victory for democracy in the global Cold War (see chapter eight).

The Committee for the Defense of National Interests (CDIN) was the single most important political and cultural force in the country since the Issara. The importance of this movement has not been recognized by Western scholars, some of whom viewed it through a neo-colonial lens as a band of “Young Turks” or “improvident children.”⁵²⁰ It was a movement formed to challenge established politicians, save the faltering democracy and wipe out communism. The CDIN articulated a new vision of anti-communism, which perceived communism as merely a pretext for a much older imperialist desire held by China and (North) Vietnam to conquer Lao lands. This new form of anti-communism was heavily influenced by ethnic tensions and a racist mindset developing since the colonial era. It is not a coincidence that it was a CDIN government in power when the Second Indochina War broke out in Laos on May 19, 1959. The CDIN was central to the RLG in the neo-colonial years, playing a decisive role in the course of events.

early as 1957 when he went on a tour of US military installations. Moreover, he suggests it was Phoumi’s return from abroad in August 1958 that precipitated the CDIN demand for seats in the cabinet.

⁵¹⁹ The US policy change occurred when John F. Kennedy took power and ended the Eisenhower policy of undermining Lao leaders, especially Souvanna Phouma. The US ultimately declined to support the rise of dictatorships led by the CDIN (January 1960) or Phoumi Nosavan (April 1960); while the US military and CIA supported the CDIN and Phoumi the US State Department did not. Later Phoumi Nosavan was the main opponent to US efforts to neutralize the kingdom from March 1961 to June 1962. On these turn of events, see Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 448-451. Ibid, p. 448, the US went so far as to cut off aid to Phoumi and threatened to sanction him. George Ball said “if he refuses [to negotiate]” the US “can no longer regard him as a man acceptable for us to work with and will immediately break off all contact with him.” Ibid, p. 449, in meetings with Phoumi Nosvana and others of the Boun Oum government in March 1962 Averell Harriman shouted at the Lao and delivered what was described as an “ultimatum” to accept the neutralization of their country. Ibid, p. 451, US Ambassador Brown did the same.

⁵²⁰ Bernard Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960-1961* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 179.

“...the Laotians, like improvident children, seemed to return immediately to their usual political games now that the worst of the danger seemed to have passed: Playing with foreign aid and military coups.”

Democracy was alive and well until the supplementary elections of 1958, which were the first to include the Pathet Lao. Until this point, the electorate was expanded, new civil and political rights were protected in law, and the press was strong enough to topple a government, peacefully. Yet as competition with the Pathet Lao intensified the democracy was degraded, marked by the appearance of vote-buying and rigged elections connected to the CDIN and the CIA. After war renewed the RLG democracy began to break down under enormous strains, especially in the 1960 general elections in which the NLHX participated even as the latter took up arms against the government, aided by neighboring foreign powers.

The years 1954-1962, the neo-colonial years, is the single most studied period of Lao history by Western scholars, although there is not a great quantity of work in the chronically under-developed field of Lao history. Thus, the key accounts of this period themselves have become major sources on Lao history in general including those by Arthur Dommen, Bernard Fall, Hugh Toye, and Alfred W. McCoy.⁵²¹ Yet these and some related works still largely viewed the RLG in terms of its international relations, and relied uncritically on a reductive view of the RLG best exhibited by Jean Deuve and Geoffrey Gunn.⁵²² These scholars had more interest in understanding the Pathet Lao communist movement than the Royal Lao Government, the latter of which could be explained simply by “family politics” among three princes, each representing three factions (“left” “right” “neutral”).⁵²³ These scholars also tended to view all politics in the RLG as little

⁵²¹ Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization* (New York: Praeger, 1971). Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*. Hugh Toye, *Laos, Buffer State or Battle Ground* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968). Nina S. Adams, and Alfred W. McCoy (eds.) *Laos: War and Revolution* (Harper and Row: New York: 1970). Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003).

⁵²² Charles Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy toward Laos since 1954* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972). Martin Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1973). Timothy Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: US Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

⁵²³ Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, *North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971). McAlister Brown and Joseph Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930-1985* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1984). The

more than family squabbling. Political parties were nothing more than a front for elite families to advance their own interests and enrich themselves, while holding to no real principles, values, or ideals. Followers were likewise merely self-interested clients. Yet I argue that a far more complicated view emerges if one views the RLG in terms of democracy, anti-communism, modernity and post-colonial nationalism. Moreover, it was the RLG ideology that provided the motivation and rationale of key RLG leaders' decision making, including the renewal of war in May 1959. In general, the RLG "right-wing" has been misunderstood, having been dismissed too simply as puppets of the US, but they were important agents in their right who shaped major events.

Revisionist works that challenge these earlier assessments have only appeared recently from Viliam Phraxayavong, Seth Jacobs, William Rust and Simon Creak.⁵²⁴ But there remains a need to address all the misconceptions in a comprehensive way. Creak is the first to present a revisionist account challenging the previous understanding of the strongman Phoumi Nosavan, demonstrating how Phoumi skillfully used popular sporting events to embody the new nationalism.⁵²⁵ Jacobs likewise showed that even the closest "rightist" allies like Katay Sasorith clashed with the US patron.⁵²⁶ Viliam, who himself worked in the relevant departments of the RLG, has written an important study of aid which provides some key insights, especially concerning US aid. William Rust has offered fresh studies of US foreign policy on Laos, showing

various works of Vatthana Pholsena, Oliver Tappe and Martin Rathie among others have brought to light a host of new understandings to the Pathet Lao communist movement.

⁵²⁴ Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity and the Making of Modern Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015). Viliam Phraxayavong, *History of Aid to Laos: Motivations and Impacts* (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2009). Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012). William Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954-1961* (University of Kentucky Press, 2012). William Rust, *So Much to Lose: John F. Kennedy and American Policy in Laos* (University of Kentucky Press, 2014).

⁵²⁵ Creak, *Embodied Nation*, p. 118-139. He further discusses Phoumi's role in the Issara giving a longer view of his life. In his earlier days in charge of a training center one could make the comparison of Phoumi Nosavan to a young Chiang Kaishek, although Phoumi never was able to rise to the heights that Chiang Kaishek did.

⁵²⁶ Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling*, p. 55-58.

how the Eisenhower administration fundamentally misunderstood the Lao anti-communist elite.⁵²⁷ This revisionist trend in recent studies has led me to attempt to formulate a new understanding of the RLG in this crucial period in terms of RLG ideology, taking seriously the ideological conflicts in which the RLG clashed with its enemy, the Pathet Lao.⁵²⁸ Moreover, it was the particular notions of RLG leaders, RLG ideology, that led them to disastrously pursue war with the communists. However, flawed and exclusionary it may have been, the RLG's vision of the nation has had far reaching consequences for the country up to the present through continuities and disjunctures between earlier periods and the neo-colonial years, because much of what happen in this period was already anticipated or latent in earlier periods, and was only reaching maturity in these years.

The Rise of Anti-Communism

In this section I discuss the rise of anti-communism in RLG politics. I also discuss problems with the current understanding of Lao anti-communism including the assumption that it was imposed by foreign (American) powers. I also give a detailed examination of the misuse of political labels (left, right, neutral) with special attention to Souvanna Phouma and Bong Souvannavong, who were strong anti-communists despite any other label applied to them. Moreover, I consider the intricately-related political philosophies of neutralism and anti-communism as they existed at the time.

When discussing the rise of anti-communism one must note that all political parties in the RLG became anti-communist by 1959.⁵²⁹ After suffering a major defeat in the 1958 elections, the

⁵²⁷ Rust, *Before the Quagmire*.

⁵²⁸ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 105, observes that some were "heartfelt" in devotion to the cause while others were "opportunistic," yet we only really understand well the latter opportunists.

⁵²⁹ Souvanna Phouma, in a speech to the National Assembly in the summer of 1958, had already called for the exclusion of parties "which do not fight communism" from the government. See Dommen, *The Indochinese*

three largest parties, the Progress Party (led by Souvanna Phouma), the Nationalist Party (Katay Sasorith) and the Independents (Phoui Sananikone) reformed as the Rally for the Lao People Party, whose central plank was now anti-communism as stated in the party manifesto: “to unite the national forces for a resolute fight against Communism and subversion.”⁵³⁰ This period also witnessed the rise of the most virulently anti-communist political force at the time, the CDIN, which immediately took a leading role on the political scene. This is what Sisouk Na Champassak, a founding member of the CDIN, meant when he stated the major politicians’ “political convictions...were basically the same.”⁵³¹ He was not saying that everyone all actually agreed on every issue of the day, but that there was one issue which united all of them.⁵³² Underlying this trend was the dissemination of government sponsored anti-communist propaganda, which appeared especially in election years (1955, 1958, 1960).⁵³³ Already in 1954 there were marches through the streets of Vientiane protesting against North Vietnamese invasion.⁵³⁴ Thus there was an emerging early popular anti-communism that paralleled the evolution of anti-communism as a political doctrine to which all major parties adhered.

Anti-communism, like democracy, has been one of the least understood aspects of the RLG

Experience, p. 373. Ibid, Dommen himself notes “the tide of sentiment was definitely swinging to anti-communism” after the May 1958 supplemental elections.

⁵³⁰ Quoted in Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos* (New York: Praeger, 1961), p. 63.

⁵³¹ Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 62. This is a theme repeated over and over in Sisouk’s account of neo-colonial RLG politics. See further p. 63 “We [the CDIN] were in full agreement with the political program of the RPL” or p. 67 “Secretly divided on so many subjects, the cabinet was united at least in its opposition to Communism and Communist designs on the country, a stand rapidly translated into practical measures.”

⁵³² See further Joel Halpern’s interview with CDIN foreign minister Khamphan Panya who said of the CDIN and the Rally for the Lao People: “They have never been at variance on ideology, as reported. In fact, the CDIN and the RPL are both anti-communist and have the same national ideals. However, I want to point out that their [RPL] anti-communism does not extend beyond the borders of Laos.” The last statement reflected a new foreign policy closely aligned to the “Free World” pursued by Khamphan as foreign minister. See Joel Halpern, “Lao Project Paper no. 19,” p. 55.

⁵³³ See for example various documents in the Jean Deuve private papers archived at the Memorial du Caen.

⁵³⁴ See *Le Combattant Lao*, Number 78, June 15, 1954. The front page of this issue features a photo of the march and the following caption: “Saturday, 22nd of May, 1954, there was a great march in the city of Vientiane to unite to fight the Vietminh that come to invade the Kingdom of Laos.” This journal was in Lao.

era, especially during the neo-colonial years. The major misconceptions of anti-communism are due to: first, a lack of awareness of its real origins, which predated American involvement in the country, appearing among both Issara and loyalists during the semi-colonial years;⁵³⁵ and second, the misapplication of the labels “left” “right” and “neutral” that, which, even though the Royalists themselves used them, were nevertheless often misused or abused. There has not been a serious study of Lao anti-communism that has questioned these basic assumptions.

In certain circumstances, such labels were used to slander one’s opponent, just like the vitriolic days of the Issara and loyalists debates of the late 1940s. For one example of the strong passions surrounding communism, take for instance, a political cartoon that appeared in 1961 in the *echo de la liberté*, a paper run by Prince Sop-saisana, a member of the CDIN, who was himself labelled a ‘leftist’ at times:

⁵³⁵ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 117 thereby explains the polarization of Lao politics in the late 1950s as being “driven by American anti-communism” not appreciating its Lao origins. Grant Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009), p. 146 for a discussion on communism by Savang Vatthana with the US in 1946.



In the first frame, the cartoon shows the leader of the Pathet Lao, Souphanouvong, sitting on the throne of the Kingdom of Laos – power-hungry, not fighting for a cause he believes in, but just desiring to grab power for himself. Ho Chi Minh bows to him saying “the Vietminh are at your disposal.”⁵³⁶ He is offering Souphanouvong a weapon (a missile?). In the second frame, Ho Chi Minh says, now with his arm over Souphanouvong’s shoulder, “they aid you in the struggle...” In the third frame, Ho Chi Minh can be seen pushing Souphanouvong off the throne, continuing his speech “...against imperialism...” showing that the North Vietnamese only pretended to aid the

⁵³⁶ *Echo de la liberté*, July 26, 1961, p. 13.

Pathet Lao, but really wanted to dominate the country for themselves. Given the animosity among Lao and Vietnamese during the colonial era, this was a highly inflammatory idea. It was also more broadly a skewering of the communists claims to anti-colonialism, pointing to the irony of their own domineering acts in neighboring countries. In the final frame, it is Ho Chi Minh who is now seated on the throne of the Kingdom of Laos, with Souphanouvong in the background in prison garb shackled to a ball and chain as Ho Chi Minh explains "...in order to guarantee order, peace, and neutrality." The message then is that one cannot trust all the sweet-sounding words of the Pathet Lao who are fools duped by the Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese are out to deceive all the Lao and even their allies, the Pathet Lao will be enslaved by them. The cartoon harkens back to the greatest skewerings of the Issara-loyalist debates in the semi-colonial years. It is also an important example of the popular discourse of anti-communism at the time. Political cartoons continued to be popular in the neo-colonial years. In other Royalist newspapers one finds references to the Pathet Lao as "traitors" (ຜູ້ຂ້າຍຊາດ) or "rebel traitors."⁵³⁷

While the Eisenhower administration was criticizing the Royal Lao Government for its perceived lack of sufficient devotion to anti-communism, it was actually a popular force on the rise in the country evidenced by a rise of anti-communism across all major political parties, a development missed by many Western observers. It was not just the Committee for Defense of National Interests (CDIN), or Katay Sasortih (Nationalist Party) or Phoui Sananikone (Independent Party) who were committed anti-communists. So-called neutralists, even the champion of neutralism Souvanna Phouma, were fundamentally anti-communist.⁵³⁸ This is clear

⁵³⁷ "283," "Beloved child of Lao" *Lao Lan Xang*, December 2, 1965, p. 3.

⁵³⁸ Souvanna Phouma was the other major leader of the National Progress Party during the 1950s. Later the National Progress Party and the Independent Party merged to form the Rally for the Lao People Party after their ignominious defeat in the 1958 supplemental elections. The Democrats and the Lao National Union Party continued to be important minority parties. Other parties would appear in the 1960s. On the Eisenhower's misunderstanding of Souvanna Phouma see Bruce Lockhart, "The Fate of Neutralism in Cambodia and Laos" in Malcolm H. Murfett

in a speech Souvanna made on April 16, 1953 shortly after a major Vietminh invasion that established the first Pathet Lao resistance bases in Samneua, during the final year of the First Indochina War. He opened his speech with good wishes for the Lao lunar new year before discussing the crisis.

Never was a wish more fervent than at the beginning of this Year of the Snake, because the happiness and the prosperity that we desire so ardently for all you, Lao countrymen and for your dear homeland, are conditioned by peace and security. Yet grave facts have just occurred at our north-east borders which constitute a danger greater than we have had to face until the present.

Until the present, we have had to struggle against the undertakings of isolated foreign bands that the action of our national army and of our national guard succeeded, with the assistance of the Forces of the French Union, to progressively break up...

Today, the enemy, violating our borders, had brought war onto the national soil. Its regular units swept over our north-east provinces and it brings a tragic danger to our homeland...

The circumstances will put to the test the vitality of the Lao country. Let us approach them with calm and resolution. Our determination to defend the soil and independence of our homeland, the same as our traditions and our culture, must be for the aggressors already a salutary warning. They know by ... the proud words of our national hymn: "whoever would want to invade our country will find us resolved to fight to the death". We are not alone in the fight for this ideal of freedom.

France is more than ever close to us... The support of friendly nations and particularly of the United States of America is assured us.

If the world should have its eyes fixed on them, the Lao people grouped around its King and Royal Government will give proof of its national loyalty.

That the Buddha and all the divine powers that protect us and assist us in the defense of our homeland in danger.⁵³⁹

This fiery speech was printed on the front page of the government newspaper *Lao Presse* and broadcast on Radio Lao. Souvanna spoke of the Pathet Lao as being entirely a foreign movement, or elsewhere as "foreign fanatics without links with Laos and its inhabitants."⁵⁴⁰ Their invasion

(ed.), *Cold War Southeast Asia* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 2012), p. 212. Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 107 similarly portrays Souvanna as a misunderstood anti-communist. See also Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 310, which notes that Souvanna Phouma professed to the Americans that he thought Souphanouvong was not a communist. See further *ibid.*, p. 373-374 which notes that Souvanna "never tired of pointing out" that "communism was an alien doctrine to the Lao, and the class struggle and violence that were the terms in which the Lao Communists such as Kaysone saw their mission were completely antithetical to the Buddhist middle way known by the lowland Lao and even by those who propitiated the spirits of the forests."

⁵³⁹ Agency Lao Presse, *Lao Presse* no. 477, April 16, 1953, (Vientiane: Ministry of Information) p. 1, 5-6.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6, elsewhere the Pathet Lao are described as: "bands coming from the outside and revitalized by the foreigner were able to trouble sporadically certain regions where the operations of the police were necessary...the

was a “criminal action...which proves once again, that it only aims to impose an ideology on the world, regardless of the borders and the rights of peoples...”⁵⁴¹ The Vietminh-Pathet Lao invasion of March-April 1953 was larger in scale than anything witnessed previously, which could only elicit a national response. The following North Vietnamese seizure of Thakhek from December 1953 to February 1954 involved a large North Vietnamese army.⁵⁴² While the French withdrew after May 1954 the conflict would only continue to escalate. By 1954 there were more North Vietnamese soldiers in Laos than there were soldiers in the Royal Lao Army.⁵⁴³ From this moment on communism was “the enemy” of the Royal Lao Government until its fall in 1975.

Most interesting is Souvanna’s reference to the invasion as a threat not just to independence but also to “our traditions and our culture.”⁵⁴⁴ He was of course speaking of the elite anti-communist notion that communism was totally opposed and anathema to Lao culture. He followed this by speaking of the Lao rallied around King Sisavang Vong and protected by the Buddha from the communist menace, thereby illustrating the cultural aspects of anti-communism. Later when

enemy came to attack the boundaries of the kingdom and to commence operations of war on its national territory. The government, the army and the Lao people are resolved to resist this aggression with the aid of French Union troops.”

⁵⁴¹ Ibid, p. 6. Souvanna never explicitly says either “communism” or “Pathet Lao” by name in this speech.

⁵⁴² The North Vietnamese campaign to seize Thakhek involved 10,000 soldiers. See Christopher Goscha, “Vietnam and the world outside: The case of Vietnamese communist advisers in Laos (1948-62) *South East Asia Research*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2004), p. 150.

⁵⁴³ In 1954 there were 17,600 North Vietnamese soldiers in Laos compared to 17,000 in the Royal Lao Army. Moreover, after the French withdrew per the Geneva Accords of that year, the Royal Lao Army, which had only been created on March 23, 1950, lost the vast majority of its officer corps (predominately French) and had to rapidly advance lower ranking members of the force to fill the breach. In many ways the Lao army was clearly outmatched by the North Vietnamese one. For the 1954 RLA figure see Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and the U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Washington D.C.: Office of Chief of Military History, 1984), p. 25. For the North Vietnamese figure see Goscha, “Vietnam and the world outside,” p. 150. Goscha describes North Vietnam’s intervention in Laos since 1948 for its own security needs as well as to modernize the Lao. Ibid, p. 154, the North Vietnamese were able to use pre-existing networks of Vietnamese in the country that pre-dated the colonial period and were enhanced during the colonial era in cooperation with the French. Even after 1954 North Vietnam left behind nearly 1,000 “secret advisors” (964 cadres including 314 military personnel and 650 other cadres) in Laos by its own records – a far larger number than that of the US. See *ibid*, p. 163. Ibid, p. 171, the North Vietnamese advisors were in the field with the Pathet Lao armed forces much earlier than the US took up such role with the RLA.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 5.

Souvanna sought rapprochement with the Pathet Lao, he would try, in private meetings, to persuade the US that the Pathet Lao movement was not really communist for the very same reason.⁵⁴⁵ To Souvanna Phouma communism was truly “un-Lao.”⁵⁴⁶ The only thing that had changed in the intervening years was that Souvanna was now trying to coopt the Pathet Lao, who were by that point deemed to be only dupes of the North Vietnamese, in a bid to divide and conquer the communist forces. Thus he shifted the “un-Lao” communism from the Pathet Lao onto the North Vietnamese. Savang Vatthana, while still Crown Prince in 1956, echoed that assessment telling US officials that Souphanouvong “was being used by the Communists only because he belonged to the prime minister’s family.”⁵⁴⁷ Yet this essentialist cultural view of early Lao anti-communism would face serious questions as the conflict intensified. An entirely new form of anti-communism would emerge to replace it, fashioned by a new political force of the period, the CDIN (see below).

The political labels “left,” “right” and “neutral” were problematic in that they often failed to accurately predict how a person thought or acted. In 1957 a “leftist” “radical” Phetsarath Rattanavongsa returned from a long period of twelve years in exile in neighboring Thailand. In interviews on his return he made several comments highly critical of the American presence and the misuse of foreign aid.⁵⁴⁸ Yet he was not a communist, for he was careful not to criticize the ends of anti-communism, but only the means. Thus, for Phetsarath as much as for Souvanna Phouma, the argument was not one between “neutralists” and “rightists” within the Royal Lao

⁵⁴⁵ Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos*, p. 115.

⁵⁴⁶ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 104, notes it was a “general” belief. See further *ibid*, p. 107, his discussion of the same as a “romantic idea of Lao culture.” See also Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 310.

⁵⁴⁷ Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty*, p. 190. Savang Vatthana added: “the Lao knew the true Communists among the Pathet Lao. Prince Souphanouvong, for example, was of no consequence, occupying only the fifth position in the Pathet Lao hierarchy...” *Ibid*, p. 175, cites *Lao Presse* reports of Savang Vatthana’s travel with Souvanna to Pathet Lao areas to promote the first coalition government.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 123-125.

Government, but only among different kinds of anti-communists, each pursued different means but held true to the same overall goal.⁵⁴⁹ In short, almost everyone among the elite was anti-communist, but not everyone was ready to back the US in the Cold War, which was an important distinction. In his interview, Phetsarath agreed with Souvanna Phouma that the most effective method to avert the communist threat was negotiation and neutralism.

In the 1950s many of the elite saw the best strategy to deal with the Pathet Lao was to coopt them. They knew the Pathet Lao leaders were more dangerous in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands than they were under the elite's careful watch in Vientiane.⁵⁵⁰ For instance, when Souvanna Phouma was negotiating the first coalition government, in his address to the National Assembly in 1957 he explained he was seeking to bring the Pathet Lao under the sovereign authority of the RLG, to have them relinquish any pretense to military or administrative powers, which he said could not be tolerated or else it "would be the negation of the idea of democracy" by which he meant the negation of the RLG itself.⁵⁵¹ Thus in 1957, at the very moment when a government of national unity was being negotiated with the Pathet Lao, the Pathet Lao were still regarded even by Souvanna Phouma, the champion of neutrality, as an existential threat to the RLG. Yet in his speech he noted that the "risks" of negotiation are "less grave than they would if there were to be a rupture in the talks."⁵⁵² At the time even a future founding member of the CDIN, Sisouk Na

⁵⁴⁹ How else can one explain the fact that the champion of neutrality in the 1950s, Souvanna Phouma, oversaw the most ferocious bombing of his own country in what became the single largest airwar in history. Martin Stuart-Fox's romanticized portrayal of the tragic hero Souvanna Phouma is in this regard limited. The search for peace and neutrality proved to be illusory and it may indeed have been impossible for the country to avoid being dragged into the Vietnam War.

⁵⁵⁰ Both of the two Pathet Lao areas of control, Sam Neua and Phongsaly, had always been peripheral to the Lao state. During the colonial era, Phongsaly was ruled as a separate military region, separated from the Luang Prabang protectorate until March 1945. As for Sam Neua, it was ruled as part of Vietnam from 1893-1903. The fact that the Pathet Lao movement took root strongly in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands at the margins speaks volumes about the movement itself.

⁵⁵¹ *Fourth Interim Report of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Laos, May 17, 1957 – May, 31, 1958.* Cmnd. 541. (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1958), p 47.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*

Champassak, endorsed these negotiations.⁵⁵³ The Eisenhower administration's erroneous assessment that this strategy was tantamount to a new Czechoslovakia, ignored the fact that it was ultimately an anti-communist strategy, whatever one might say of its effectiveness. Any assertion that the elite leaders of the RLG were not anti-communist on their own terms is fundamentally flawed.

The "neutralist" label itself was perhaps the most problematic, being used differently by different writers to such an extent that it lost any meaning. Even so-called "leftist" parties like Bong Souvannavong's Peace and Neutrality (*Santiphap Pen Kang*) Party, which upset the 1958 supplemental elections, were opposed to communism. For one thing, the Peace and Neutrality Party was not a party, but only a new "group" of the Lao National Union Party, the first political party permitted by the French in the semi-colonial years, of which Bong Souvannavong remained a founding member.⁵⁵⁴ Yet neither the National Union Party nor the Peace and Neutrality wing supported communism. In fact, anti-communism was a key plank of the party's platform, as is indicated in US monitoring of the Lao press:

July 9 is the birthday of the Lao Huam Samphan [National Union] Party.

On July 9, 1959 Lao Huam Samphan party celebrated its thirteenth anniversary. The major tasks of the past twelve years were the development of the nation and the suppression of the communist and alien doctrines existing in Laos. Lao Huam Samphan said that these are only the first duties of the party and that the party must continue to work and struggle.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵³ Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 49. "The Pathet Lao rebellion was, after all, an internal political problem... To free the rebel leaders, Vientiane first had to include them in government as a bona fide minority group, and then separate them from their Communist mentors."

⁵⁵⁴ This is abundantly clear from a wide array of sources. See also Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 100. See further Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p. 181 who notes in the 1960 election Santhiphap ran on the National Union ticket. See further Joel Halpern, "Lao Project Paper no. 19: Laos Profiles," (1961), p. 34 for a brief biography of the leader of the Santhiphap party, Chan Vanthanouvong. See *ibid*, p. 52-53 for short biographical detail on additional Santhiphap members Maha Kou Souvannamedhi, Kouily Banchongphanit, Sisaat Pholsena, and Lou Boualavong. Three out of four of these persons did not speak French and Lou Boualavong was "arrested many times for his propaganda against the government, and is said to be very popular with the people." Maha Kou Souvannamedhi had been a monk for twenty years before disrobing and cooperating with the Japanese. Many members of Santiphap were former monks, *ibid*, p. 39-40.

⁵⁵⁵ US Information Service, *Press Summary of Lao language press and radio*, July 28, 1959, p. 2.

Nevertheless, the US labeled Bong's *Santiphap* group "leftist" because they supported the Neo Lao Hak Xat in the 1958 supplementary elections. The details surrounding Bong's brief support for the NLHX appear in the paper *Lao Hakxa Sat*, which reported that after the 1958 elections and the narrow (29 to 21) voting in of the CDIN government of Phoui Sananikone, Bong Souvannavong broke away from the *Santiphap* group which he founded and "distributed to all the deputies [of the National Assembly] a brochure on the danger which communism represents for the Kingdom..."⁵⁵⁶ In a special issue of the same paper, in an article entitled "Bong unmasks the communists before the National Assembly" Bong's stance becomes clear. He had supported the NLHX during the 1958 with his *Santiphap* group. He did this because he wanted to bring the NLHX under government control, similar to Souvanna Phouma.

Yet Bong did not condone any foreign entanglements, either free world or communist, in accord with his belief in strict neutrality. He likewise worked to secure the return of Phetsarath from Thailand for the same reason he supported the return of Souphanouvong: unification of all sides to bring true, lasting peace to the country. Yet Bong told the National Assembly, after the election he went to an evening soiree held by the NLHX where he discovered they were not actually neutral. Quinim Pholsena,⁵⁵⁷ a deputy *Santiphap* member asked Souphanouvong directly at the party to declare the NLHX were not communists to which Souphanouvong replied:

⁵⁵⁶ *Lao Hakxa Sat*, "His excellency Bong Souvannavong warns the deputies of the danger of communism in Laos" special issue September 1958, p. 3.

⁵⁵⁷ Born on November 18, 1915 in Pakse he became a leading figure associated with the neutralist movement. He served in the colonial administration, first as a secretary to a Résident then as a Résident at Pakse from 1944 to 1945. After the Japanese coup of March 9, 1945 he joined the Franco-Lao anti-Japanese resistance and fought the Issara as well. In November 1945 he was Chao Muong of Pakson. From 1947 to 1949 he served as provincial governor of Pakse. In 1949 he then served as provincial governor of Sam Neua. In the 1951 elections he was elected a deputy from Sam Neua, a seat he retained in the 1955 elections. In 1956 he was one of the cofounders of the *Santiphap Pen Kang* committee with Maha Boutdy, Chan Phao Vanthanouvong and Kou Souvannamethy. After the Kongle coup he rallied to the government of Souvanna Phouma and served as Minister of Interior and of Information. In October 1960 he led negotiations between this government and the NLHX. In November 1960 he was vice-president of the Committee of Neutrality and Unity with Souvanna Phouma and others. After the Battle of

“The NLHX which is issued of the former Pathet Lao party is a party which is supported by the communists. We could not declare that we are not. We apply the policy of gradual neutrality, and we cannot immediately declare ourselves strictly neutral. We must be supported still by the communists.”

Bong declared “so you are not neutrals. By supporting the communists you declare yourselves their ally! And the Santiphap group that I preside [over] could not share your point of view.”⁵⁵⁸

Bong then declared to the National Assembly that all objectives of the *Santiphap* group were accomplished with the return of Phetsarath and Souphanouvong. As a result, he dissolved the group as he said: “especially since I no longer support a party (NLHX) that could not declare itself strictly neutral and non-communist.”⁵⁵⁹ He made it a point to inform the National Assembly of the deception of the NLHX. He believed that a policy of strict neutrality would bring true peace yet he was firmly non-communist as well. In his “unmasking” he was trying to push back against the communist appropriation of peace and neutrality, which was not what he considered true neutrality. Bong Souvannavong represented in the Royal Lao Government the search for a third force, non-aligned in the Cold War.⁵⁶⁰ He was a highly principled politician who was trying to save his country.

Anti-communism was not the only popular political philosophy of the time. Neutralism was also widely popular at the time, and, especially when it was merged with Buddhism, could be as potent a force in Royal Lao Government politics as anti-communism. In 1954, right after the end of the First Indochina War, even stalwart “rightists” like Savang Vatthana and Katay Sasorith were pressuring the US to agree that Laos needed to be neutral, and that they did not want to see

Vientiane he served as Minister of Foreign Affairs to Souvanna Phouma’s government at Khang Khay and opened relations with the People’s Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. He retained this important post during the second coalition government. At the Geneva Conference in 1962 he led the unified Lao delegation. On April 1, 1963 he was assassinated in Vientiane. His death precipitated the fall of the second coalition and escalated war between the RLG and Pathet Lao. See Deuve, *Le Royaume du Laos, 1949-1964*, p. 346-347.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid, “His excellency Bong Souvannavong unmasks the communists before the National Assembly” p. 4.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁰ See further Sophie Quinn-Judge, *The Third Force in the Vietnam War: The Elusive Search for Peace 1954-1975* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

the country dragged into another war in Vietnam.⁵⁶¹ Anti-communism and neutralism were competing values, but few ever subscribed totally to one or the other (except the NLHX), rather it was always an inner, personal conflict ongoing among the elite over which value should prevail at any given time.⁵⁶² The “radical” Phetsarath’s views on peace were no doubt shared widely among the RLG elite:

My most cherished desire is to see peace completely reestablished in my country. I believe that twelve years of troubles and fratricide is more than enough. All Lao aspire to peace...

We must solve the Pathet Lao problem. A solution is possible on condition that Laos adopts an overall neutrality, that is, one which does not veer towards either of the two blocs.⁵⁶³

Several RLG leaders spoke of the Five Principles (*pancha sila*) of Jawahar Nehru as the basis of peaceful co-existence, like Souvanna Phouma and Phetsarath, who himself was not in government service then. Why else would the Royal Lao Government send a delegation to the Bandung Non-Alignment Conference in 1955, if not for peace and neutrality? The Lao delegate won assurances from the People’s Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, whom both pledged not to interfere in Laos; even though this initiative failed, it shows the priorities of the country’s leadership.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶¹ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, vol. XIII, part 1, Indochina*, eds. Neil H. Petersen and John P. Glennon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 299, where Savang reported to US Ambassador Heath: “[So] far as Laos concerned, [the First Indochina] war is virtually over... “Indochinese” war, therefore, henceforth [a] misnomer since Laos has achieved [national] unity and independence and is entering [a] quasinormal situation. In [the] absence [of] [Chinese] invasion, [the] remaining conflict is essentially [a Vietnamese] civil war. While continuing [to] accept treaty obligations to France and other [Associated States] entered into at [the] time independence [was] granted, *Laos does not consider itself obliged [to] expend [national] effort in [the] settlement [of the Vietnamese] civil war.*” Emphasis added.

⁵⁶² For example, at the opening of the National Assembly in May 1960, which was then dominated by CDIN deputies, King Savang Vatthana made a speech in support of neutralism – exactly right when the most strongly anti-communist government was formed. Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 145.

⁵⁶³ Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty*, p. 123-124. He also warned of foreign influence: “Foreign powers have meddled in this affair” and called for recognizing the PRC and DRV saying Lao should have “good relations with everyone,” p. 125.

⁵⁶⁴ Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p. 69-70. The RLG delegation was led by Katay Sasorith, a “rightist,” was Prime Minister at the time, accompanied by the foreign minister Phoui Sananikone. See further Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 315-316. The agreement between the RLG and DRV in which the latter pledged non-interference in the former was signed in the presence of Chou En-lai and Nehru at the conference.

Bong Souvannavong's promotion of neutralism was influenced by the French and Norodom Sihanouk, both of whom proposed several times to neutralize the former Indochina states after 1954.⁵⁶⁵ Bong was from one of the key loyalist families of the late 1940s, and had served in both the colonial administration and the early RLG as education minister. He was in the semi-colonial years generally viewed as a conservative.⁵⁶⁶ In the 1950s he was a founding member of the Literature Committee, became its the deputy head and again served as education minister, also having the health and culture portfolios. He remained a moderate, not a radical in the 1950s.⁵⁶⁷ This is evident from the pages of the Lao National Union Party newspaper, which in its issue of February 11, 1959, the header on the front page read as follows:

The name that is established is an unimportant thing, for example:

“good boss” is an evil person, “rich boss” is a poor person, generally. One who is named “patriot” [ຜູ້ຮັກຊາດ] is a person who protests the nation, or loves to insult. One who is named “protector of the nation” [ຜູ້ຮັກສາຊາດ] is a person who defends insults, is also possible.⁵⁶⁸

Bong's paper, of which he was still the director in 1959, was criticizing the misuse of nationalism by both the Pathet Lao and the CDIN, although his insight would have also been useful to the US State Department during the Eisenhower administration. In this way, Bong and his supporters were playing the important role of the minority, opposition party in the kingdom, vital to any real, functioning democracy. Yet the US had labelled him a “leftist,” which shows how such labels were seriously misused, by Westerners and Lao alike. More importantly, Bong Souvannavong is an excellent example of an anti-communist who nonetheless opposed aligning the country too closely

⁵⁶⁵ Souvanna Phouma later began to advocate for neutralization in 1960 while in Phnom Penh. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 436.

⁵⁶⁶ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 67 for an informative description of the conservative nature of the loyalists.

⁵⁶⁷ See further Clive Christie, *Ideology and Revolution in Southeast Asia 1900-1980: Political ideas of the Anti-Colonial Era* (Curzon, 2001), p. 152-156 which provides an account of Bong's philosophical treatise on what Christie calls “Buddhist democracy.” Bong notably criticized dictatorships (and the CDIN) for preventing individuals from accepting their own moral responsibility, which he believed was only fully realized in a democracy.

⁵⁶⁸ ລາວຮ່ວມສັມພັນ, *Union Nationale Lao*, February 11, 1959, p. 1. The paper was still printed at the New Laos (ລາວໃໝ່) publishing house.

with the US. His political career is an important counterpoint to other anti-communists who were avidly “pro-American,” such as the CDIN, thereby deepening understanding of the diverse forms of Lao anti-communism in the neo-colonial years.

Anti-Communist Buddhism

Buddhism was a major ideological battleground between the RLG and the Pathet Lao until 1975. While scholarly accounts have focused mainly on Pathet Lao efforts, the RLG made a determined effort to enlist Buddhism in the fight against communism, especially in the neo-colonial years.⁵⁶⁹ Buddhism was central to the RLG from its beginning. Since 1947 the constitution enshrined Buddhism as the state religion and the King was stipulated to be “a fervent Buddhist.” Buddhism influenced many aspects of RLG life. For example, Buddhism was taught in government schools as a “morals” course in the 1960s. There were several Buddhist-oriented political parties and newspapers active in the mid-1950s.⁵⁷⁰ Many educated elite viewed Buddhism as central to Lao civilization. Important monks appeared in the period such as Mahapan Anatho, who was highly influential on a generation of the sangha and opened several Buddhist schools across the RLG.⁵⁷¹ There were others who promoted veganism or socially-engaged Buddhism.⁵⁷² Besides this there were social-morality campaigns which swept the urban elite, especially in Vientiane in which women notably took a prominent role (see chapter seven). Thao Nhouy Abhay

⁵⁶⁹ Martin Stuart Fox and Rod Bucknell, “Politicization of the Buddhist Sangha in Laos” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 13, 1 (1982). See also Patrice Ladwig, “Special Operation Pagoda: Buddhism, Covert Operations, and the Politics of Religious Subversion in Cold War-Laos (1957-1960)” in eds. Vanina Bouté and Vathana Pholsena, *Changing Lives in Laos: Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State* (2017). For one account considering RLG anti-communist monks (although mainly after 1975) see Ian Baird, “Lao Buddhist Monks’ Involvement in Political and Military Resistance to the Lao People’s Democratic Republic Government since 1975” *Journal of Asian Studies*, (August 2012) vol. 71, no. 3.

⁵⁷⁰ The Sintham party was active in the mid-1950s. Later the Santiphap group appeared. I have not yet found any extent copy of the Sintham party newspaper.

⁵⁷¹ Justin McDaniel, *Gather Leaves and Lifting Words* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), p. 53-55.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*

himself made impassioned calls for reform of the sangha well before the threat of communism arose.⁵⁷³ Finally, the CDIN sought to rally mass support for its anti-communist crusade by raising the specter of “atheist” communists threatening to destroy Buddhism in the country. The CDIN undertook a variety of activities to that end including a reform of the sangha in May 1959.

Martin Stuart-Fox and Rod Bucknell in a study of the “politicization” of the RLG sangha, provide valuable insight into its “penetration” by the Pathet Lao, yet they did not give an accurate account of Lao anti-communism’s use of Buddhism, relying too uncritically on Pathet Lao sources.⁵⁷⁴ Patrice Ladwig has recently extended this analysis with his own oral history of some monks who sided with the Pathet Lao.⁵⁷⁵ There were important anti-communist monks who have received little attention. Foremost among these was the highly-revered sangharaja Dhammayana Maha Thela who spoke out strongly against communism.⁵⁷⁶ In Pathet Lao sources, the Vientiane

⁵⁷³ On Thao Nhouy’s reforms see Eugene Ford, *Cold War Monks: Buddhism and America’s Secret Strategy in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 133-134. My own analysis of Thao Nhouy’s reforms differ from Ford’s in as much as it is apparent that Thao Nhouy’s reforms did influence the later May 1959 Sangha law passed by the CDIN government. See Ryan Wolfson-Ford, “The Committee for Defense of National Interests: An anti-communist, Buddhist nationalist movement (1958-1960)” conference paper presented at Interrogating Buddhism and Nationalism workshop, Oxford University, January 2018.

⁵⁷⁴ Stuart Fox and Bucknell, “Politicization of the Buddhist Sangha in Laos.” They relied heavily on one Pathet Lao text: Khamtan, *ພະສົງລາວກັບການປະຕິວັດ* [“Lao monks and the revolution”] (n.p, 1976), third edition. They also used two Thai monks’ accounts, but no Lao anti-communist monk sources. For a very perceptive review of the Khamtan work see Phinith Savèng, Review, “Khamtan, Le sangha Lao et la révolution” in *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient*, tome 64, 1977. Ibid, p. 317-318 notes “We see the interest in his work *The Lao Sangha and the Revolution* ... especially because it brings some elements that can respond to questions of the existence and evolution of Buddhism in a revolutionary regime tending toward communism.” Ibid, p. 322: “Khamtan’s book is not a work of erudition: it is a manual of popularization destined for the Lao population and destined to rally the monks who remain up to now in the attitude of *upekkha* to new tasks required by the revolution.” Savèng notes that in this work Khamtan claimed that Buddhism spread in the world because it was “a religion having a more progressive character than other beliefs.” Khamtan sought to portray the Buddha as an “ordinary being” rather than a *deva*. He added that the Buddha’s leaving “his family and his refusal to seize power shows that he was in search of social progress.” He also fused modern scientific truth with the truth of Buddhism: “...the revolution is the only just way because it is the law of human evolution and the truth (satchadam) which no one can thwart.” Interestingly, Khamtan claimed during the golden age of Lan Xang that monks guided society and were at times higher than kings. The whole point of the sangha after 1975 was to create “engaged” monks who would play an active role in society as opposed to the RLG era monks who remained detached from the world.

⁵⁷⁵ Patrice Ladwig, “Special Operation Pagoda.” He balances this with some discussion of anti-communist monks.

⁵⁷⁶ See further Pha One Keo Sitthivong and Khamvone Boulyaphonh, *Great Monks of Luang Prabang: 1854-2007* (Luang Prabang: Anantha Publishing, 2011), p. 47-49.

Buddhist Institute was itself accused of spreading anti-communism, although a more nuanced picture does not emerge.⁵⁷⁷

Buddhism was at the root of a cultural anti-communism which emerged in the RLG since 1948. This perspective held that the Lao were naturally resistant to communism because of their culture, their traditions, and especially their observance of Buddhism. Moreover, the communists were seen as “atheists.” The CDIN made use of Buddhism very explicitly and it was part of the movement’s appeal. New members of the CDIN had to pledge to a belief in Buddhism (see below). At huge political rallies, the CDIN spoke of Buddhism as “the sole defense which can resist the communist ideology.”⁵⁷⁸ Yet as Stuart-Fox and Bucknell as well as Ladwig have argued this Buddhist cultural armor began to rot from the inside during the first coalition government (1957-1958) when Phoumi Vongvichit was given the Ministry of Religious Affairs portfolio and subsequently wielded influence over the sangha. The Pathet Lao’s most damaging claim was that there was an equivalence between Buddhism and socialism as both were critical of materialism, which was in basic opposition to the capitalist West (none more so than the US).⁵⁷⁹ RLG leaders and especially the CDIN government had a very real fear that communism would destroy Buddhism. Therefore, in their view rooting it out of the sangha was necessary to save the monkhood, to keep it from committing suicide by some young foolish monks who refused to obey their elders.⁵⁸⁰ If the Pathet Lao could subsequently win over the sangha to the view that the war was the fault of the RLG, the US and their supporters the result would be devastating.

⁵⁷⁷ Khamtan, *Lao monks and the revolution*.

⁵⁷⁸ *Lao Hakxa Sat*, no. 21, August 15, 1959, p. 7.

⁵⁷⁹ Thai intellectuals made similar efforts to articulate the similarities of Marxism and Buddhism. See Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 182-183.

⁵⁸⁰ Ladwig, “Special Operation Pagoda,” p. 102 notes only 82 radical monks defected to the Pathet Lao liberated zone during the Kongle Coup. They represented a small minority of the roughly 17,000 members of the sangha.

There was a unique text written at the time by an anti-communist monk, demonstrating that there was a well-articulated notion of anti-communism promoted by some members of the sangha. Written by Maha Singha Rakmanut and published by the government in 1961 or 1962, a unique work, titled *My views on Communism and the plan for revolution, taking the Kingdom Red*, illustrates perfectly how the RLG was supported by anti-communist monks among the sangha as the country descended into the Second Indochina War. The book purported to be a commentary by Singha on a captured Pathet Lao document, wherein he could expose the dangers of communism. The purported communist pamphlet extracts included in the text were printed with red ink and Singha's own commentaries were in black ink. He was highly critical of the political wing of the Pathet Lao, the Neo Lao Hak Xat,

The Lao Patriotic Front, I look at them as if [they] could be a party that is truly patriotic. Like [they] might not [have] foreign entanglements from the communist side. But when I look at their actions, their doings, and accordingly look at the performance of the leaders of the party, then it is really an organization founded in a certain way which has a massive scheme to infiltrate the village and indoctrinate the citizenry, the farmer, the trader, the gardener, the boss, the civil servant, the soldier, the policeman, to become a member. [They] perform their work in order to overturn the masters, the owners of the Lao land reaching up to the big bosses and his majesty the King of the Lao, to abandon the democratic system, with the King as the head, to become the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is the communist system.⁵⁸¹

Singha's commentary follows the basic essential rejection of the communists first voiced clearly by the Issara in 1948, yet by his time it was no longer an academic subject only. The possibility of revolution in the country itself was now real. Singha hoped to prevent such an enormously destructive act, given all the RLG elite had worked to build in the years since 1945. As the country spiraled into violence it is notable that Singha's effort did not rely on coercion, but only persuasion in his call to his fellow monks and the people. There was a major intellectual struggle between communism and anti-communism over the fate of the country whose outcome

⁵⁸¹ Maha Singha Rakmut, ຂ້າພະເຈົ້າເຫັນກອມມູນິສລາວ ແລະແຜນການປະຕິວັດເອົາພະຣາຊອານາຈັກໄປເປັນ ຕຸ້ງ [My Views on Lao communism and the revolutionary plan to take the Kingdom red] (Vientiane: Ministry of Propaganda, 1961-1962), p. 1.

was uncertain until the very end. Singha's work was part of the conflict as it concerned Buddhism. Thus, the RLG had strong support from some Buddhists and anti-communist monks, who felt strongly they had reason to be concerned about communism.

To that end, Singha hoped that everyone in the country could read his work in order to be alerted to the dangers of communism. He hoped to guide people away from the dangers of communism. He called on people to really think about what exactly the Pathet Lao were offering them.

I, your humble servant requests to bring it to the gaze of the reader, who is the farmer, the gardener, the monk, the novice, the trader, the head of the household, the boss, the civil servant, the soldier, the policeman, anyone who likes peace, who desires to defend the norm, the customs of our country, who wants to have law, to have bosses, whoever has a peaceful livelihood, whoever has brought forth prosperity, happiness, wealth, [and] goodness already.⁵⁸²

What would the Pathet Lao do to the country if they had the power? What were they opposed to exactly? Singha wanted to underline that, whatever problems there were in the Kingdom, there was a lot that was good, and right. He was expressly concerned about the "hidden danger" of the Pathet Lao saying of the Neo Lao Hak Xat that "the Lao communists hide inside."⁵⁸³ Of communism he was unequivocal, saying, it "is hugely dangerous to the life of the Lao [in] all the country."⁵⁸⁴

His commentary, Singha believed, would allow the reader to "understand well, with ease the danger of communism in Lao."⁵⁸⁵ He described his own commentary as: "the teaching of our own Lao government, in order to help the thinking of the reader to know clearly, see truly the danger of communism that there is to the life, the nation, our country."⁵⁸⁶ He said of the document

⁵⁸² Ibid, p. 2.

⁵⁸³ Ibid, p. 3.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 2.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 3.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 2.

it was “the teaching of the leaders of the Lao communists,” arguing this was proven by the way the communist material was written according to Pathet Lao spelling conventions, with words were spelled as they were pronounced or as he said of it “having no silent letters.”⁵⁸⁷ He contrasted this to his own spelling, which he said was “written according to the principles of Pali and Sanskrit philology.”⁵⁸⁸ While literary conventions seem like a slight matter given all the country was facing, nonetheless his comment speaks volumes about how those who sided with RLG saw themselves and their enemies. Singha wrote in a way that affirmed the very essence of Lao civilization, showing vividly its deep Indic roots. He set this as fundamentally opposed to the communists, who for their part sought to remove all foreign influences from the language, yet in the process resulted in something that was not really Lao.⁵⁸⁹

Contesting Democracy in the Shadow of Dictatorship

RLG democracy continued to deepen and strengthen in the first few years of the neo-colonial period (1955-1958), however, by 1960 the young democracy could no longer peacefully resolve all political conflicts in the Kingdom. From 1955 to 1958, the electorate was greatly expanded as women were given the right to vote for the first time. At the same time, fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution were expanded in 1957 (see chapter eight). General elections were held in 1955, which the Pathet Lao boycotted. Realizing their mistake, the Pathet Lao would not choose to sit out elections again (at least until 1965), which only had the effect of isolating and delegitimizing them. Democracy itself then became an important zone of contention as the Pathet

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 3.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ See further, Peter Koret, “Books of Search: The Invention of Traditional Lao Literature as a Subject of Study” in Grant Evans (ed.) *Laos: Culture and Society* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999) p. 246

Lao and the RLG competed over who could offer the best version of democracy to the people. Since 1954 the Pathet Lao claimed it was not able to participate in the RLG democracy freely or fairly. In negotiations it included in its list of demands for the RLG to have “truly democratic” institutions for it to be truly independent.⁵⁹⁰ They also called for a new electoral law and for Pathet Lao observers to be posted at every polling station in the country.⁵⁹¹ Later during negotiations leading up to the Geneva Conference of 1962, the Pathet Lao again called for new elections and a new National Assembly, seeking essentially to reverse the departure from democratic norms witnessed in the country since 1958.⁵⁹²

One foreign observer on the ground at the time observed Lao democracy first-hand. Anthropologist Joel Halpern described deputies of the National Assembly who would build up their popularity by dispensing favors which he likened to US political machines and American “pork barrel” politics.⁵⁹³ To Halpern, the deputy of the National Assembly was serving the essential function of acting as a mediator between the government bureaucracy and the average person. This was especially important at election time as candidates would tour the countryside making donations to local temples.⁵⁹⁴ They would also show propaganda films (supplied by USIS) at temple festivals which amused the crowds.⁵⁹⁵ While Halpern describe this as a “one-way channel of communication” he did note instances of villagers who called on their deputy for aid, such as one person who experienced a disaster then travelled to Vientiane to see their deputy for relief; or

⁵⁹⁰ Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 33. Sisouk had first-hand knowledge of the RLG-Pathet Lao negotiations.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵⁹² Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Washington D.C.: Office of Chief of Military History, 1984), p. 100. Oudone was a high-level member of the RLA in 1961 and took part in the negotiations personally.

⁵⁹³ Joel Halpern, “The Lao Elite” (1961), p. 62-65.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

another village who wrote letters to their deputy seeking a school be built.⁵⁹⁶ Yet elsewhere Halpern reported on the dislocation of peasants in the new democracy as quasi-feudal relations broke down with seemingly nothing to replace them. Villagers told him “the officials get all the benefits of foreign aid programs, while we receive nothing.”⁵⁹⁷ Those particular individuals felt they couldn’t change anything by elections or even petitioning the government.⁵⁹⁸

The major political conflict in the RLG before the outbreak of the Second Indochina War centered around the reintegration of the Pathet Lao into the nation. Negotiations had been ongoing for several years, but finally culminated in what became the November 1957 Vientiane agreements. Leading up to its passage in the National Assembly, RLG democracy seemed alive and well. When the National Assembly opened on May 11, 1957 there followed acrimonious debate among supporters and opponents of the agreement. There was a two-month crisis in which several governments were formed yet failed to secure sufficient votes in the National Assembly. After Souvanna Phouma’s government resigned, Katay Sasorith formed a government with a hardline policy that would declare the Pathet Lao to be rebels. Katay and his supporters perceived it had been a mistake to negotiate with the Pathet Lao as equals. Katay did not have enough support in the National Assembly and had to form a coalition with Bong Souvannavong’s National Union party. Yet Bong’s attacks on Katay in the press led to an unraveling of that coalition (“Katay in power means war, poverty and ruin for the country”).⁵⁹⁹ Next Bong tried to form a government, but this was also rejected by the National Assembly. Souvanna Phouma had to use a parliamentary

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 76.

⁵⁹⁸ See further Lao Kham Hom’s famous short story “The Politician” which may well illustrate important aspects of democracy in this period, although he was writing about Thailand. Khamsing Srinawak, *The Politician and Other Stories* Domnern Garden (trans.) and Herbert Phillips (ed.) (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Press, 2000).

⁵⁹⁹ Quoted in Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 57.

tactic to finally get elected and move forward with the agreements. This episode shows once again the importance of minority parties in the politics of the time.

The press also played an important role in events as some news outlets launched withering criticisms against the agreements and the government.⁶⁰⁰ Katay led a “merciless” campaign against the November 1957 Vientiane agreements in his newspaper, *La Voix du Peuple* warning of a dangerous optimism.

They [Pathet Lao] demand an enlarging of the government that is not in conformity with the principles of our constitution, nor with the Geneva Agreements. The government which has been mentioned in the joint statements of Prince Souvanna Phouma and Prince Souphannouvong does not call itself the Royal Government, nor the Government of his majesty the King of Laos. It calls itself the Coalition Government or the National Union Government. Tomorrow, it will be the Government of the Directory, the day after, an Imperial Government or a Triumvirate Government on the pattern of the U.S.S.R. Where shall we put the King, the people, and the nation? At that moment, my dear countrymen, you will say: Ah ha! I see!...Yes, but it will be too late!⁶⁰¹

The campaign had its effect as it raised serious doubts about the agreements. The Lao press was then strong enough to change government policy.⁶⁰² Yet there were political repercussions for Katay. He and Souvanna Phouma, allied since the Issara days, split over the agreements. Katay went to form a new political party (the Nationalists) not for spoils or personal differences, but clear-cut ideological ones. Yet the November 1957 agreements were adopted anyway: “Thunderous applause from floor and galleries greeted the announcement of the unanimous investiture vote.”⁶⁰³

⁶⁰⁰ For a vivid account of the press of the time see the opening chapter of Eugene Burdick and William Lederer’s *The Ugly American* (New York: Norton, 1958).

⁶⁰¹ Quoted in Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 52.

⁶⁰² The well-known fictional account of Laos, the *Ugly American*, in its opening chapters gives some idea of Lao press at the time.

⁶⁰³ Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 59. See further Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 333, which observes on debates concerning negotiations with the Pathet Lao in May 1957: “The debate demonstrated again the capacity of the Lao elite to debate grave questions affecting the survival of their country in a reasonable manner.”

In the 1955 elections people voted in record numbers.⁶⁰⁴ This resulted in a National Assembly divided by four major parties. The Progressive Party gained twenty seats, increasing by five seats since the 1951 elections. The Independent Party won nine seats, down from seventeen in the last elections. The Democrats won four seats, the same result as in 1951. The Lao National Union likewise won two seats, less than the three seats won in 1951. There were four deputies who were not aligned to any party. This resulted in a five week fight to form a coalition. By the time serious negotiations were progressing with the Pathet Lao in 1957 the National Assembly was already highly fragmented by a number of entrenched parties. When the 1958 supplemental elections were held two additional parties appeared which were more radical: the Neo Lao Hak Xat (Lao Patriotic Front) and the Santhiphap Pen Kang (Peace and Neutrality). The young RLG democracy was by this point too contested to completely resolve and settle all differences peacefully;⁶⁰⁵ competition was too intense and contributed to the spilling over of political conflicts into real violence and finally, all-out war.

In the May 1958 supplementary elections which followed the Pathet Lao stunned the world by winning nine seats in the National Assembly (15% of all seats). This was despite the Americans (and CIA) engaging in vote buying, which backfired as it proved the anti-American rhetoric of the Pathet Lao.⁶⁰⁶ Katay was also involved in voter fraud in the south setting an important precedent that degraded RLG democracy.⁶⁰⁷ These events show the power of democracy to determine the course of events, even in the neo-colonial period. Yet it was the Pathet Lao who protested against

⁶⁰⁴ For the 1955 elections see Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 326.

⁶⁰⁵ M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia Since c. 1200* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 285-287 notes something similar happened in Indonesia's 1955 elections, which were hotly contested but failed to deliver a clear mandate to any one party. Thereafter the democracy fell under various dictators.

⁶⁰⁶ US Ambassador Graham Parsons referred to this campaign as "Operation Booster Shot." For the CIA's involvement, see Thomas Ahern, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* (Washington D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006) p. 5.

⁶⁰⁷ Ian Baird, personal communication.

the closure of the National Assembly in January 1959, which they called the “assassination of democracy” or in a word: “dictatorship.”⁶⁰⁸ Halpern himself described the use of “police informers,” house searches and “enforced attendance at pro-government rallies.”⁶⁰⁹ Yet even as late as 1959 there were signs in the National Assembly of a reformist mood as deputies began to contact their rural constituents; some deputies even spoke out about military abuses under the state of emergency.⁶¹⁰ These self-correcting moves on the part of the RLG legislature came too late. Finally, the general elections of April 1960 were of enormous significance to the state of RLG democracy, but to fully understand them one must first consider the CDIN.

Committee for the Defense of National Interests

This section presents a reconsideration of the single most important national, political and cultural force in the RLG in the neo-colonial years, the CDIN. It focuses on specific government policy, as well as the movement’s anti-establishment struggle against the “Old Ones” (i.e. older RLG political leaders in power). There is also a consideration of two crucial interventions made by the CDIN that were of fundamental importance to anti-communism and democracy in the country. The CDIN introduced a new version of anti-communism that made imperialism the chief concern, yet that was also clouded by ethnic tensions. As for the democracy, they fundamentally degraded it even as they pledged to safeguard and restore it from enemies within and without. Apart from its anti-colonial politics, its cultural efforts and its support by King Savang Vatthana,

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 67. Ibid, p. 68: “this new violation of democracy.” See further, Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 377-378, which notes that Phoui Sananikone first held a vote among Rally for the Lao People members to gauge support for closing the National Assembly. Twenty-six of out twenty-eight members voted in favor of the measure to close the National Assembly. The RPL was responsible for this development in RLG democracy.

⁶⁰⁹ Halpern, “The Lao elite,” p. 44.

⁶¹⁰ Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 381. The state of emergency in relation to the early stages of the Second Indochina War was declared country-wide on September 4, 1959.

the CDIN deserve to be taken seriously if for no other reason than for the fact that it was a CDIN government in power on the morning of May 19, 1959 when the Second Indochina War broke out in Laos.

The CDIN, (ກັມກັນການປ້ອງກັນປະໂຍດຂອງຊາດ), or the “Lao protectors of the nation” (ລາວຮັກສາຊາດ) as they were more commonly known in Lao were the neo-colonial era RLG anti-communist equivalent to the communist Pathet Lao or their political arm the Neo Lao Hak Xat. Both movements were strongly nationalist, patriotic forces on opposite sides of the Cold War. The CDIN touted a “Right and Positive Nationalism” as they led a moral crusade to save the country. They frequently spoke of “good and loyal citizens” at political rallies whom were the true patriots of the country. More importantly, as the name implied, the Committee for Defense of *National Interests* presented itself as the only organization to put aside special (personal, parochial) interests for the higher interests of the nation. To them, the nation was sacred; as such they began the construction of the *Anousavaly* (ອະນຸສາວະຣີ, “monument”), the RLG monument of the dead.

The CDIN movement has been misinterpreted by scholars who demonize the movement as a puppet of the US, “no more than a U.S.-front organization” or simply a US “creation.”⁶¹¹ What

⁶¹¹ Len Ackland, “No Place for Neutralism: the Eisenhower Administration and Laos,” in (eds.) Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 149. Ibid refers to Phoumi Nosavan as a CIA “protégé.” Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 103 suggests strongly the US (the CIA) created the CDIN. Stuart-Fox in particular cites instructions US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles gave to the US Embassy in Vientiane to “encourage such a group of ‘new faces’” a month before the CDIN was formally established and organized according to RLG statutes on civic organizations. Yet his reading is not the only possibility; the US may have simply been aware of the group before it was formally created. See also Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 325 which claims the CIA simply “set up” the CDIN. See further Roger Hilsman, *To Move A Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967) p. 114-115, which has been widely cited to claim the CIA created the CDIN. But what Hilsman actually wrote was that the CIA *helped* Lao anti-communists create the organization: “the CIA apparently proposed helping the Lao organize... a patriotic organization that would work to give Lao national unity and direction.” Ibid p. 115, Hilsman was unaware of the indigenous roots of Lao anti-communism thus he perceived the CDIN could only possibly serve foreign interests: “there is a profound difference between an organization espousing the goals of patriotism that is spontaneous and totally native and an organization which, while espousing such goals, still derives its impetus and its subsistence from interests that are,

scholars have missed or otherwise discounted is Lao agency in creating the CDIN – the CIA or any other foreign power or entity could never have created such a powerful movement out of nothing or entirely by themselves. The CDIN like Lao anti-communism generally had indigenous roots that have been largely ignored. The reality then was a complex interaction rather than a puppet and puppet-master pulling the strings. Given the circumstances such a movement (or something similar) likely would have appeared regardless of US support; the US could only act to facilitate and support an already existing collective. There is no denying the CDIN and CIA were in contact and the former received support from the latter (as well as the PEO).⁶¹² Oudone Sananikone, a founding member of the CDIN, freely acknowledged such support.⁶¹³ But to view the CDIN on their own terms one must view them separately from US actions in the country. Following this line of reasoning, the most intriguing aspect of the CDIN may be that the polarizing of the RLG politics in the neo-colonial years was not some scheme of US officials, but was led by the CDIN who were hyper-nationalist, anti-communist and strongly Buddhist.

The CDIN was founded on June 17, 1958 in the wake of the government's defeat in the supplementary elections of May 1958, which was viewed as a disaster for the governing parties.⁶¹⁴ The CDIN had two central planks: to clean up government corruption and to destroy communism. They thereby sought to coopt the anti-government rhetoric of the Pathet Lao that had proven so successful in winning elections while at the same time rooting out all communism. They claimed

inescapably, foreign." Others have glossed over what Hilsman actually wrote to the claim the CDIN was a CIA "creation." See Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, p. 149 "the CIA was instrumental in the creation of the CDNI." He cites Hilsman as his source. See also Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos*, p. 159 footnote 3 who similarly cited Hilsman to say "the impetus for the creation of the CDIN came from the CIA." See further Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 357.

⁶¹² Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, p. 6-11, 21, 106. See further Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos*, p. 159, where he notes an interview with the neutralist Khamchan Pradith who spoke of CIA support for the CDIN.

⁶¹³ Oudone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 47-48. "We always needed funds for transportation and for our public assistance and information projects and the Americans, notably the CIA, were usually able to help significantly."

⁶¹⁴ Oudone Sananikone, who was secretary general of the CDIN, said Inpeng Suryadhay was "the original organizer of the movement." See *ibid*, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 47.

not to be a political party and held no seats in the National Assembly until the general elections of April 1960, but were able to get four ministerial posts in the government of Phoui Sananikone formed on August 18, 1958; by January 1959 they gained three more ministers making it a CDIN dominated government.⁶¹⁵ The biggest fear at the time was that when the next general elections were held (1960) the Pathet Lao would win a sweeping victory without some change – the CDIN struggled for the next two years to ensure that did not happen. The CDIN refused to accept the Pathet Lao’s apparent transformation from an armed insurgency to a peaceful political party; and therefore took extraordinary measures to deny them full participation in the RLG democracy. The CDIN were convinced that if the Pathet Lao was elected to power they would destroy the Western liberal parliamentary democracy, building a totalitarian (democratic centralism) regime on its ashes.

The new government began by purging communist sympathizers from the administration.⁶¹⁶ It then declared a state of emergency, closing the National Assembly in January 1959 in response to a North Vietnamese invasion at Xepon on December 14, 1958, which became the trailhead of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.⁶¹⁷ By doing so, the CDIN also strengthened its

⁶¹⁵ The RLG constitution did not require members of the cabinet to be deputies in the National Assembly. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 333. The three CDIN members added to the cabinet in January 1959 were all from the RLA: Phoumi Nosavan, Ouane Rathikoun and Oudone Sananikone. This was as a result of the state of emergency. The original four CDIN ministers were Khamphan Panya, Inpeng Suryadhay, Thao Leuam Rasasombat and Sisouk Na Champassak.

⁶¹⁶ The RLG had been penetrated by communists. In 1956 there were 64 Lao communist cells in the Royal Lao Army and 88 cells in the RLG administration. See Goscha, “Vietnam and the world outside,” p. 168. For the purge see Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 67: “Under its aegis, Communist sympathizers and long-time fellow travelers of the Pathet Lao were dismissed from government service.” See further Halpern’s interview with the new CDIN foreign minister Khamphan Panya in Halpern, “Lao Project Paper no. 19,” p. 55. In the interview, Halpern notes that Khamphan’s aide boasted that there were “no former Pathet Lao” in the ministry. The unnamed aide added: “No one is permitted to work in the Foreign Affairs Ministry who does not share our ideals and principles. We would rather take a young person as a clerk and train him, than a former member of the Pathet Lao.” Moreover, the aide stated, “all members of the foreign ministry are members of the CDIN because the Minister is a member.” This last comment is likely why Halpern spoke of people being forced to attend rallies against their will.

⁶¹⁷ See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 375-376, who further claims the border dispute was planned in advance by the North Vietnamese. Major General Oudone Sananikone also dated the first North Vietnamese incursion that seized Xepon to the last week of December 1958 from his recollection of events. See Oudone, *The*

hold on the cabinet and excluded NLHX deputies from any role in government.⁶¹⁸ By July 1959 the CDIN had branches in Xainyaburi, Phongsaly, Attapeu, Champasak and Savannakhet.⁶¹⁹ The new government sought to defend the “democratic institutions” of the country, which were threatened with inevitable destruction under communist rule, using a variety of means including reforming the administration, rooting out corruption, ending speculation and inflation in the economy, changing the election law, creating new pro-government propaganda (i.e. radio), penetrating the rural areas via a program of rural aid, reforming the sangha and finally proposing to outlaw communism, which was frequently labeled a foreign ideology.⁶²⁰ The CDIN fundamentally altered the RLG across a range of fields (urban-rural relations, religion, democracy) during a short time. Moreover, the influence of the CDIN cast a long shadow on the remaining years of the RLG. Its influence could still be felt across the Kingdom until 1975.

The founding members of the CDIN were civil servants, army officers and students returning from study abroad. Most observers have described the movement as distinctly “young” presenting a second generational divide in the kingdom, similar to the first that had appeared in the late 1940s. The CDIN in fact referred to themselves as the “Young Ones” in contrast to the

Royal Lao Army, p. 48. Around this time the South Vietnamese government made an agreement with the RLG which permitted South Vietnamese forces to “operate within 10 kilometers inside the border of Laos to protect South Vietnam from infiltration.” See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 380, 579.

⁶¹⁸ Sisouk explained that Phoui Sananikone and the CDIN only got support to shut the National Assembly from the Rally for the Lao People deputies who were hoping to be rewarded for their support by being included in the cabinet.

⁶¹⁹ Oudone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 47 notes that 1,200 officials from the provinces attended the first party congress in Vientiane.

⁶²⁰ There was a draft anti-communism law that was dropped in November 1957 when the first coalition government with the Pathet Lao was agreed. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 338. See further *ibid*, p. 373, which notes that after the supplemental elections of May 1958 discussion of this anti-communism law was revived. For more on the CDIN government see Phoui Sananikone’s five-year economic plan (1959-1964), Kingdom of Laos, *Plan de développement économique et social: période de 5 ans du 1er Juillet 1959 au 30 Juin 1964* (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, 1959). The new CDIN government also created the first Department of Rural Affairs. See further “Powers and functions of Chaokhouang, Chaomuong and Tasseng,” William W. Sage Collection On Laos, archived at: <http://hdl.handle.net/2286/R.A.166942>.

failed leadership of the RLG who were the “Old Ones.”⁶²¹ They saw themselves as representing the future of the country. As such the CDIN led an extended campaign against not only the Pathet Lao, but also leading RLG politicians and officials. Not only had the Pathet Lao made political gains from official corruption and misuse of aid, but these harmful practices continued unabated. CDIN accounts spoke of “sudden fortunes dubiously acquired by particular ministers and high officials.”

The young men saw that as long as certain families continued to divide titles and prerogatives among themselves, as long as ministerial posts either cloaked the most disgraceful trafficking or were traded about like currency, as long as the wealthy in Vientiane flaunted their luxuries before the eyes of an astounded populace, any anti-Communist campaign would be pointless. These public scandals were better Communist propaganda than tons of newspapers and pamphlets.⁶²²

The above quote has been widely cited to prove the “family politics thesis.” But accepting the comment uncritically misses the context in which the CDIN operated: by that comment they were specifically attacking their political opponents (Katay Sasorith, Souvanna Phouma, and Phoui Sananikone among others). A struggle between the Young Ones, members of the CDIN and the Old Ones – established RLG politicians – would outlast the CDIN movement itself.⁶²³ Some criticisms of the Old Ones by the CDIN were damning: “their love of comfort, their taste for profit, and their indifference had degraded this young democracy until it was virtually meaningless.”⁶²⁴ Sisouk Na Champassak observed that the only reason Phoui Sananikone offered the CDIN to join his government in August 1958 was so that they would be less able to criticize it as members.⁶²⁵ Sisouk, who was a cabinet member of this government, noted it was characterized by rampant infighting that only came to a head in December 1959 when the CDIN finally dispensed entirely

⁶²¹ Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 63: “we were anxious to keep ourselves disassociated from the senior politicians, the “Old Ones” whom we held responsible for past errors and the present situation.”

⁶²² *Ibid*, p. 63.

⁶²³ Specifically, the Young Nationalists group in the National Assembly during the 1960s led by former CDIN member Sisouk Na Champassak.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 64.

⁶²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 66.

with elected politicians and formed the first dictatorship in RLG history.⁶²⁶ They were young, ambitious technocrats and military men who thought they could solve the country's problems themselves.⁶²⁷ The CDIN are remembered now as an anti-communist movement, but their first act was to declare war on "corruption."⁶²⁸

The CDIN were moral crusaders, fighting against the "moral crisis" in the country, and abrogated to themselves the special mission to save the country, echoing the Issara.⁶²⁹ The key members included General Sounthone Pathammavong⁶³⁰ (honorary president and founder of the RLA), Khamphan Panya⁶³¹ (foreign minister), Sisouk Na Champassak (information, youth and

⁶²⁶ Ibid, p. 66: "mutual distrust and desire to eliminate the rival prevailed within the new cabinet, as each faction waited eagerly for the other to make the slightest slip." "crises, quarrels, parliamentary disputes, and threats of resignation" characterized the new government. See further p. 69.

⁶²⁷ Another CDIN member, Oudone Sananikone said the real source of the CDIN's power was the military. See *ibid*, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 47.

⁶²⁸ For another widely-cited quote on corruption see Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 64: "Corruption and extortion in the customs, banking, foreign trade, police and other administrative departments were commonplace. Black-market deals in American aid dollars reached such proportions that the Pathet Lao needed no propaganda to turn the rural population against the townspeople. The Chinese of Hong Kong and Bangkok and a few Lao officials profited from the American aid, while the poor Lao for whom it was intended stood by helplessly. Officially Vientiane of course knew nothing about this prodigious fraud, though the entire city seemed to be involved."

⁶²⁹ The CDIN used the phrase "crisis of morality" in regard to misuse of aid, *Lao Hakxa Sat*, October 1958, no. 5, p. 3.

⁶³⁰ Born in Vientiane in 1911, he was most famous for founding the Royal Lao Army on March 23, 1950. Prior to that he studied at the Lycée Pavie from 1928 to 1932 and then served as in the colonial administration, first as a teacher (1933-1941) and then as Chao Muong of Muong Xieng. He then joined the anti-Japanese guerrilla resistance and opposed the Issara. In 1947 he served as provincial governor of Savannakhet. In 1950 he became the commander-in-chief of the RLA at the rank of colonel. In January 1959 he became Minister of Defense, as one of the first military officers to serve in the cabinet. By June of that year he was promoted to rank of General. By the end of 1960 he requested leave from his post, which he did not resume until 1962. He retired in 1972. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 367-368. See further Halpern, "Lao Project Paper no. 19," p. 107.

⁶³¹ Born in Luang Prabang in 1917, Khamphan Panya had studied in Saigon, Phnom Penh, and Hanoi where he graduated from the School of Forestry. He then went on to study in France where he received a law degree. He returned to serve in the Forestry Bureau in 1942, later becoming the chief of the division. In 1945 he was the assistant to the provincial governor of Vientiane when he then aided the Japanese after their seizure of power. He next served the Issara government before rallying to loyalist forces a few days before the reconquest of Vientiane. Crown Prince Savang Vatthana protected him from punishment after France's return. At this time he became assistant to the Secretary General of the Royal Palace. He thereafter served in a number of posts as Director of Protocol for the Foreign Ministry, Assistant to the Secretary General of the French Union, led an economic mission in Saigon and served as RLG Ambassador to India. He also represented the RLG on the international stage. By June 1958 he cofounded the CDIN and became foreign minister. In 1959 he also held the Education and Information portfolios. In December 1959 he participated in the first coup led by Phoumi Nosavan against Phoui Sananikone. In Kou Abhay's care-taker government he retained the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs. In the Boun Oum government he was Minister of Public Works. From 1962-1975 he served as a top diplomat being Ambassador to

sports), Inpeng Suryadhay⁶³² (justice), Thao Leuam Rasasombat⁶³³ (finance and economic affairs), Prince Sopsaisana⁶³⁴ (religion), General Ouane Rathikoun,⁶³⁵ Colonel Phoumi Nosavan, Colonel

France, the US and the UN. In 1975 he fled to France. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 343. See further, Halpern, "Lao Project Paper no. 19," p. 55-56 which includes an interview with Khamphan.

⁶³² Born in 1923 in Khong, Champassak he earned a Bachelor's Degree in 1946. He then was an instructor in the primary schools from 1946 to 1949. During this time he became Director of teacher training. From 1949 to 1952 he studied in France at the Études de Droit et Sciences Politiques in Paris where he earned a Public Service degree. From 1953 to 1955 he served as first secretary to RLG Ambassador to the US. From 1955 to 1958 he was Director of Information and Propaganda services as well as Secretary General to the cabinet. In the 1958 supplementary elections he ran as a deputy for Champassak, but lost. He was later Director of the National Center of Documentation which was a security service for the RLG. He was an active member of the Junior Chamber with others including Sopsaisana. In 1958 he was Secretary of State to Justice and in 1959 he was Secretary of State to Education. In August 1960 he served as Minister of Finances and Economy in the neutralist government of Souvanna Phouma. By 1962 he was vice-president of the National Assembly which he remained until 1964. From then until 1971 he was Minister of Plans and Cooperation as well as Justice. From 1971 to 1975 he was RLG Ambassador to the UK. In 1975 he fled to France. Afterwards he was active anti-LPDR activities along the Thai border. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 340-341. See further Halpern, "Lao Project Paper no. 19," p. 56.

⁶³³ Born in Savannakhet in 1923, he was a brother-in-law of Boun Oum. His father worked for the French Consul in Ubon, Thailand. He was educated in Vientiane and Phnom Penh. He was also a Catholic, one of the few to rise to top positions in the RLG. He then served in the colonial administration in the Forestry Bureau in Attapeu. He later became deputy governor of Pakse. Next he was cabinet chief to the Prime Minister (Phetsarath) of Luang Prabang from 1942 to 1944. In 1945 he joined the Issara movement, but by 1947 he had returned to serve in the loyalist Souvannarath government as Minister of Finance in 1947. In Boun Oum's government he was Minister of Interior and Justice in 1949. In Phoui Sananikone's government he was Economic Minister in 1950. In the 1951 and 1955 elections he was elected as a deputy from Savannakhet. He also served as secretary of the National Assembly at the time. He held many posts concurrently including as Ambassador to Thailand from 1951 to 1955. In 1953 he served as Minister of Health and later in 1956 served as Minister of Finance and Public Welfare. From 1956 to 1957 he was charge d'Affaires to France and then became Ambassador to Cambodia. In 1959 he became Minister of Finance. In the Kou Abhay government he was Minister of Finances, Economy and Agriculture. Later he was Ambassador to Thailand and France. For an interview with him, see Halpern, "Lao Project Paper no. 19," p. 35-37. On the other hand Deuve writes that he was actually born in Ubon and only adopted by a family in Pakse. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 349.

⁶³⁴ Born in Vientiane, he earned a Bachelor's Degree. He then had an internship in France. Later he was an economic attaché in Saigon. In 1958 he cofounded the CDIN. In 1959 he was chief of protocol to the Palace. From 1961 to 1962 he was Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs in the Boun Oum government. From 1962 to 1964 he was Ambassador to Cambodia. In 1975 he was a refugee in France. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 366.

⁶³⁵ Born in 1922 in Luang Prabang he studied at the Luang Prabang Groupe Scolaire and college from 1930 to 1938. He enlisted in the French Union Army in 1941. By 1945 he was a corporal in the anti-Japanese resistance before rallying to the Issara. He led an Issara guerrilla unit from a base south of Paklay. In 1950 he joined the Royal Lao Army as a lieutenant. In 1952 he was promoted to captain, and in 1953 to commander. By 1955 he was commander of military region I (Luang Prabang). In 1958 he cofounded the CDIN. In 1959 he was promoted to brigadier general. In August 1960 as commander of military region I he supported Souvanna Phouma's government yet by November he had rallied to Phoumi Nosavan's cause. From 1965 to 1969 he was commander in chief of the RLA. In 1973 he was elected a deputy. In 1975 he was sent to re-education. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1965*, p. 354. See further Halpern, "Lao Project Paper no. 19," p. 106-107.

Bounthieng Venevongsot, Colonel Bounpone Maktheparak,⁶³⁶ Colonel Oudone Sananikone,⁶³⁷ Ngon Sananikone, and Oukham Phomvongsa. Savang Vatthana also played a leading role in the movement. There were some ex-Issara among them, as well as former loyalists, representing a synthesis of the earlier factions. The CDIN are responsible for increasing the role of the military in RLG politics to the detriment of democracy. One can also condemn them as undemocratic for wielding power and influence even though they won no election until 1960. The CDIN had a complicated relationship to democracy, which they claimed to be “safeguarding” from forces they felt sought to overthrow the democratic system itself.

The CDIN’s manifesto called for a clean government to restore the faith of the people. In an interview shortly after claiming “full powers” and instituting emergency rule on January 14, 1959 Phoui Sananikone responded to the question of how to address internal agitation to which he replied “detach little by little the population from the subversive elements by persuasion, which will be born by more frequent contacts between the people and the representatives of the authority.”⁶³⁸ He added “encouraging results were already obtained in this domain, which shows this method is good.”⁶³⁹ The Prime Minister concluded “we will continue to declare to the peasant mass the real objectives of the sowers of troubles. Those will ultimately be isolated [and] separated

⁶³⁶ Born in Pakse, in 1945 he was a sergeant in the anti-Japanese guerrilla resistance. In 1950 he transferred to the Royal Lao Army. In 1958 he was president of the CDIN; he was then at the rank of colonel. He rallied to Phoumi Nosavan after Kongle’s coup. By 1969 he was commander of military region III (Savannakhet). In 1973 he became commander in chief of the RLA. In 1975 he was sent to a re-education camp. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1964*, p. 337.

⁶³⁷ In 1941 he was working as a nurse when he fled to Thailand during the Franco-Thai war. He then entered into the service of the Thai government. In 1945 he was a member of the Lao Pen Lao and later joined the Issara where he was Director of Propaganda. He returned from exile in 1949 and was integrated into the Royal Lao Army in 1950 as a staff officer. In 1957-1958 he was director of civic action. In 1959 he was a lieutenant colonel and secretary of state to social affairs. During Kongle’s coup he was briefly under arrest and only belatedly supported Phoumi Nosavan. By 1969 he was a general and chief of staff of the Royal Lao Army. In 1973 he was deputy commander in chief of the RLA. In 1975 he went to the US as a refugee. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1964*, p. 355. See further Oudone, *The Royal Lao Army*. For an interview from 1959 see Halpern, “Lao Project Paper no. 19,” p. 103-105.

⁶³⁸ *Lao Hakxa Sat*, no. 8, January 15, 1959, p. 4.

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.*

from the population, like strangers.”⁶⁴⁰ In the same interview Phoui discussed the government’s efforts at electoral reform which he said “will be to avoid fraud and inconsistencies which happened during the elections of mid-1958.”⁶⁴¹ Phoui instead proposed a “formula, better adapted to the mentality of the Lao voter and his degree of political formation.”⁶⁴² In the general elections of April 1960 these electoral reforms would include higher education requirements and deposits for candidates, which would effectively limit the NLHX to nine candidates in the election. More deeply, efforts to reform election laws by both the CDIN and established politicians demonstrated a growing frustration among the elite with voters who did not vote for the right candidate. By mid-1958 there was a low opinion of the average voter among the elite in general.

New Breed of Anti-Communism

The CDIN represented a new phase in the development of Lao anti-communism. Its members presented a new analysis of the communist threat then menacing the country, thereby revising anti-communist thinking which had not significantly changed since the Issara. In the new CDIN version, the threat was no longer academic, but real. Moreover, it explained communism in distinctly imperialist terms, and was chiefly concerned with Chinese and Vietnamese expansionism. The CDIN saw the Cold War as a struggle for survival of the tiny Lao state against a mighty Red Sino-Vietnamese tide. For the CDIN, the Cold War in Laos was not a clash of capitalism and Marxism, neither of which was well-established in the country itself, but was in fact a much older conflict in which the Lao fought against the Sino-Vietnamese under the guise of a global Cold War, which was merely a pretext. Marxism served to mask the old idea of Sino-Viet

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid.

⁶⁴² Ibid.

conquest of the Lao. Ethnic tensions were a key element of the new breed of anti-communism, not present in earlier analysis. The CDIN drew on a deep-well of hatred for the Vietnamese, which existed since the French colonial period and combined these with new fears about a resurgent China. Furthermore, the CDIN now took full cognizance of the important role that minority peoples played on the Lao-Sino-Vietnamese borders.

Sisouk Na Champassak, who was information minister in the CDIN government, gave an important account of the new thinking. He spoke of China saying it “had always represented a permanent menace to Indochinese countries.”⁶⁴³ Its massive population was now seeking “to expand toward the south” especially after the French had left. They did so according to Sisouk by “two powerful levers: Communism and nationalism.”⁶⁴⁴ He then noted how this new ideology spread to colonized countries (Vietnam), seized upon by “politically immature peoples...who were ready to use any means to put an end” to colonial oppression.⁶⁴⁵ Yet he called attention to the Marxist rhetoric which served as a means to disguise a real desire to dominate: “Under Marxist terminology and anti-European slogans these men hid the covetousness with which the Tonkinese have always regarded their Indochinese neighbors.”⁶⁴⁶ Sisouk portrayed the Vietnamese similarly to the Chinese, as an over-populated state looking to aggressively expand to dominate its neighbors: “Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese swarming from the Tonkin Delta have always sought space in the less densely populated lands on the western slope of the Annamite chain.”⁶⁴⁷ Sisouk then included a quote allegedly from a Vietnamese newspaper: “We will have the space we need... One day Indochina will no longer be a collection of separate and distinct countries, but

⁶⁴³ Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 21.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

a single country impregnated with Vietnamese blood...⁶⁴⁸ Regardless of whether Sisouk's source was accurate, it demonstrates the alarming level of ethnic tension that informed CDIN anti-communism and the lengths to which the CDIN would go to fan the flames of ethnic hatred. Sisouk concluded "Today, the vocabulary has undoubtedly changed, but the old conquering instincts remain the same."⁶⁴⁹ To him the appeal to Marxism was false, hiding a real desire to conquest, a new imperialism. The Pathet Lao were themselves nothing more than pawns, a tool for Vietnamese expansion into Laos, "a pretext and a lever for future conquest."⁶⁵⁰

This development in Lao anti-communism needs to be contextualized. Recent research on North Vietnamese activity in Laos has shown the Vietnamese saw themselves not only as "liberating" the Lao from foreign rule, but also as modernizing an otherwise "backward" people.⁶⁵¹ These efforts met a paternalistic duty "to take care of Laos" and had links to earlier "civilizing impulses" in Vietnamese history.⁶⁵² To that end, starting in the early 1950s the North Vietnamese operating on Lao soil "built state organizations, put the Lao...revolutionary arm[y] together, and often administered, *de facto*, party and government affairs... The Vietnamese helped create police services, tax codes, economic structures, in short revolutionary states based on the Sino-Vietnamese communist model."⁶⁵³ Thus the Pathet Lao sought to capture administrative control of the two provinces (Phongsaly and Sam Neua) they were only supposed to regroup in prior to reintegration with the national forces by the terms of the Geneva Accords of 1954. In practice

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 22, 24.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 24.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 30. Sisouk also condemns Souphanouvong for his pro-Vietnamese attitude, which he claimed "scarcely conformed to the Laotian character and tradition." Ibid, p. 25. Another CDIN member, Oudone Sananikone spoke of Souphanouvong similarly: "Souphanouvong had become little more than a tool of his North Vietnamese sponsors and an instrument of North Vietnamese policies, just as the Pathet Lao forces had become a vassal army of North Vietnamese aggression in Indochina." See Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 110.

⁶⁵¹ Goscha, "Vietnam and the world outside," p. 141-142, 148, 156-157. The North Vietnamese saw themselves "as being on the South East Asian cutting edge of a wider, modern revolutionary civilization."

⁶⁵² Ibid, p. 142-143.

⁶⁵³ Ibid, p. 150-151.

Vietnamese cadres learned Lao and ethnic minority languages and then were sent to live and work in the village; some used Lao names and married or were adopted into the village headman's family.⁶⁵⁴ The CDIN would later describe this as colonization.⁶⁵⁵ The CDIN responded to this in ways that played into the development of RLG ideology.

The other key aspect of the CDIN brand of anti-communism was to bear witness to the real problems of the communist system, and to list the crimes and evils of communists and communist regimes as they existed in neighboring countries and certain areas of the country itself that had fallen under communist rule.⁶⁵⁶ Just as the analysis was no longer academic, now the flaws of the communist system were not observed in distant Russia, but on the borders and within the national territory. Sisouk was critical of life in the “liberated zones” and accused the Pathet Lao of “forced recruitment when necessary.”⁶⁵⁷ But Sisouk also gave a dismal account of the People's Republic of China when he visited in August 1956 in the entourage of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. In his account there was no democracy in China, and popular rallies were nothing more than elaborate performances. On his arrival Sisouk said “at once we saw a sample of the iron discipline under which the Chinese people had been living for seven years.”⁶⁵⁸ The crowds that greeted him

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 155-156.

⁶⁵⁵ Of course, Goscha compares the Vietnamese in Laos to Catholic missionaries as opposed to “historic Vietnamese imperialism ‘dressed in red’” – although missionaries and imperialism were not separate in French colonial contexts.

⁶⁵⁶ This was distinct from some Westerners who visited the Pathet Lao controlled “liberated zone” and praised the “regime of iron” under which people lived (in which incidently the shops were empty and the town looked “deserted”). See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 494.

⁶⁵⁷ Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 33. See further *ibid* p 120-123. On p. 120 Sisouk recounts life under the Pathet Lao: “When the Lao-Viets made Sam Neua their temporary capital, the people lived under a rule of coercion and fear. It was a time of informants and summary executions, as well as of annoying and inconsiderate regulations. When the enemy left, they took many village children and adolescents with them across the border to indoctrinate them and teach them how to handle arms. The people of Sam Neua had not forgotten these outrages, and were little moved by rebel propaganda.” Further on p. 122 he describes refugees who fled the “liberated zones” which he said was a rejection of the Pathet Lao: “the number of these men and women who, rather than submit to the Communist rebels’ law, abandoned their fields, their possessions, and their villages to seek the protection of the National Army was the most eloquent proof of their fear and distrust of the ‘liberators.’” He too easily speaks of refugees “spontaneous preference for the government over the rebels.”

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 43.

made up what he called an “immobile block of humanity.”⁶⁵⁹ There was “an impressive, even oppressive silence” until Chinese officials arrived at which point there was deafening “rehearsed” applause.⁶⁶⁰ He then added “the same performance was repeated everywhere”:

Large groups of men, women, and children stood at attention in absolute silence. Reception committees welcomed visitors with open arms. Then, suddenly, the wild enthusiasm of the crowd, launched by a mysterious signal, and achieving its climax in fraternal and even passionate embraces. Children throwing themselves at our feet. Young girls embracing us. Surely it was enough to melt the hardest of hearts, and certain members of our delegation allowed themselves to be won over momentarily. After returning to the silence of our hotel, however, they found a few moments of reflection sufficient to recognize the artificiality of these mass demonstrations.⁶⁶¹

These performances grew in scale and intensity until RLG officials met the Chinese leadership in Beijing. Sisouk even described a feeling of terror at the sight: “But the sight of so many men applauding on cue, mouthing the words expected of them, and smiling, eating, and drinking almost in unison was terrifying.”⁶⁶² Later in 1961 when RLG delegates went to negotiate with the Pathet Lao in the “liberated zones” under Pathet Lao control the RLG delegates were likewise confronted with orchestrated crowds whom applauded Pathet Lao accusations of RLG “crimes against the people.”⁶⁶³

On the other hand, the Chinese hosts evoked peace, neutrality and coexistence, “those magic words which were repeated again and again during all the official ceremonies everywhere we went.”⁶⁶⁴ Yet rhetoric did not match reality when Sisouk met with Chinese military figures including Chinese General Peng Te-huai, the decorated war hero of Korea, and saw the lengths the Chinese would go to achieve their objectives. While assuring RLG officials that “China would never attack Laos” the Chinese military chiefs then boasted of future war with the US: “We are

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 43-44. Oudone Sananikone reported seeing similar staged crowds in the Pathet Lao zone in mid 1961. See his *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 91.

⁶⁶¹ Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 44.

⁶⁶² Ibid, p. 46.

⁶⁶³ Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 445. The negotiations were at Ban Namone.

⁶⁶⁴ Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 45.

not afraid of the U.S. We beat them in Korea. We do not have atomic bombs, but we have great manpower. Even if they were to use their atomic bombs in case of war, they could never kill more than 300 or 400 million Chinese. That would still leave 200 million, which would easily be enough to beat them.”⁶⁶⁵ To Sisouk this “revealed to us the Chinese leaders’ profound contempt for human life.”⁶⁶⁶ He could not help thinking of his own tiny country in the coming cataclysm: “...and the thought of the havoc [Peng] would wreak among the mere two million of his “good Lao neighbors,” should the day ever come when their sacrifice was deemed necessary for “the cause,” made us shudder.”⁶⁶⁷ Sisouk summed up Chinese efforts to win over the RLG as follows: “See how strong we are! See how good we are!...You dare not defy our power or resist our friendship; become our friends quickly or you’ll be crushed.”⁶⁶⁸

An important aspect of the new CDIN anti-communism was its sharp criticism of older, more naïve and idealistic forms of anti-communism. Sisouk attacked his former ally Souvanna Phouma for refusing to give up his old, outdated views: “The danger of Communism in Laos? He [Souvanna] did not believe it. Laos had never been, could never be Communist. The same applied to the Pathet Lao.”⁶⁶⁹ It is important to note that Sisouk never actually said that Souvanna Phouma was not an anti-communist, but was in fact criticizing him for remaining within the old mindset that had not changed its thinking since the late 1940s.⁶⁷⁰ Yet the CDIN and others (e.g. Katay Sasorith) were formulating a new form of anti-communism that was better suited to the realities of the day. It was an anti-communism that saw the Chinese and Vietnamese as imperial powers,

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 46.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 46-47.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 54.

⁶⁷⁰ Even in early 1961 Souvanna Phouma still adhered to the earlier Issara cultural view of anti-communism writing to John F. Kennedy on February 7, 1961 that “it was unthinkable that a people as peaceful and as fervently Buddhist as the Lao should wish to become Communist.” Quoted in Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 437.

intent on conquest. Thus in this light the conflicts among the RLG elite in this period were not ones between neutralists and rightists, but really between old and new kinds of anti-communists. Sisouk could by then repeat the old Issara anti-communist formula which now appeared as mere wishful thinking: “how could one speak of Marxist danger in a land without industry and hence without a proletariat, a land inhabited only by peaceful farmers, for centuries dedicated to the rice paddies and the Buddhist religion?”⁶⁷¹ Yet by Sisouk’s time, in the face of a real insurgency, the cultural anti-communism of the Issara was no longer enough. What had previously been a source of strength, a truly Lao form of anti-communism in which the Lao were imagined to be naturally resistant to a foreign ideology, was now a weakness in the face of real threats. The simple answer the CDIN posed to such a question as “where are the communists in Laos?” was to point to powerful neighboring communist countries who would invade and conquer the country, transforming it into a communist state by sheer might, by colonialism and imperialism. The Lao people no longer needed to be swayed by the charms of communism; instead they would be enslaved by a conquering army. To Sisouk and the rest of the CDIN the coming conflagration could only be seen in terms of existential danger: “For Laos the fight against Communist subversion is a struggle for existence.”⁶⁷²

As should be clear from the preceding, the CDIN were a cultural movement as much as a political one. In their own newspapers they included anti-Chinese political cartoons. They also used discriminatory language with respect to minorities, such as referring to Faydang, the Hmong communist leader as “the Méo traitor.”⁶⁷³ Other CDIN members made disparaging comments on minorities, even while noting their marshal ability to defend the RLG: “the Meo and Kha tribes in

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² Ibid, p. 109.

⁶⁷³ *Lao Hakxa Sat*, “Radio Hanoi” September 1959, no. 25, p. 7. Of course, it was common to use such language among the wider elite of the RLG. In this and many other ways the CDIN were in fact reflective of the wider elite.

their picturesque costumes, carrying old flint guns and crossbows.”⁶⁷⁴ The CDIN fully subscribed to the hyper-nationalist idea of a Lao race, which is apparent from their propensity to quote approvingly Savang Vatthana’s comments on the subject: “Lao youth, without apprehension, without reticence, we confide to you the future of our country and our race.”⁶⁷⁵ They further viewed the communists as entirely foreign, saying “the ex-Pathet rebellion was elaborately conceived, prepared, supported and led by the authorities of the DRV.”⁶⁷⁶ They even referred to communism as a “contamination”:

To perpetuate the national character of our culture, for the defense against all interference and contamination, for the preservation against all tentative infiltration of a foreign culture of anti-democratic doctrine [i.e. communism] and ideology not conforming to the true aspirations of the people.⁶⁷⁷

Yet the most significant cultural act of the CDIN government was the creation of the *Anousavaly*, the RLG monument to the dead later renamed *Patouxai* (victory monument) by the Pathet Lao. Savang Vatthana was present at the laying of the first stone of the monument in March 1959.⁶⁷⁸ In his speech Savang said “it is necessary to see in this gesture the unanimous recognition of the Lao Nation toward those who died for the fatherland and an oath of fidelity to their memory. It is also an act of faith in our future of independence and liberty... All the Lao nation has united at this solemn moment.”⁶⁷⁹ While this occasion marked an important moment in the maturing post-colonial nationalism, Savang was acutely aware of the role that war and conflict had played in its formation:

At the dawn of the new Laotian independence, we had the duty to fight against the invader to defend the integrity of Our soil, to safeguard Our race, to maintain Our political unity.

⁶⁷⁴ Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 120. He referred to “their musical-comedy appearance.”

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid, June 1959, no. 17, p. 1. The French “notre pays, notre race” was used for the Lao “ຊາດຮີງ”.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid, September 1959, no. 22, p. 1.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid, November 1958, no. 6, p. 1.

⁶⁷⁸ “Journée des anciens combattants,” *Lao Hakxa Sat*, March 15, 1959, no. 12, p. 4.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

From the struggle for national and racial life is born a powerful and indestructible Lao solidarity.

We Laotians have reconnected with our military traditions of the ancient past.

The peril, the sacrifices of the dead, of the veterans, the prospects of the future of our country, of our race have wrought our Laotian soul...⁶⁸⁰

The CDIN and the King

It may only appear to be a coincidence that Savang Vatthana (r. 1959-1975) and the CDIN rose to power at the same time. But on closer inspection the Prince, and later King was an active and highly visible supporter of the moment.⁶⁸¹ Savang was said to have personally addressed several CDIN meetings.⁶⁸² As one founding member of the CDIN put it, “he was sympathetic to the idea of reanimating a stale government through a party of young people.”⁶⁸³ In service of this “sympathy” the new King’s quotes would often be splashed across the frontpage of the CDIN newspaper, *Lao Hakxa Sat*. Savang Vatthana was personally involved in the advancement of the CDIN at key moments, for instance when Phoui Sananikone recalled the National Assembly to an extraordinary session to request emergency powers for one year to deal with the communist threat on January 14, 1959.⁶⁸⁴ Savang Vatthana, still a prince, was present to support Phoui in his move to close the National Assembly, which also increased the CDIN members of the cabinet, resulting

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁸¹ On the other hand, Timothy Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, p. 4 says he “exercised little power and influence.”

⁶⁸² Joel Halpern, “The Lao Elite” (1961), p. 42. See further *ibid*, p. 73: “The King has aligned himself at least indirectly with the young elite of the CDIN.”

⁶⁸³ Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 66. He adds on p. 141: “Furthermore, they [CDIN] enjoyed both the King’s favor and the active support of a large part of the Army...”

⁶⁸⁴ *Lao Hakxa Sat*, January 1959, no. 8, p. 1. This action was taken in response to North Vietnamese incursions around Xepon and the DMZ, which was the start of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. See further Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 358, which notes that US Ambassador Smith was asked to leave the country January 2 to January 16, 1959, exactly when the government requested emergency powers and closed the National Assembly for one year. Smith may have been asked to leave the country because he was not in favor of a coup by the CDIN, implying they might have taken such a course of action if the National Assembly did not grant emergency powers by a vote. At the time, Dommen, *ibid*, notes the CIA was unconcerned with safeguarding RLG democracy or adhering to the RLG constitution to get what it wanted, but US embassy staff “were willing to risk their careers” to ensure “the survival of a democratic government that had faithfully cooperated with the United States.”

in a CDIN dominated government. Since the mid-1950s as his father became sick and frail with age, Savang Vatthana had become very active in the affairs of state. In August 1959, Savang Vatthana arranged for a regency a few months before his father, Sisavang Vong's death on October 29.⁶⁸⁵ Virulently anti-communist, Savang Vatthana long had an interest in military matters such as counter-insurgency, discussing "auto-defense" forces with the US and later creating "civic action" programs in rural areas after the 1958 electoral defeat.⁶⁸⁶ Savang was not the puppet of anyone, but was his own man.⁶⁸⁷ On the other hand, he had much less of a presence in the south.⁶⁸⁸

The rise of the CDIN itself was not unrelated to other initiatives which began as Savang Vatthana assumed power, such as his promotion of the Lao Scout movement, national youth rallies across the country and the teaching of civics and Buddhism as subjects in the schools.⁶⁸⁹ Some of the energy of the CDIN itself may have been due to the uncertainty surrounding the transition of the monarchy.⁶⁹⁰ King Sisavang Vong had been ruling for 55 years and was then the longest reigning monarch in Asia. Yet his son's early years as king were marked by a series of coups which

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid, August 1959, no. 21, p. 1.

⁶⁸⁶ *Foreign relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Vol. XXI, East Asian Security; Cambodia; Laos*, eds. Edward C. Keefer, David W. Mabon, and John P. Glennon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1990), p. 729 in which Savang Vatthana discusses US aid for auto-defense forces with the US Ambassador, Charles Yost. See further, ibid, Document 336, which explains the auto-defense program began in June 1955 was already established in Phongsaly by this time, led by the efforts of Ouane Rathikoun. The auto-defense mission involved recruiting locals who were unhappy with the Pathet Lao exploitation (travel restrictions, forced labor, confiscation of food) who were then trained by the RLA mostly for defense, but also they would conduct small raids and cut supply lines of the Pathet Lao. Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 140 says Vang Pao set up these forces in Xieng Khouang, Houaphan, Samneua and Phongsaly in 1959. He also notes Vang Pao's closeness with Savang Vatthana, p. 142. See also, Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p. 116.

⁶⁸⁷ For example, when US policy changed under John F. Kennedy to belatedly endorse a coalition government including communists, Savang continued to oppose any such thing. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 445.

⁶⁸⁸ Thanks to Ian Baird to bringing this my attention. It is very easy even in the RLG era to take a northern-centric view of events.

⁶⁸⁹ These youth movements would only take shape in schools later in the 1960s. Perhaps tellingly, the department of Youth and Sports was moved from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Defense in 1958. Rallying the youth perhaps drew on earlier Vichy fascist examples. Lao anti-communism may have been influenced by European fascism to a degree. As for the new curriculum, civics was taught by Lao instructors, even in the secondary schools that were still dominated by French teachers.

⁶⁹⁰ Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p. 128-129.

destabilized the kingdom. For instance, after Colonel Phoumi Nosavan ousted Phoui's government in late December 1959, Savang Vatthana gave his support to the new, short-lived CDIN dictatorial government, and later supported the results of the elections of April 1960 that returned 32 candidates to the National Assembly who thereafter joined the new Social Democrats Party (political successor to the CDIN). Later during the Kongle Coup the US cut aid to the country in October and requested as a condition for the resumption of aid, that the government relocate to Luang Prabang where it would be under the close watch of the King.⁶⁹¹ The Eisenhower administration often viewed Savang as a "conservative" force that could rein in other politicians even before he was king. On December 12, 1960 Savang gave his approval to a new government headed by Prince Boun Oum, supported by Phoumi Nosavan, and legitimized by the National Assembly, which met in Savannakhet and were shuttled to Luang Prabang, even though that was highly irregular.⁶⁹² The King thus actively shaped events, and his close alliance with Phoumi Nosavan paralleled the rise of Sarit Thanarat and King Bhumibol of Thailand, although Savang Vatthana welded more power in the arrangement than Bhumibol at the time.⁶⁹³ Yet because Savang had suffered much criticism, even ridicule by the Issara in the semi-colonial years, he sought to disguise his power (at least with foreigners) by taking the posture to uphold and respect the constitution. Nonetheless he was an important power in the country, especially in the neo-colonial years, in the waning years of his father's reign, and in the early years of his own.

⁶⁹¹ Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, p. 22. see further Marc Askew, William S. Logan and Colin Long, *Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao landscape* (London: Routledge, 2007) p. 135.

⁶⁹² Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, p. 21-22. See further *ibid* p. 15 where Savang refused to remove Souvanna Phouma on October 6, 1960 without a vote by the National Assembly.

⁶⁹³ See further Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism* (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP, 2007). See further Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 324, 327, which notes that Savang sought security guarantees from the US, demonstrating he was much more actively involved than some observers have realized.

CDIN Anti-Colonialism

The CDIN have often been portrayed as puppets of the US.⁶⁹⁴ Some even claim they were set up by the CIA.⁶⁹⁵ Yet to their supporters they portrayed themselves as strong anti-colonialists.

Consider for example a slogan in the CDIN newspaper, *Lao Hakxa Sat*,

Colonialism is not dead!
It seeks to implant itself in Laos by other factors, by other means, by other authors.
Attention to foreign domination by intermediaries!⁶⁹⁶

Certainly, they referred to a “communist imperialism,” but they also led a little noticed campaign to remove lingering French influences from the country.⁶⁹⁷ The constitution had already been revised to “omit all reference to the French Union” in 1956.⁶⁹⁸ The CDIN themselves often spoke of a second independence movement, for “reconquering our national independence.”⁶⁹⁹ When they came to power in August 1958, the CDIN wanted to immediately break off French military aid but the US dissuaded them; at any rate US military trainers were brought in to satisfy the CDIN.⁷⁰⁰ Only later in 1961 were former CDIN members able to occupy the last French military training base in the country at Seno, Savannakhet, even as a major war raged.⁷⁰¹ The CDIN were not above

⁶⁹⁴ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 103.

⁶⁹⁵ This claim made after the fact by various US figures bears scrutiny for hyperbole and exaggeration. Oudone Sananikone acknowledges the CDIN received some US funding. See his *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 47-48.

⁶⁹⁶ *Lao Hakxa Sat*, October 1959, no. 28, p. 1.

⁶⁹⁷ As Evans has noted, even Savang Vatthana was not above anti-French feelings, as he told a US official in the 1960s: “it was France which started the [Vietnam] War by its stupidity in attempting to re-establish its colonial control in 1945. It was France that created the Viet Minh.” Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 114.

⁶⁹⁸ Pornsak Phongphaew, “The Political Culture-and-Personality of the Laotian Political-Bureaucratic Elite.” (Ph.D. diss., The University of Oklahoma, 1976), p. 106. Moreover, the RLG dissolved the Indochinese customs union with Cambodia and South Vietnam in December 1954. This established national borders between the former parts of French Indochina and replaced the colonial piaster with national currency. See Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), p. 286.

⁶⁹⁹ *Lao Hakxa Sat*, September 1958, no. 1, p. 1

⁷⁰⁰ Nicholas Tarling, *Britain and the Neutralization of Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), p. 32.

⁷⁰¹ Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p. 215. The Boun Oum government, invested by a CDIN-Social Democrats National Assembly, requested the removal of all French advisers from the country on January 17, 1961. The Royal Lao Army then occupied Seno military base on February 5, 1961. One might add that when General Phoumi Nosavan’s forces captured Vientiane from Kongle’s forces, Phoumi’s troops shelled the French military training mission, while French advisers stayed with Kongle’s troops throughout the battle. In early January 1961 Phoumi wanted to expel the French from the country, but was persuaded not to by the US. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 435. The French continued to support Kongle’s troops at Khang Khay, *ibid*.

more symbolic efforts in this regard. They changed the street names of Vientiane from French colonists to Lao kings.⁷⁰² For instance, their own paper *Lao Hakxa Sat*, which began in September 1958, listed its address as “rue Nokéo Koumane, formerly rue Colonel Tournier.”⁷⁰³ Yet the best evidence for the change of street names at the time appears in the government paper *Lao Presse*. Throughout the 1950s, the frontpage of the paper listed its address as “place au marché” but on November 17, 1958 no address was listed. The following day’s paper of November 18, 1958 then listed the address as “rue Setthathirat, Pangkham Vientiane.” The Minister of Information at the time was Sisouk Na Champassak, a prominent CDIN member. Yet other papers like Phoui Sananikone’s *L’Indépendant* continued to list its address as “rue George Mahé” as late as 1960, suggesting cooperation was not universal.

It was only after the CDIN appeared that the initial moves were made to make Lao the language of instruction in the secondary schools. Savang Vatthana himself issued a royal decree on July 30, 1962, which greatly reformed the secondary school curriculum that introduced some courses with Lao as the language of instruction.⁷⁰⁴ It would not come to fruition until some years later, but the initiative certainly started at the height of CDIN activity. Another example of the anti-French program of the CDIN government was its strong objections to the reactivation of the International Control Commission (ICC) in accord with the CDIN anti-colonialist ideals, which viewed the ICC as a neo-colonial institution infringing Lao sovereignty. Thus, they were at times simultaneously anti-West and anti-communist, as their slogans demonstrate:

No return of the ICC to Laos

⁷⁰² Although he does not give a date, or identify who was responsible American anthropologist Joel Halpern observed the change: “The names of a few streets have been changed from French officials’ names to those of traditional Lao heroes...” See Joel Halpern, “Lao Project Paper no. 19: Laos profiles” (1961), p. 95, footnote 1.

⁷⁰³ *Lao Hakxa Sat*, September 1958, no. 2, p. 1. See also an ad which appears in the paper for a bar whose address is given as “rue Sam-Saen-Thai, ex-rue George Mahé” in *ibid*, July 1959, No. 18, p. 3.

⁷⁰⁴ See “Educational Reform Act of 1962,” William W. Sage Collection On Laos, archived at : <http://hdl.handle.net/2286/R.A.166491>.

We will chase the communists out of the country
The Neo Lao Hak Sat outlaws⁷⁰⁵

This quote appears at head of the CDIN paper as the government was seeking for the UN to halt the North Vietnamese invasion and support of the Pathet Lao. At the same time, the government was rejecting calls by the Pathet Lao for the ICC to be reactivated in the country because the CDIN viewed the organization to be a tool of the communists. They were also strongly opposed to French efforts to neutralize the country, which they likewise saw as intolerable meddling in Lao internal affairs.

The famous French scholar-journalist Bernard Fall perceived the CDIN as distinct from the older Francophone generation, now oriented to the US and at times hostile to the French.⁷⁰⁶ The CDIN government had several hostile exchanges with journalists and diplomats, some of whom were French skeptical of government reports that North Vietnam had invaded Lao soil.⁷⁰⁷ There was a strong anti-colonial undercurrent to the exchanges. In Sisouk's words: "French newspapers were skeptical and asked for proof" of the North Vietnamese invasion at Xepon to which he retorted: "did they have proof of Chinese intervention at Dien Bien Phu?"⁷⁰⁸ While many were concerned with the Cold War, the CDIN was itself still dealing with the legacies of colonialism. Whatever else might be said of the CDIN, by its actions it could be seen by its own

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid, August 1959, no. 20, p. 1.

⁷⁰⁶ Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p. 93. Fall's dismissing of the CDIN as "Young Turks" had echoes of colonialism. See further *ibid*, p. 179 where he refers to them as "improvident children."

⁷⁰⁷ Sisouk who was the Minister of Information gives a firsthand account of hostile press conferences, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 113-115. See further p. 70, 106. See further *ibid*, p. 102: "a member of a friendly embassy told anyone who would listen that "these people have no business here. The myth of a Viet Minh invasion is entirely made up by Lao officers in cahoots with the Americans." See *ibid* p. 103: the French "imagine all sorts of war plots hatched by the "young Turks" in the government in connivance with "the young colonels of the Lao National Army impatient to play a role on the political scene." See further p. 115 where Sisouk notes some journalists who found factual inaccuracies and responded by "minimizing the crisis and making it appear ridiculous." He added "these were the newsmen who considered the aggression entirely a fantasy of the young ministers and some ambitious Lao soldiers." On p. 113 he notes the RLG reports of North Vietnam's invasion at Xepon was portrayed by some journalists as an effort to solicit more aid from the US.

⁷⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 106. Bernard Fall was particularly incensed about this comment. See his *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p. 148.

supporters as strongly anti-colonialist, finally ousting the French from the country, even as it drew closer to the Americans.

Most of the scholarship on the CDIN movement has derived from Sisouk Na Champassak's well-known book *Storm over Laos*. Published in English and French, it was intended for foreign consumption, but also provides a valuable insider-account of the CDIN movement. A few scholars have looked at the CDIN newspaper, which had a Lao audience, yet no one has studied any Lao language documents, such as a revealing pamphlet from the CDIN's first national congress, held in June 1959, which includes the seal of the CDIN, surrounded by the words "democracy," "prosperous and wealthy country," and "respect for nationalism." At the front of the pamphlet there is an oath, which presumably initiates had to pledge to join:

Intellectual principles

I firmly believe that:

- 1- The defense of national independence is a duty of all the people which amounts to patriotism.
- 2- This duty is in the bounds of the free individual, which resists for the emancipation of the people, who are free as is enshrined in the UN charter.
- 3- The constitutional monarchy form of government is a form derived from political customs and traditions which the Lao people highly revere. The violation or infringement of tradition with the hope to change the current system of government must be criminally charged and heavily punished per the law.
- 4- Economic and social justice among the Lao people must be accomplished within the rights and freedoms of mankind if [it] will be well respected.
- 5- In order to defend peace among nations, which have good intentions among each other, the respect for independence, unity, and sovereignty which is mutual, must be the principle of each country in foreign policy.
- 6- The life of the nation has meaning and value from belief in Buddhism which must cause international relations to have the highest compassion and humanity.⁷⁰⁹

By this oath members were initiated into an organization that was nationalist, monarchist, anti-communist, defended civil and political rights, supported peaceful co-existence and viewed

⁷⁰⁹ ກົມະການປ້ອງກັນປະໂຫຍດຂອງຊາດ ["Committee for Defense of National Interests"], (Vientiane: Central Office, 1959), p. iii.

Buddhism as the meaning of life. The oath is most interesting in that it states that any attempt to change the governing system is illegal. The CDIN government did discuss outlawing communism but never actually passed such a law. Yet the CDIN oath also articulated rights and freedoms that were to be valued higher than social justice and, in their view, accorded with the values of the international community as stated in the UN Declaration of the Rights of Man. In principle, they supported peaceful co-existence and did not endorse meddling in neighbors' internal matters; they were thus able to coopt neutralism to an extent by framing it as a matter of sovereignty and independence. They defended the role of Buddhism in the country and saw it had a special role in defending the country from communist subversion.

Oukham Phomvongsa, a CDIN member, wrote sympathetically of the Issara, thus indicating ways in which the CDIN was inspired by the earlier movement. In many ways, if one examines the rhetoric and causes touted by the CDIN, they can be seen as worthy successors of the Issara, just as the Pathet Lao claimed to be. Both the Pathet Lao and CDIN were nationalists fighting to remove foreign influence from the country, in their own compromised ways. The CDIN perfectly encapsulated the nationalist anti-communism of the moment, identifying themselves as synonymous with the nation, the same way that the Issara had in years past:

The Committee for Defense of National Interests is created to safeguard the unity, the freedom, and the independence of the nation.

This zeal which arises itself in the youth of today is something pure, beautiful, just and honest, which can only create the grandeur of the kingdom.

To not approve it, is to be against the greatness of the country.

To be against the C.D.I.N. is to betray the interest of the nation.⁷¹⁰

⁷¹⁰ *Lao Hakxa Sat*, January 1959, no 8, p. 1. This slogan appeared in the issue announcing the state of emergency and the closure of the National Assembly for one year.

They viewed themselves as safeguarding the gains made in the country since the Issara. Thus the CDIN were as important to the evolution of RLG nationalism as the Issara were.⁷¹¹

The CDIN and Democracy

From 1960, democracy in the Royal Lao Government broke down as the country descended into an unparalleled time of lawlessness and war that only gradually lifted from 1962 (elections did not return until 1965).⁷¹² The likes of Captain Kongle or Colonel Phoumi Nosavan seized power and promoted themselves to the rank of general, spawning in the process two governments each seeking recognition and legitimacy on the world stage. The National Assembly voted in new governments in highly irregular sessions under pressure from angry mobs and international forces as the constitutional order was disrupted. Meanwhile, General Phoumi Nosavan took control of the army, testing all for loyalty to him as his troops abused their powers and the population at large.⁷¹³ The source of lawlessness may well be the CDIN themselves who created the first dictatorship in the RLG, which although short-lived did not augur well for the future.⁷¹⁴ Further, they oversaw the rigged general elections of April 1960 in which the military had an unprecedented role. Yet while the CDIN exhibited clear anti-democratic tendencies the true picture is more complicated. The single most importance factor was that the CDIN operated in a context which, as they saw it, was on the brink of war. More deeply, the CDIN (especially the civilians) were not

⁷¹¹ They even appropriated the term “New Laos” to suggest their movement was one of renewal, see *ibid*, January 1959, no. 7, p. 1.

⁷¹² Yet even in mid 1960 the Somsanith government sought to reestablish the supremacy of the civilian government over the military. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 390.

⁷¹³ Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 72-74. Oudone himself was removed from an important post due to his lack of support for the counter-coup forces Phoumi assembled in Savannakhet after August 9, 1960. Phoumi put in place a new staff in charge of the RLA. Later Phoumi turned to illegal activities to fund the army, *ibid* p. 79.

⁷¹⁴ The coup lasted from December 24, 1959 to January 5, 1960. The term of the National Assembly ended on December 25, 1959. See further, Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 128-138 for an insider account of the coup. It is notable that the King reigned in this coup.

opposed to democracy per se but intervened in a misguided attempt to safeguard it from enemies within and without. Certainly, what the CDIN proposed was not without its own dangers, as similar efforts to reform democracy in neighboring countries had led to dictatorship.⁷¹⁵ The CDIN saw the democracy itself was ailing, failing to solve the country's problems, corrupted by special interests and subverted by foreign powers which threatened to wipe the democratic form of government from the country. Finally, it is most intriguing to consider was there any popular support for the CDIN?

To fully understand the CDIN one must take account of their views on RLG democracy and democracy generally. The CDIN often did not attack democracy per se but only the low state to which it had fallen in the RLG and the established politicians who corrupted it.⁷¹⁶ While their rhetoric started with the danger of foreign threats, the CDIN quickly shifted to an indictment of domestic politics:

Since we have reconquered our national independence, our country has known the very bottom of miseries which can befall a people. Invasion, almost total occupation... new battle destroying its cities... the Geneva Accords, occupation of two provinces, supplementary elections. Others searching currently to infiltrate and to implant themselves on our territory.

Through these vicissitudes, some efforts were undertaken for social reform and national reconstruction. But always untidy, these efforts are in vain. No concrete realization. No appreciable amelioration. From government to succeeding governments. We have not ceased recourse to expedients. Certainly, we are not ignorant of the inconveniences which they must have, more or less short term. But one assures us each time that it will be ready in time, that it would be the task of the day after.⁷¹⁷

The government was paralyzed, passing from one crisis to the next as the country drifted even as serious problems went unaddressed. Yet the country faced “one of the gravest moments in its

⁷¹⁵ For one example, Thai military dictators delayed elections for over a decade; putting democracy temporarily on-hold could be very dangerous indeed. Thanks to Bruce Lockhart for this comment.

⁷¹⁶ At the same time in October 1959 Savang Vatthana shouted at Phoui Sananikone “I do not like these deputies who are hated by the people as much as if they were members of the Lao Patriotic Front.” See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 381.

⁷¹⁷ *Lao Hakxa Sat*, “editorial” September 1958, no 1, p. 1.

history.”⁷¹⁸ The government was unable to address these problems because the democracy had grown decrepit, dominated by the same few politicians, who traded posts in a political game. New elections brought no change in the composition of the government: “the same ministerial team remains, except changing the incumbent at the post of Prime Minister.”⁷¹⁹ There was “too much egoism” among politicians, who had their eyes on economic and defense posts: “the ones want to traffic in the riches of the country, the others on power.”⁷²⁰ The CDIN saw established politicians as out-of-touch fat-cats ensconced in Vientiane. The CDIN movement was in this respect a democratic challenge to the elite in as much as it came from outside the traditional elite, yet in other ways profoundly questioned the very nature of the democratic order. The mortal sin of the established politicians was that they allowed “special interests [to] take precedence over the higher interests of the country.”⁷²¹ While the CDIN were “skeptical about the efficacy of our democratic institutions” in the confrontation with the Pathet Lao, they did not wish to abolish democracy itself and saw the conflict as one between the forces of democracy and those opposed to it as the RLG was “menaced by the infiltration and implantation of a totalitarian ideological and antidemocratic regime.”⁷²² In this conflict, most concerning to the CDIN was the failure of the established politicians, the Old Ones “blinded by the vanity of power” who were too busy seeking privileges and jockeying for position to adequately respond to the threat.⁷²³

To the CDIN, RLG democracy was sick and had to be shorn of its cancerous corruption and disastrous inefficacy first before tackling the challenges of the day. It would only be fully restored by nationalism. There was in fact a link between the CDIN’s own criticisms of RLG

⁷¹⁸ Ibid.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid.

⁷²⁰ Ibid.

⁷²¹ Ibid.

⁷²² Ibid. Note the CDIN took issue with “our” democracy – not democracy in general.

⁷²³ Ibid.

democracy and earlier (especially loyalist) critiques of democracy; especially those which conceived of the masses as dupes and idiots in the grip of seductive demagogues (see chapter three). As General Ouane Rathikoun told an interviewer in 1959 “Now the government and the officials are the servants of the people. The time has passed when officials pocketed money instead of helping the people.”⁷²⁴ He added ominously “this former democracy in which everyone stole for himself has now been rejected and replaced by directed democracy,” and went on to describe the Royal Lao Army’s role in civic action programs in the rural countryside.⁷²⁵ However, Ouane’s promotion of the military was explicitly rejected by others within the CDIN, including Khamphan Panya, who maintained the military could only be a means to uphold the democratic order.⁷²⁶ There was a division among the CDIN along civilian-military lines of those who supported “directed democracy” and those who did not. While those who favored a “directed democracy” temporarily gained the upper hand as the country descended into war, it would be the civilian CDIN members who would go on to play the most important roles in the country until 1975.

The CDIN frequently claimed to be defending the democracy, yet were accused themselves of destroying it, never more clearly than during the rigged elections of April 1960. Even before the elections, Phoumi Nosavan commented on the limitations of “masses too ignorant for normal democracy.”⁷²⁷ However, according to one cabinet member in the CDIN government, it was the CDIN who wanted elections, whereas the Rally for the Lao People (RPL) resisted calls to hold

⁷²⁴ Joel Halpern, “Lao Project Paper no. 19,” p. 106.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56: “Later it was reported that the Army had tried to seize power during the [December 25, 1959] crisis. This is another inaccuracy. I know the Army very well and I can assure you it never had such ambition. It so happens that during the period of uncertainty we lived through, the Army was the only organized and disciplined force in Laos, thus the only element capable of restoring constitutional legality in order and security. If the Army took over to dispatch current business, it was only to prevent further abuse.”

⁷²⁷ Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, p. 8. Phoumi also promised to return a “tame Assembly” in the election. While Phoumi was a founding member of the CDIN, after the elections he broke from the movement to pursue his own power.

them (even though the Assembly term was ending) due to the unsettled conditions in the country resulting from the renewed war with the Pathet Lao.⁷²⁸ The army was given the sensitive task of safeguarding the polls from Pathet Lao attacks. NLHX leaders remained jailed during the elections, but the party was not banned, and communism was not outlawed. Despite the difficulties, CDIN leaders were anxious to prove the openness of Lao democracy by including the NLHX in the elections even as the latter were waging a violent insurgency aided by foreign powers.⁷²⁹ Yet the 1960 elections became a key example of how RLG democracy failed, due in part to jerrymandering and a new electoral law requiring candidates to pay a higher deposit and meet higher education requirements to stand for office.⁷³⁰ Oudone Sananikone admitted there was “some justification” to the charge the elections were rigged.⁷³¹ He pointed to vote-buying and the use of the RLA to distribute pro-government propaganda. Yet the worst abuses came as the votes were tallied. It was not the CIA, but Phoumi Nosavan’s ally Captain Siho Lanphouthacoul who blatantly rigged the vote in favor of pro-government candidates, which nonetheless revealed a corrupting American influence on Lao notions of democracy.⁷³²

For the 1960 elections the RPL and CDIN united to present a united ticket.⁷³³ The CDIN continued to claim they represented what the people wanted, but would not compete openly with

⁷²⁸ Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 139. See further Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, p. 8-9.

⁷²⁹ See further Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 313, who cites Kaysone Phomvihane that “the fundamental principle of our Party was always that of violent revolution...” Any government would not hesitate to outlaw a party that pursued its goals through violent means, much less in alliance with hostile neighboring countries.

⁷³⁰ A key source has been Sisouk’s own account of the elections.

⁷³¹ Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 60.

⁷³² Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, p. 10-11. CIA case officer Stuart Methven witnessed Siho’s manipulation of the vote tally: “There he [Methven] found a Phoumi aide, Capt. Siho Lanphouthacoul, recording the official count at the chalkboard. The numbers were clearly tainted, for communist candidates were ostensibly running far behind even in the Pathet Lao-dominated province of Phong Saly. Siho met Methven’s reproach for this blatant fraud with a jaunty question, “What is your year of birth?” The startled Methven gave it to him, and Siho erased the number of Pathet Lao votes – a three-digit figure, at most – and replaced it with a more generous 1,927.” CIA chief Allen Dulles was not upset by the fraudulent election, but “was inclined to treat it more as a youthful prank.”

⁷³³ There was conflict among RPL and CDIN over how to apportion seats in the election. The RPL wanted to retain the 35 seats it held in the National Assembly, but the CDIN was dissatisfied with being left with only 8. The CDIN got 32 seats to the RPL’s 27.

the RPL in the elections. Yet more importantly, the arrival of the NLHX in RLG politics and the success they enjoyed in 1958 caused RLG democracy to become highly degraded in a variety of ways. The CDIN themselves perceived how the Pathet Lao degraded it:

From the moment the democratic system had been established in Laos, the Communists had steadily perverted it for their own ends. Democracy is a double-edged sword. To reproach the government and the Army for departing from its methods in organizing these elections would be to accuse them of not having handed the Communists the weapon for their own assassination.⁷³⁴

It was not possible to hold elections without the intervention of the army, as Pathet Lao attacks continued across the country. The Pathet Lao insurgents were expected to target polling places and voters, or else to threaten and intimate them to suppress the vote.⁷³⁵ The government responded by reducing the number of polling places to only those sites that were secured. In the end, during the general elections of 1960 the “army decided that, wherever possible, it would suppress Communist propaganda in the provinces to insure the victory of government candidates.”⁷³⁶ At a certain point the NLHX withdrew from the elections entirely saying they had been rigged.⁷³⁷ Yet the CDIN argued that it was only when the RLA was present that people felt free from fear enough to oppose the NLHX candidates.⁷³⁸ Political violence had spiraled out of control to such a degree by April 1960 that there was no neutral space in which to freely deliberate anymore; one was either coerced into voting for one side or the other. As the war escalated the CDIN morphed into the Social Democrats Party (ປະຊາຊົນສະມາຄົມ) while the RPL withered, but all parties in fact were “indebted” to the Army.⁷³⁹ The new Social Democrats Party, which held the majority of seats in

⁷³⁴ Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 142.

⁷³⁵ North Vietnam had first gained control of many villages in Laos using “armed propaganda,” including “execution of...Lao ‘traitors.’” See Goscha, “Vietnam and the world outside,” p. 158.

⁷³⁶ Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 141.

⁷³⁷ Ibid, p. 143.

⁷³⁸ Ibid, p. 144: “With soldiers everywhere, the people began to feel protected against the usual threats; they would be able to vote without fear, something they had not done in many years.” Sisouk alleged that anyone who voted for NLHX candidates had done so only due to propaganda and “fear of reprisals.”

⁷³⁹ Ibid, p. 145-146.

the National Assembly, was led by none other than General Phoumi Nosavan, yet the US blocked him from the post of prime minister.⁷⁴⁰

Did the CDIN have any popular support – or did people rally to its cause?⁷⁴¹ Foreign observers have portrayed the CDIN as anti-democratic, pointing to fact that they initially refused to form a political party, supported the closure of the National Assembly, rigged the election of 1960 with the help of the Royal Lao Army, and were a vehicle for the military to become involved in politics, of whom Phoumi Nosavan was the prime example.⁷⁴² Yet on the other hand they were a manifestation of a popular mood in certain quarters, able to rally large popular support as demonstrated by a march through the center of Vientiane in August 1959 in protest against Vietnamese invasion, which drew ten thousand supporters out into the streets.⁷⁴³ Within the administration, the CDIN organized a union for junior officials so they would no longer need to make complaints anonymously but could speak freely and voice their concerns and criticisms in an open and frank manner.⁷⁴⁴ Finally, one's opinion of the CDIN will likely turn on how sincere one regards their efforts to save the democracy. Would they have acted the same had the North Vietnamese not invaded? They did not see themselves as anti-democratic (“democracy” was on their seal), but felt only to be doing what was necessary to respond to the crisis of the time and the

⁷⁴⁰ Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, p. 11.

⁷⁴¹ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 106 claimed the CDIN did not attempt to win popular support, but he ignored their rallies. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 357 likewise claimed the CDIN “lacked grassroots support.” Dommen stressed the CDIN was formed by Lao who had spent time abroad, implying they fell under foreign influence (“the telltale signs of foreign support were there”). He pointed to the expenses of the CDIN newspaper which was “printed on glossy paper unlike anything seen before in Laos.” He also cited State Department instructions to the embassy to cooperate with the CDIN. Many observers read US support for the CDIN as evidence the CDIN were puppets or tools of the US, or more crudely were a US creation. See further *ibid.*, p. 352 where he describes the CDIN as “nationalists willing to be disloyal to the legal and constitutional order.”

⁷⁴² For a revisionist account of Phoumi Nosavan, see Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation*. Ian Baird has suggested that the full circumstances under which Phoumi was exiled in early 1965 have not yet been disclosed in the literature.

⁷⁴³ *Lao Hakxa Sat*, August 1959, no. 21, p. 8. It is interesting to compare this rally to the one supporting Kongle only a year later.

⁷⁴⁴ Halpern, “The Lao Elite,” p. 43.

threat posed by communism. Thus, they felt there was an unprecedented emergency in the young state that called for a temporary suspension of the democratic order in order to prevent the permanent overthrow of the democracy at the hands of foreign communist foes. They were willing to sacrifice civil and political liberties temporarily in a bid to safeguard the democratic form of government. The CDIN were opposed to neutralism and foreign invasion in the 1950s. Yet the CDIN may have actually been more in tune with the times, with the mood of the country, and certainly with the Royal Lao Army, which was itself a major force in the kingdom. Yet less than a year later in August 1960 the streets of Vientiane would again fill – this time with Kongle supporters rallying behind his neutralist, anti-American cause. The fate of the RLG might have been determined by protesters on the streets of Vientiane more than has been previously considered.



(caption: “the people gather to protest the invasion of the Viet-Minh and the rebel traitors [Pathet Lao].”⁷⁴⁵)

The CDIN and the Origins of the Second Indochina War

Finally, the CDIN led the country to war. Too little attention has been given to their role in initiating the Second Indochina War in Laos.⁷⁴⁶ No analysis has attempted to explain their actions, much less motivations or rational, beyond appealing to overly-simplistic caricatures of the movement as rightwing US puppets.⁷⁴⁷ Yet it is evident the CDIN decision to go to war was informed by its own particular notions of anti-communism, democracy and Buddhism-in-peril, which is obscured when one dismisses them as American puppets without any individual agency. One must note they were the government in power when war broke out.⁷⁴⁸ They were linked to the military and were strongly nationalist. For months recriminations were exchanged with North Vietnam over border incursions around the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South

⁷⁴⁵ ກົມະການບ້ອງກັນປະໂຍດຂອງຊາດ, unpaginated page after p. 44.

⁷⁴⁶ See Christie, *Ideology and Revolution*, p. 151 who blames the US for the start of the war without mentioning the role of the CDIN. On the other hand, Fall portrayed the CDIN as hungry for war calling them “the “young wolves” of the CDIN”; see his *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p. 109. See further *ibid*, p. 120. Yet it is important to note that Fall did not believe the government when it reported North Vietnam’s invasion of Xepon. Fall called this “The Lao Fraud.” See further Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 146, who stated “it is impossible to say when the war actually ‘began.’”

⁷⁴⁷ Ackland, “No Place for Neutralism,” p. 150. See Peter Dale Scott, “Laos: The Story Nixon Won’t Tell,” in Marvin Gettleman, Susan Gettleman, Lawrence Kaplan, and Carol Kaplan (eds.) *Conflict in Indo-China: A Reader on the Widening War in Laos and Cambodia* (New York: Random House, 1970) p. 271: “In May, 1959, one Pathet Lao battalion refused, understandably, to be assimilated under the new right wing government, and it decamped to a valley on the North Vietnamese border. The Sananikone government then declared that the Pathet Lao had committed an act of open rebellion and that only a military solution appeared possible. It thus by its own actions deflected the Pathet Lao from the role of political opposition into a military insurgency...” *Ibid*, p. 270 likewise blames the North Vietnamese occupation of villages near Xepon in December 1958 on the Royal Lao Army. These works cited Abraham Halpern and H.B. Fredman, “Communist Strategy in Laos,” (Santa Monica: Rand Research Memorandum, 1960), p. 51 “it is apparent that the Sananikone government precipitated the final crisis that led to the war in Laos.” While these authors blamed the RLG for starting the war, they portrayed the RLG as aggressive, but at the same time denying Pathet Lao aggression or North Vietnamese presence. Instead I draw attention to the unique anti-communist views of the CDIN government, which was not addressed in these earlier analyses.

⁷⁴⁸ The US Ambassador Horace Smith frequently complained that the RLG did not consult before responding to DRV military actions in the country in August-September 1959. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 379-380.

Vietnam.⁷⁴⁹ RLG-DRV relations deteriorated further with the closure of the National Assembly and the exclusion of the NLHX from government.⁷⁵⁰ The CDIN perceived that once the Pathet Lao were blocked from gaining power by the ballot box they would resort to violence with the direct aid and support of North Vietnam. Moreover, the CDIN stoked tensions with violent rhetoric in its newspaper *Lao Hakxa Sat*. Writing of the Chinese invasion of Tibet, one editorial in the CDIN newspaper spoke of a “terror” felt by all Buddhists in reaction to what could only be viewed as communist-atheistic violence against all religions and even spoke of an impending “holy war.”⁷⁵¹ There followed a number of anti-Chinese political cartoons that incited ethnic tensions. Then on May 11, 1959 when the breakdown with the Pathet Lao emerged, the *Lao Hakxa Sat* paper read ominously: “for each man and each nation, there exists a decisive hour...for Laos, this hour has arrived, the hour of the CDIN.”⁷⁵²

In the final analysis the CDIN viewed the situation as an existential threat: the communists would overthrow the democracy, wipe out Buddhism, wage class warfare and install a “totalitarian” “anti-democratic” regime subservient to China and North Vietnam. In this effort the CDIN were able to mobilize ethnic hatred against the Vietnamese which had existed since the colonial era and stoke new fears of the Chinese. The Lao would surely be enslaved by the new Sino-Vietnamese masters. Facing the prospects of a threat to their very way of life the CDIN felt

⁷⁴⁹ Sisouk offers a prescient comment on the border dispute: “In isolation, the Tchepone [Xepon] incident was merely one of those innumerable border disputes between two countries whose territorial limits had always been very poorly defined. But in the context of the Cold War and the power struggle in Asia, this minor incident might suddenly acquire vast dimensions.” See his *Storm Over Laos*, p. 73. See further *ibid* p. 67 – Sisouk dates the invasion to the “first days of January 1959.” Oudone Sananikone on the other hand dates it to the “last week of December 1958.” See his *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 48.

⁷⁵⁰ Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 372 notes Pham Van Dong protested against the closure of the ICC in Laos. *Ibid*, p. 375-376, this was followed by the RLG’s protest of the DRV’s occupation of territory near Xepon. The RLG printed a refutation of DRV claims to the territory in question in *Lao Presse* on February 13, 1959 which included relevant treaties of the colonial era and territorial claims of the pre-colonial period going back to Fa Ngum.

⁷⁵¹ *Lao Hakxa Sat*, no. 15, May 16, 1959, p. 1.

⁷⁵² *Lao Hakxa Sat*, no 14, May 1959, p. 1.

no other option but to go to war. It was a struggle for survival in a Social-Darwinist, post-colonial world where newly independent, small, weak countries were stalked by powerful foes. Certainly, the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao had a role in starting the war.⁷⁵³ A single Pathet Lao battalion of 750 men refused to disarm, and managed to escape with North Vietnamese aid.⁷⁵⁴ By June 3, 1959, the Pathet Lao decided to pursue armed struggle.⁷⁵⁵ The US also played a role in the origins of the war as the main supporter of the CDIN.⁷⁵⁶ While it was a defensive war for the RLG, the CDIN rejected any calls by the Pathet Lao to negotiation in the first few months of the war. Yet no one could foresee the resulting war would last fourteen years and leave the country in ruins.

Anti-Communism in Neo-Colonial Conditions

The US Eisenhower administration's evaluation of Souvanna Phouma's policies toward communism was deeply flawed. They viewed him as being soft on communism for pursuing a negotiated political solution yet no military solution could be possible. The Joint Chiefs of Staff themselves said there was no point to the Kingdom of Laos having a large army, and only agreed to support funding such a large force for political needs.⁷⁵⁷ The Kennedy administration saw the error of the Eisenhower administration and reversed the previous opposition to Souvanna Phouma, backing neutrality. But of course it was already too late, as the war in Laos had already become

⁷⁵³ See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 378.

⁷⁵⁴ Goscha, "Vietnam and the world outside," p. 177, which notes North Vietnam "dispatched troops to meet and help" the escaping battalion. Ibid, p. 174 notes these battalions were given "intensive courses in political and ideological indoctrination" before North Vietnam reduced its activity in the country in November 1957. Yet each battalion still had a single North Vietnamese cadre, *ibid*, p. 174-175.

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 177.

⁷⁵⁶ The US military considered nuclear options in response to the outbreak of war in Laos after May 1959. See Victor B. Anthony and Richard R. Sexton, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The War in Northern Laos, 1954-1973* (Washington D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1993), p. 23-25. *Ibid*, p. 28, US special forces also began to train irregular guerrilla forces in Laos that would become the Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs).

⁷⁵⁷ Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos*, p. 131. See further Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p. 163. The Royal Lao Army's own commander in chief, General Sounthone Pathammavong reached the same conclusion in his own study of the issue. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 323.

entangled with the situation in South Vietnam in what became the Second Indochina War. US officials were also suspicious of Souvanna Phouma's anti-communist views, yet they were the same as those espoused by the ex-Issara generation of the leading elite since 1948. Souvanna, therefore, often said in meetings with the US Ambassador that Souphanouvong could not really be a communist because he still got angry if people did not refer to him as "prince" (ເຈົ້າ).⁷⁵⁸ In its dealings with the RLG, the US ignored Lao anti-communism as it really was. In his first meeting with the US Ambassador Charles Yost, Katay Sasorith, when asked by Yost for his views on communism, simply directed him to his Issara pamphlet, which he had written six years before, something few if any US officials ever read.⁷⁵⁹

The US failed to listen to, or understand the RLG elite just as the French had ignored the Issara. The US, in fact, adopted uncritically many of the French assumptions concerning the Lao when it should have made its own independent assessment of the country.⁷⁶⁰ US officials likely adopted the French colonial mindset on the Lao in part because they harbored their own racist notions of the Lao.⁷⁶¹ They could not believe that it was a real nation. As a French invention, Laos had no genuine politics, but only a game among rich families which made later US violation of Lao sovereignty all the more permissible for it never really existed in their minds.

Yet this attitude introduced a massive contradiction in the US approach to the RLG which was never resolved throughout the neo-colonial years. It was official US policy to support the anti-

⁷⁵⁸ FRUS.

⁷⁵⁹ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Vol. XXI*, p. 578-579.

⁷⁶⁰ One example would be Joel Halpern who in his study of the Lao elite noted that the soft-spoken unaggressive image of the Lao was in his words "over-emphasized" yet then proceeded to describe at length how Lao were lazy and fatalists. These were of course the old French colonial racist stereotypes of the Lao which informed Halpern's work. See his "The Lao elite," p. 46-48. See for instance, Roger Smith's promotion of Bernard Fall's work, which resulted in the English language book *Anatomy of a Crisis*, an important reference on the country.

⁷⁶¹ Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling*, notes Americans commonly referred to Lao as "retarded children."

communist Royal Lao Government and the US expended enormous efforts and resources to that end.⁷⁶² Yet at the same time, Washington's policies had the effect of undermining RLG sovereignty in many ways. The US fully funded the budget for the Royal Lao Army, making Laos the only country in the world to have its army entirely foreign-funded at the time.⁷⁶³ The rise of the army later in the politics of the country was unmistakable, producing a few unsuccessful dictators. It also brought a period of warlordism in the provinces where power was vested in the hands of the military.⁷⁶⁴ The country was divided into military regions each under the control of a general.⁷⁶⁵ Yet this was not just an exigency of war, but also a result of how much the military had been built up while the rest of society was neglected. Militarization had a pervasive impact on the society, which only intensified political violence.

The literature on US-RLG relations in this period has focused on aid, never failing to repeat the sensational accounts of corruption, which had at least as much to do with poor administrative capacity on the part of Royal Lao Government officials as much as pure malfeasance.⁷⁶⁶ A not insubstantial portion of corruption was in fact committed by US nationals themselves.⁷⁶⁷ Yet US aid was also used to erode the sovereignty of the RLG, which was openly admitted at Congressional hearings by US officials, such as the US Ambassador to Lao J. Graham Parsons.⁷⁶⁸ At crucial times aid was withdrawn to topple several governments which dared to pursue a policy at odds with the US; most infamously in 1958 to trigger the downfall of the legally elected

⁷⁶² Castle, *At War in the shadow of Vietnam*. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*. Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos*.

⁷⁶³ Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos*, p. 130.

⁷⁶⁴ Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 39.

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid. These regional military commanders "quickly became the centers and sources of all power in the provinces. The civilian administration looked to the military for support and the means to carry out all civil projects."

⁷⁶⁶ See especially Viliam, *History of Aid to Laos*, who is a former RLG official who worked in the responsible department.

⁷⁶⁷ Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos*. Viliam, *History of Aid to Laos*. Americans may have shown Lao entirely new practices of corruption, not unlike they did in the Philippines.

⁷⁶⁸ Quoted in Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos*.

government of Souvanna Phouma, effectively dismantling the first coalition government. As much as US officials criticized the Royal Lao Government for corruption, they did so selectively, when it served their purpose. US complaints of Royal Lao Government corruption also served to disguise US manipulation of the government via aid. US aid was therefore used as a weapon. Just before his death, the stalwart US ally Katay Sasorith himself criticized the US aid program.⁷⁶⁹ Ostensibly he complained about the US failure to pay on time, noting the French were never late. But what he was really talking about was a thinly-veiled criticism of the US for using aid to control the country. The comparison to the former colonial power France was not flattering.

In yet more divisive ways, US aid undermined the Royal Lao Government. The US deemed the RLG unfit for the purpose, so it went about creating what has been described as a parallel government: every department of each ministry of the RLG had a US counterpart.⁷⁷⁰ These US aid agencies would, in fact, be the ones distributing aid, especially in the rural areas. Thus, Washington became a wedge between the RLG and its own people, preventing the RLG from garnering more popularity among the people, by distributing the aid itself. Moreover, some Lao complained in the press openly about the racism they experienced in their dealings with these “foreign” aid organizations, such as a letter to the editor of September 22, 1965:

I, your humble servant am one of the Lao people that has the true blood of the Lao race, by having buried [my] placenta in these Lao lands, truly. In the past your humble servant had served the Lao nation, as a soldier, since the time of French rule.

Your humble servant is moreover a person that did right by the Lao nation. Now your humble servant did leave from duties in government soldiery to go to the offices of the various organizations which are foreign [ຊາວຕ່າງຊັງ] owned. But [I] was disappointed because the said organizations do not want Lao persons although they have work there [in Laos]. Your humble servant has ability sufficient to work. If [one] speaks of the carrying of heavy burdens then your humble servant has

⁷⁶⁹ Halpern, “The Lao elite,” p. 53.

⁷⁷⁰ Viliam, *History of Aid to Laos*, p. xii. Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 130, which is an aid structure that in his estimation “could only be described as neo-colonial.” Askew et al., *Vientiane*, p. 137. The Pathet Lao were no different in this regard as North Vietnam “had advisers working at all levels of the nascent Pathet Lao state structure,” since 1954. See Goscha, “Vietnam and the outside world,” p. 171.

the energy enough that [I] can fight. Then what reason do they thus not employ your humble servant?
Why do they thus employ only Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai and other races?⁷⁷¹

This account should not simply be dismissed if one is to attempt an understanding of US-RLG relations in the neo-colonial years. The editor thought it was important enough to print it in a major newspaper daily in the capital. It may well have been indicative of more common experiences by others in dealing with the American presence. Jacobs has noted that the American community at km6 was *defacto* a segregated community, a reality confirmed in interviews with Americans who were there at the time.⁷⁷² What the Americans were either ignorant or insensitive to was the fact that the Lao had seen the same behavior already before during French colonial rule when the French employed Vietnamese in the colonial administration, mostly excluding Lao and otherwise isolating themselves from the Lao. One of the major Issara demands concerned how the French had made the Lao into a minority in their own country. Now it was happening again, courtesy of the Lao's purported friend and ally, the US.

Yet US aid more than anything else undermined RLG sovereignty and went against stated American policy to support a free government in Laos. Once the RLG was criticized for its use of foreign aid, which was never as vicious as in the American press, it was a charge that the government was never able to dismiss. In fact, the pro-government candidates lost the 1958 election to Pathet Lao due to charges of official corruption concerning US aid. The Lao people were also made aware of how the US controlled the RLG via aid, thus seeing their government as nothing more than a puppet of foreign powers. In the semi-colonial years, the Issara had criticized the loyalist government as a puppet, yet here the Lao were undermined by their own ally. Thus in

⁷⁷¹ *Lan Xang Kaona*, ["voices from the country"] September 22, 1965, p. 5. "voices from the country", was a recurring feature in the paper, which publishes letters sent to the paper. The letter was signed "from one of the people, [who] kicks the dust".

⁷⁷² Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling*, p. 99. See further Askew et. al, *Vientiane*, p. 140-141. Grant Evans, "Interview with James Chamberlain conducted by Grant Evans," *Journal of Lao Studies* v. 1, no. 1, 2010, p. 88.

the neo-colonial era, the RLG was delivered a fatal blow from which it never fully recovered. This only became clear in 1975 when the revolution swept away the RLG in a wave of passionate, popular anti-American fury (see further chapter eight).⁷⁷³

In this era, the Eisenhower administration's clash with the RLG and its pursuit of a disastrous attempt to install a dictator after 1958 was not due to anti-communism, but because the RLG elite did not accept to be controlled by the USA, even the so-called "rightists" like Katay Sasortih and Phoui Sananikone. For instance, Katay at times resisted US meddling during his term as Prime Minister.⁷⁷⁴ Phoui famously plunged the country into crisis when he openly declared a state of emergency, closed the National Assembly for a year and announced Laos would join the free world, threatening the 1954 Geneva accords.⁷⁷⁵ Yet he was not willing to be a blind servant to the US either. In December 1959, he lifted the state of emergency and expelled CDIN members from his cabinet, before he was himself ousted from power. If even the "rightists" were refusing to be pliant clients of the US and to march their country into the emerging Vietnam War, what was the US to do? Yet the critical miscalculation the Eisenhower administration made in dealing with Laos was that it failed to recognize there were genuine anti-communists in the country who were ready to defend their country against communist expansion.⁷⁷⁶ The US was stymied further in the early 1960s by Phoumi Nosavan, the so-called US strongman who refused to participate in negotiations to form the second coalition government.⁷⁷⁷ Later General Kouprasith Abhay and

⁷⁷³ See for example, Bounsang Khamkeo, *I Little Slave: A Prison Memoir From Communist Laos* (Cheney: Eastern Washington University Press, 2006) which includes an eyewitness account of the revolution, especially the events surrounding the Pathet Lao entering Vientiane in August 1975. See also the forced closure of the USAID compound.

⁷⁷⁴ Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling*, p. 55-58. At other times Katay cooperated with the US.

⁷⁷⁵ The closing of the National Assembly to deny the Pathet Lao to take their seats appears to be a similar tactic to Philippines treatment of the Huks.

⁷⁷⁶ I have argued in the introduction of this chapter that both the US and the RLG were fundamentally anti-communist, which offered the basis of cooperation, but the Eisenhower administration itself only acknowledged some RLG politicians as true anti-communists while excluding others. This was the font of the problem.

⁷⁷⁷ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 121-122.

Police General Siho Lanphouthacoul would launch a coup in April 1964 without US support. Even the pretender dictators were non-compliant with the US. Finally, Washington's failure to install a dictator led to the restoration of full democracy as the only viable option for Laos. Yet the US had already missed any chance of a broad alliance with the Royal Lao Government, and had instead undermined the kingdom's popular support at the very moment it was fighting for its life.

Conclusion: The War Against Communism

It is often said of anti-communist regimes that they were not able to articulate clearly the values and ideals for which they stood. In contrast to other anti-communist nationalisms in the early Cold War, the Royal Lao Government forged a new national identity that was modern, anti-communist, and at times neutralist, with an established tradition of democracy. There was some inner-struggle among the elite over priorities among competing values of anti-communism, democracy and neutralism, yet few ever completely abandoned any one value. The elite made an enormous effort to elaborate their vision of a modern Lao nation and to popularize this among the masses. At the center of this view of the nation stood the elite's anti-communism which had at its heart Lao culture, tradition, society, and Buddhism. To be a communist was not just to be the enemy, but to be un-Lao. In the Cold War, this cultural anti-communism mutated into a new form that resisted Chinese and Vietnamese communist imperialism.

Yet the preference for democracy and neutralism could also prevent one from being totally exiled from society for communist sympathies, as Bong Souvannavong's support of the communist NLHX during the 1958 supplementary elections showed. Thus, in the neo-colonial years, the country was the scene for numerous unresolved clashes between democracy, neutralism and anti-communism. While democracy did prevail in the short-term as the Royal Lao Government resisted

US attempts to install a pliant leader, nevertheless it had been dealt a crippling blow, a slow poison, that would lead inexorably to its downfall in 1975 amidst a profoundly anti-American revolution – the moment when neutralism finally triumphed over anti-communism. In this way, Lao anti-communism was never able to extricate itself from too close relations with the US, which took shape in these years. Even though Lao anti-communism rallied around traditional culture, its long-term survival was compromised by being caught in the Cold War embrace of the US.

Anticommunism was the lifeblood of the Kingdom yet it was also defective. The US and the elite shared an antagonism toward communism, yet they each started from different basic assumptions.⁷⁷⁸ The US believed the “antidote” to communism was to create a market economy and plant the seeds of capitalism, even though this in effect had great dislocating effects on Lao (see chapter five). The Lao elite for their part believed their culture and religion meant their people were naturally resistant to communism: they would never abandon Buddhism, which was in conflict with communism, nor would they submit to the massive social upheaval and toppling of the social order which communism called for.⁷⁷⁹

In retrospect, both the US and Lao elite approaches to the problem were not good enough. One can imagine that if the US and the Lao elite had cooperated more effectively from the beginning, that perhaps they could have found a better solution than either found working alone. But this level of cooperation was not possible at the time. Just as it missed an opportunity with democracy during the semi-colonial years, so the West missed another such possibility regarding

⁷⁷⁸ See for one example Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 369 where John Foster Dulles told Souvanna Phouma at their Washington meeting on January 13, 1958 “Since we approach the problem [of international communism] from a different viewpoint, we perhaps reach different conclusions. We respected those of the Prime Minister and hoped he would ours, each recognizing an element of rightness in the views of the other.” Ibid, p. 370 notes this comment was inaccurate regarding US Ambassador to the RLG Graham Parsons.

⁷⁷⁹ In generalizing, I risk treating the Lao elite as monolithic when the reality was one of a broad, diverse array of views that defy easy categorizing. Thank you to Ian Baird and Bruce Lockhart.

anti-communism in the neo-colonial years. Thus one observer claimed “there is no close cultural affinity between Americans and Laotians which might cause us concern about that country’s future.”⁷⁸⁰ In both cases, the central problem was that the West – first France, then the US – ignored the elite, without which their efforts were doomed to fail.

Finally, with the outbreak of war in 1959 it is worth asking, what did the elite think they were fighting for? The CDIN, which was in power at the time, was hyper-nationalist, jealously guarded its independence, and appeared at the same time the military had an enlarged role in the country to the point that even the wider society had become militarized.⁷⁸¹ These factors combined to result in a masculine, chauvinistic nationalism that was virulently anti-communist; RLG ideology was maturing among the elite. Many of the elite believed that communism was an existential threat which would lead to racial extinction – the same as colonialism had appeared to the Issara. Thus, in the semi-colonial years, the elite Issara feared racial annihilation by the French and Vietnamese. Now in the neo-colonial years, the elite CDIN feared communist China and North Vietnam would do the same. The Cold War in Laos was to the RLG elite a struggle for the survival, with echoes of Social-Darwinism. The Royal Lao Government was thus fighting the Pathet Lao and their allies North Vietnam, communist China and the Soviet Union to defend the independence of the modern country they had created, which was culturally Lao, Buddhist and, above all, anti-communist. Even as the country slid into war under the CDIN’s leadership, there were those among the elite who disagreed, seeking to maintain democracy and promote neutrality as the best way to keep the country anti-communist, but war overtook them.

⁷⁸⁰ Len Ackland, “No Place for Neutralism: The Eisenhower Administration and Laos,” in (eds.) Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) p. 139.

⁷⁸¹ Creak, *Embodied Nation*, chapter three. Creak offers the only study on masculinity, military and nationalism at this time.

CHAPTER FIVE: HIGH CULTURE AND MODERNITY

Introduction

There were important cultural trends much more in the hands of the elite themselves than previously realized, yet which nonetheless had far reaching consequences for the State. The earlier cultural nationalism coalesced around new nationalist projects among the elite – specifically concerning projects to create a modern national history and a modern national language and literature. What was distinct from earlier periods was that in the neo-colonial years, the elite now had direct access to the state organs, and for the first time used them to promote their views, especially an exclusionary hyper-nationalist idea of a “Lao race” (ຊາດລາວ) and nation. With it, the elite defended the Lao language from foreign influence, especially in literary works. The leaders of the RLG felt they must forge a new nationalism to unite the country, and that this was vital to confront all the challenges facing the country. Yet at the same time not enough attention was given to the problem of how the new national identity would impact minority, ethnically non-Lao peoples in the country or for that matter relations with neighboring countries.⁷⁸² The elite simply tried to assimilate minorities to the dominant Lao culture, which was an inherently risky venture in the most ethnically diverse country in Southeast Asia.⁷⁸³

This important cross-road was reached at the very same moment the RLG leaders made war with the Red Sino-Vietnamese, initiating a conflict that was infused with ethnic tensions. These trends, the idea of a “Lao race,” discrimination of minorities and ethnic tensions with

⁷⁸² Regarding ethnic minorities Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (Crow's Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2002), p. 134 argues the Royal Lao Government was not ethnocentric, but the preponderance of evidence seems to challenge that assessment.

⁷⁸³ Some have estimated there are around 200 different ethno-linguistic groups in a country the size of France or the US state of Utah.

geopolitical adversaries, were in fact all linked to form a unique ideology discernable among the writings of a number of the RLG elite. Clearly, the RLG leaders did not lack for nationalism. If anything, they suffered from an over-abundance of nationalism that was expressed as a new exuberance that itself could be oppressive for non-Lao living in the country. This failing was exploited by the Pathet Lao, who advocated for equality among all ethnic groups as well as offering leading roles in the revolution to those of diverse ethnic backgrounds.⁷⁸⁴ I will address how these cultural trends among the RLG elite influenced the opening stages of the Second Indochina War in the conclusion.

Yet the elite were never in isolation in the neo-colonial years. There were important new cultural currents coming from abroad in these years. The most important influence was from the US, the new Cold War ally. The US offered a new model of modernity and new example of anti-communism, which influenced Lao thinking on these matters. Moreover, early American cultural influences can be observed in Lao travel-writings on visiting the US and in the emergence of new civic organizations influenced by the US such as the Lao Scouts. At the same time there was an unmistakable early anti-American sentiment discernable even before 1960, especially in elite writings. The Kongle coup was a major crystalizing of previously latent anti-American feeling. The Pathet Lao were the major source of anti-Americanism in the country. They saw little

⁷⁸⁴ Thanks to Bruce Lockhart for this comment. Equality among all ethnic groups had been part of the Pathet Lao platform since the movement's creation in August 1950. See "Principle Points of the First Program of the Neo Lao Issara, 1950" in Brown, MacAlister and Joseph J. Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930-1985* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), p. 288. Yet in some NLHX publications one finds reference to a "Kha race" that is portrayed as "primitive." See Phoumi Vongvichit, *Les Laos et la lutte victorieuse du peuple lao contre le néo-colonialisme Américain* (n.p.: éditions du néo lao haksat, 1968), p. 19. See further *ibid* p. 21 which refers to the "Kha" as leading "a primitive life at a very low level," who do not possess writing, and are "very superstitious." This was due to their "ancient oppression and domination of more evolved nationalities" – but Phoumi did find reason to celebrate a spirit of resistance ("there have been and remain indomitable fighters").

difference between the Americans and the French, thus capitalizing on the already existing anti-foreign sentiments in the country.

Vital to the future of the country was a renewed drive to modernize, especially after 1954, when the First Indochina War ended and US aid began to pour in. The “red prince” Souphanouvong, who was economic planning minister during the first coalition government, worked to the same goal to see the country modernize.⁷⁸⁵ Yet modernization was itself one of the key areas of ideological contention during the Cold War.⁷⁸⁶ There were two competing models of modernity in the aftermath of World War II as Europe lay in ruins: American capitalism and Soviet socialism. Just as happened with anti-communism, the Lao quest for modernity experienced a shift in the neo-colonial years, from viewing France as the model of modernity to turning to the US, which presented itself in diverse ways. But the drive to modernize the country had existed at least since the colonial era, and was a long-held aspiration of the elite and people alike. The quest for modernity was thus of central importance to the country’s leaders appeal to win popular support for the young state. By the early 1960s, Royal Lao Government leaders were even bold enough to claim some success in overcoming chronic underdevelopment in the country, which not even the French had conquered. Yet that assessment was problematic. While the quest for modernity was key to how the elite saw themselves, its very failures – rising income-inequality, corrupt misuse of aid and the outbreak of the Second Indochina War – was the wedge that allowed the Pathet Lao communist movement to come between the government and the people and usurp popular legitimacy from the RLG. Therefore, the government lived and died by its quest for modernity just

⁷⁸⁵ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 109.

⁷⁸⁶ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

as much as the elite did by their creation of a “Lao race,” which were never just side-projects, but were in fact central to the state.

Nationalist Literature and Language Project

The neo-colonial years were a time of great political upheaval and violent Cold War confrontation, during which the RLG very nearly was toppled several times before 1975. These dramatic events have captured scholarly attention, obscuring long-term cultural and social change.⁷⁸⁷ Yet major cultural works continued to be created by the elite, seemingly heedless of any political crisis, as the cultural nationalist writings begun in the 1930s reached their logical conclusion in the neo-colonial years. With the elite free to publish without fear of French repression, the RLG made a number of moves on the cultural front to forge a nationalist identity, through a nationalist literature and language project and a history project. In respect of history, the ex-Issara exclusionary hyper nationalist view came to hold sway at the expense of the old loyalist multi-ethnic nationalism. In the area of language, by contrast, the outcome was less clear-cut and ex-Issara and former-loyalists continued to clash, especially over the standardization of language. In their struggles they laid the foundations for modern Lao culture. Whether it was literature, or history, the elite looked for antecedents in the distant past, making important connections between the RLG and the earlier Lao kingdoms, thus portraying their post-colonial nation as timeless and eternal.⁷⁸⁸

The Literature Committee produced more modern works on Lao culture, language and literature in the neo-colonial years than at any time ever before, profoundly reshaping

⁷⁸⁷ Works by Grant Evans and Simon Creak are the only ones to investigate cultural history in the RLG.

⁷⁸⁸ See further, Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

understanding of Lao culture, redefining what is known of “Lao literature,” and the “Lao language.” Yet it is important to view these sustained efforts, by far the largest elite project during the Royal Lao Government era, in the context of other nationalist projects of the time.⁷⁸⁹ The elite worked to modernize their culture. They sought to revive literature and language, to modernize it in order to save it from being lost forever. They saw themselves as the “lamplight” which is how members of the elite repeatedly posed themselves.⁷⁹⁰ Although their efforts were a continuation of the earlier *Lao Nyai* World War II campaigns, the elite were now charting their own course without any foreign collaborator. The symbolism of the Literature Committee is evident in their seal – showing palm leaf manuscripts in a shining halo above a stack of modern books – which began to appear on later works to indicate the central purpose of the Literature Committee, bridging modernity and tradition.⁷⁹¹

In some works, the elite of the Literature Committee attempted to create a compendium of knowledge on the Lao. In so doing, they took on the role of the guardians of Lao culture in a broad sense. In the neo-colonial years this appears most clearly in the *Bibliographie du Laos*, which appeared in 1958. This work was compiled by the old loyalist Thao Kéne. As he explains in the forward:

The works treating Laos are numerous, and their domain varied, from anthropology to archaeology, to ethnography or botany, from the precise research of the specialist to the relation of a voyage or a popular work. Some are almost inaccessible in our day, and their research proves difficult [to find]. The libraries of neighboring countries: Cambodia, Thailand, Viet-nam, offer nonetheless of not negligible resources, as well as others, more distant, like France, England or Germany.

Laos by its isolating geography and its difficult access, without [an] outlet to the sea, with rare means of interior communication, is still for a long time badly or little known. But the mores and customs

⁷⁸⁹ Koret, “Books of Search” and Nick Enfield “Laos as a national language” in Evans (ed.), *Laos: Culture and Society*.

⁷⁹⁰ Pierre Nginn, ບັນນາທິການຖະແລງ [“Editor’s forward”] *Literature*, October 1953, no. 2, p. 2. See also Oun Sananikon’s forward in Oukham Phoummavong, ສົມເດັດພະເຈົ້າໄຊເຊດຖາມະຫາຣາຊ [“His Majesty Xai Settha, High-King”] (Vientiane: National Chamber of Commerce, 1959), p. viii.

⁷⁹¹ One antecedent to this symbol would be the Issara 50 ອັດ currency notes which included the image of a palm leaf manuscript surrounded by a halo floating above a silver offering bowl. See fonds Jean Deuve, dossier number 4.

of its peaceful inhabitants, their rare spirit of tolerance have long since sharpened the curiosity of researchers.

The present bibliography will try to rejoin their accounts and their studies.

We try to have, without any ambition, the simple desire to make the work useful and as to serve our dear country.⁷⁹²

The bibliography consisted of Western and Lao elite scholarly works, predominantly in French. It can be seen as a claim by some members of the Literature Committee to being the inheritors of French learning. The ex-loyalists may have felt it necessary to publish this work in order that newly arrived powers like the US could understand the country better. Yet they also listed their own works on literature (*Sin Xai*, 1953; *Inthignan son luk*, 1954; *Sieo Savat*, 1955; *Xieng Mieng* 1956), on culture (*prapheni bouhan*, 1955; *thammasat lao*, 1956), and on religion (Pali Tripitaka, 1956). They also listed issues of their journal *Literature*, early drafts of their grammar (1954) and their constitution. They further listed Issara and loyalist works (e.g. *Kinnary*) by Pierre Nginn, Ourot Souvannavong, Phouvong Phimmasone, Somlith Pathammavong, and Katay Sasorith among others. They saw these as the essential works to know and understand the country.

In the neo-colonial years, the Literature Committee found itself doing much more mundane and practical duties such as editing works, and even serving as the censor for the RLG. In one letter to the author of a work he edited, Thao Kéne wrote “I have checked and inspected it...it is of great benefit...thus I corrected and modified it only slightly in some places...”⁷⁹³ This showed the Literature Committee indeed had the power to alter texts before publication. Thao Kéne would applaud a work for being written according to the “true version.”⁷⁹⁴ In this way the Literature Committee posed as the arbiter of truth concerning matters of Lao culture and history. James Chamberlain has observed how Maha Sila Viravong himself often censored objectionable content

⁷⁹² Thao Kéne, *Bibliographie du Laos* (Vientiane, Edition du Comité Littéraire, 1958), p. i.

⁷⁹³ Oukham, *His Majesty Xai Settha the High-King*, p. iii

⁷⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

in Lao literature in the process of preparing a modern popular version of traditional tales. There was thus a certain moralism at the Literature Committee's core. Yet it was not without perhaps some irony that in pursuit of the new standardization the Ministry of Education solicited help from a Thai expert to set up its standards department.⁷⁹⁵

There were a number of literary works “saved” in the neo-colonial years.⁷⁹⁶ There were for instance multiple versions of the Lao epic masterwork, *Sin Xai* published in these years. The Literature Committee first produced the story in the original verse, then followed in 1958 with a prose version that would contribute to its program to popularize the great literature, making it accessible to the people.⁷⁹⁷ The 1958 version of *Sin Xai* is notable in that it prominently features the author's name, Thao Pang Kham, along with the year of its composition, 1644, on the book cover. Besides this, Sila identified other authors as well, such as a certain Kun who he claimed was the Lao author of the trickster tales *Xieng Mieng*.⁷⁹⁸ Traditional Lao literary conventions were such that the author for the vast majority of Lao works was unknown, choosing to remain anonymous. But during the neo-colonial years new views on authorship were forming and authors themselves began to be promoted. In the 1958 edition of *Sin Xai*, the Literature Committee was elevating the author Pang Kham to the stature of a Homer or a Shakespeare. By listing the editor who made corrections to the work, Sila, and the date, the 1958 edition of *Sin Xai* was itself a vivid representation of how the Royal Lao Government was reviving the golden age of Lan Xang, restoring priceless works of literature, and even rescuing genius authors from obscurity. Sila

⁷⁹⁵ The Thai expert was Phon Momluangmanith Soumsai. See the forward in Sila Viravong, ວັດທະນະທຳພາສາລາວ [“Lao language dictionary”] (Vientiane: Ministry of Education, 1960), p. ii.

⁷⁹⁶ Koret, “Books of Search.”

⁷⁹⁷ Thao Bangkham, ຫ້າງສິສັງສິນໄຊ ທ້າວບາງຄຳແຕ່ງເມື່ອປີສລູ ພຸທສັກຮາດ 2187 ແກ້ໄຂໂດຍມະຫາສິລາວິຣະວົງສ໌ ພຸທສັກຮາດ 2501 [“Sang Sin Xai book Thao Bang Kham composer in the year of the Ox, Buddhist Era 2187, corrections by Maha Sila Viravong, Buddhist Era 2501”] (Vientiane: Kingdom of Laos, 1958).

⁷⁹⁸ Sila Viravong, ຄຳອະທິບາຍ [“Explanatory note”] in ຫ້າງສິນທານລຽງໜັງງ ຕຫລັມ 1 [“The tales of Xieng Mieng, vol. 1”] (Vientiane: Edition du Comité Littéraire, 1963) p. ໑. Second printing.

himself was elsewhere feted by the Ministry of Education in terms of his “knowledge, industry, heroism.”⁷⁹⁹

The project to compile a national literature did not always lead to the obvious conclusion. For instance, Sila had some surprising things to say in his discussion on the tales of *Xieng Mieng*, including that the story was in fact “from the Thai, or that Xieng Mieng was a Thai person.”⁸⁰⁰ He drew this conclusion from a passage which said that Sithanonchai had come to trick the Lao, by blocking the den of the Nagas, who protected the city, thereby allowing the Thai to invade Vientiane.⁸⁰¹ Sila was willing to concede that the Thai character Sithanonchai was created earlier than the Lao Xieng Mieng in deference to the popular use of it to narrate the downfall of the Kingdom of Vientiane, but he also pointed to a strong anti-Thai feeling surrounding the stories as well. Either way, he went on to say that the Lao version, Xieng Mieng, was unique from the earlier Thai or Pali versions because it recast the stories as humorous political satires. Yet the most interesting observation related to his own time:

Besides that [the composer] had the purpose, wanting to insult [ວ່າ] the bosses, the officials, the senior elite [ຜູ້ໃຫຍ່] indirectly. Because in that age, there still were not newspapers insulting each other; and the bosses of that age were people who held unquestionable absolute power, [one] cannot criticize [them].⁸⁰²

Sila’s reading of the famous political satires led to his projecting his own times onto the stories, including the volatile press of the neo-colonial years. Yet his comment also spoke more broadly of the transition from the era of absolute monarchy to popular sovereignty. While he seemed to belittle the newspapers of his own time for printing “insults,” these same criticisms of the powerful

⁷⁹⁹ Thao Nyuy Abhay, ຄຳນຳຂອງກະຊວງສຶກສາທິການ [“Forward of the Ministry of Education”] in Sila, *Lao language dictionary*, p. i.

⁸⁰⁰ Sila, *Xieng Mieng*, p. ໑.

⁸⁰¹ The excerpt does not specify whether this is 1778 or 1827-1828.

⁸⁰² Sila, *Xieng Mieng*, p. ໓.

had been elevated to the status of art in stories like Xieng Mieng, who was famous for mocking and fooling the high and mighty. While the modern era was seen by Sila as both more mundane, open, and free, nonetheless the RLG represented a unique time in which a vibrant open public sphere existed contrasting with earlier times where dissent could only take the form of subversive satire.

But the masterworks of the Literature Committee in the neo-colonial years would have to be the many dictionaries, both monolingual and bilingual, that were produced under its supervision. Collectively, the dictionaries demonstrated mastery over, and new authority on the Lao language. The center-piece would be the first modern monolingual Lao dictionary.⁸⁰³ The ex-Issara and former loyalists each worked to produce their own versions. Yet only one such dictionary, by Maha Sila Viravong, was ever published in 1960. Previously all dictionaries and lexicons were the products of foreign scholars, especially the French. Consequently, the Literature Committee dictionaries represented a clear break from the past. The Lao language would no longer be considered a branch of Thai, or as the Thai called it, the “little Tai” script (ตัวไทน้อย). Even the French had not always considered Lao as its own language, but at times adopted the modern Thai view that it was merely a dialect of Thai.⁸⁰⁴ Such a view was itself a product of the nineteenth century political domination of the Thai over the Lao. Thus, the Literature Committee worked to produce new dictionaries in order to protect and defend the Lao language, and to modernize it to

⁸⁰³ See further Kongdeuane Nettavong, Bounleuth Sengsoulin, Khamvone Boulyaphonh, Volker Grabowsky and Hans Georg Berger, *Pha Bunchankaeo Phothichitto and Lao Philology* (Bangkok: Anantha Publishing, 2012), which includes an account of an earlier, unpublished monolingual dictionary by Pha Bunchankaeo Phothichitto and his commentaries on the 1960 dictionary.

⁸⁰⁴ Bruce Lockhart has suggested the Thai treatment of Lao language as a dialect was related to early twentieth century efforts to assimilate the Lao as Issan.

ensure its independence in the modern world. In general, the elite viewed the independence of the Lao language as intrinsically linked to the independence of the RLG.

The publication of Sila's 10,249-word Lao language dictionary in 1960 was something of a scandal that nearly broke up the Literature Committee. It was only published in small numbers and was said to be a "temporary" edition by the Ministry of Education.⁸⁰⁵ This was due to a conflict between Sila and the other members of the Literature Committee over various aspects of the dictionary. In Sila's forward to the work, which does not appear in any reprint, he defended his publishing of the dictionary without the final approval of the Literature Committee. He cited the 1951 royal decree establishing the Literature Committee and noted that its original task was to standardize the language, including orthography, which a dictionary was vital to achieve. He went on to explain the rift as it appeared during the Literature Committee's work on the dictionary:

...But when the committee did meet together, many times since 1952 (B.E. 2495) on, they were not able to unite to compile [the dictionary] easily. [That's] because the committee, each member, except for senior government officials, had many work difficulties remaining; and some gentlemen served as government officials in foreign countries, always, each time for many months. Therefore, the committee really did meet [and] saw the good of entrusting this work to your humble servant [Sila] to be the compiler and to unify [ທ້ອນໄຮມ] all the Lao words. When that was done suitably, then really [I] did offer [the dictionary] to the committee, [who] met, to discuss [and] decide each word. Doing [it] like this, was not easy again because...the committee was forced to lose time arguing [ຖຽງກັນ] for many hours before agreement. If [it] certainly went on like this, [I] saw that the majority will fall to trap one-another in every word. It would take twenty or thirty years to finish. The committee saw [the problem] and discussed, seeing that now [it] was urgent that our nation must have immediate use of a dictionary in order to stipulate the writing of Lao books, and the Lao language to be correct, to be one and the same system, because our Lao country was an independent country...⁸⁰⁶

Sila saw the nation's urgent need for a standard dictionary was more important than any disagreement among members of the Literature Committee. According to Sila, the other members

⁸⁰⁵ Sila, *Lao language dictionary*, p. i. See also Allen Kerr's review of Sila's dictionary. Allen D. Kerr, "Vachnanoukrom Pahsah Lao: A Laotian Dictionary by Maha Sila Viravongs," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 21, 4 (Aug. 1962). He notes it was based on an earlier version "prepared" in 1957, p. 570.

⁸⁰⁶ Sila, *Lao language dictionary*, p. ii

then felt the same nationalist impulse and there was a moment of cooperation on the Literature Committee afterward, in the spirit of nationalism, but that too ultimately failed:

The Literature Committee saw the necessity as [I've] said here. Thus [it] really did meet to consult and seek a way that would make the dictionary appear immediately. Then [it] agreed that [it] must seek an able person...to come help compile the vocabulary, joining with your humble servant...But this agreement was impossible again with obstructions of many kinds. Therefore, your humble servant really did receive permission from the Committee to be the work centralizer; and compile words, but by myself alone until now. Your humble servant confesses here that this dictionary must have a great number of words that are lacking, [and] deficient. This is because the spoken language of Lao, in each region, each locality [one] accepts [is] much different from another because our Lao country has people of many tribes mixed together and has regions bordering many countries, which causes [us] to have language differences among each other...⁸⁰⁷

The rift between Sila and the other members of the Literature Committee made standardization of the language difficult. Lao of the north, the south, or the Vientiane area would not agree to elevate one regional dialect above the others as the new national standard.⁸⁰⁸ Thus, the Literature Committee was divided by regionalism concerning the national language. But it would not be fair to take this conflict to mean that any member of the committee was not a strong nationalist. It was merely a tension of the emerging nationalism that was for the most part manageable.⁸⁰⁹

The Ministry of Education's role in the dictionary controversy is interesting. It was then headed by Thao Nyuy Abhay. The Minister explained the need for the dictionary was to standardize language.⁸¹⁰ He gave examples of teachers in the class room not teaching a uniform curriculum, which grew all the more pressing with the expansion of the national education system and a national reading audience who expected standardized spelling in the press and other publications. Nyuy echoed Sila when he complained that the Literature Committee's corrections

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid, p. iii.

⁸⁰⁸ This issue appeared across Asia in the post-colonial period. India elevated Hindi, but many protested and sought to redrawn state lines on a linguistic basis representing the dominate local language. The Philippines resisted elevating Tagalog instead preferring a foreign language, English, to serve as a lingua-franca.

⁸⁰⁹ On the other hand, the most serious manifestation of southern regionalism was perhaps the repeated proposals made by General Phoumi Nosavan to partition the country and abandon the north to communist forces. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 442.

⁸¹⁰ Ibid, p. i.

would “take many more years.”⁸¹¹ The Ministry of Education was not concerned with the finer technical points and authorized the publication of the work. Whether it forced the Literature Committee to yield or circumvented it entirely is unclear, but Sila himself said that the “senior government officials” on the Literature Committee were the only ones who did not object to his work.⁸¹² If so, the government showed more concern to affirm a modern national education by standardizing the language than to become lost in academic disputes. In the end, Sila was able to out-manuever his critics on the Literature Committee by giving his dictionary and history directly to the Ministry of Education, which then promoted his works as the “standard” (ມາດຕະຖານ) of RLG in their respective fields.⁸¹³ The ex-Issara Sila’s dictionary became the popularly accepted version, reprinted several times while no other monolingual dictionary was printed before 1975. Given that the old loyalists neither produced a monolingual dictionary nor a major history work, they seemed to be somewhat overshadowed in the neo-colonial era, at least in the culture field.

But one of the most pressing matters for the Literature Committee to address was the proliferation of new foreign words across the kingdom, a problem since the semi-colonial years with the rise of French language acquisition that only grew more intense in the neo-colonial years. Several dictionaries, monolingual and bilingual, would seek to impose order over the new foreign words. They would also seek to domesticate them. So many new foreign words appeared, it seemed as if the Lao language itself was becoming secondary under the rise of French and English. Simply adopting a foreign loan word in its French or English form risked rendering the Lao language incoherent and unintelligible. Therefore, a concerted effort was made to find Pali root-words to

⁸¹¹ Ibid.

⁸¹² Ibid, p. ii.

⁸¹³ Ibid, p. i.

serve as an equivalent to the French or English terms especially.⁸¹⁴ While Pali was itself foreign to all but the highest monks of the sangha, it would be used as an alternate source of terminology to that of French or English words, thereby serving to domesticate the new foreign terms and facilitate their use in everyday spoken language.

One of the reasons the Ministry of Education promoted Sila's dictionary was because it dealt with the issue of loan-words. Sila addressed the issue of word origins in a guide to the dictionary. In the guide, he explains that he marked each word that came from another language, as follows:

C. Etymology

1. Words which have a base [one] knows came from another language, [I] will indicate the name of that language at the end of the word, explaining [such] with a short letter in parenthesis like (P) meaning Pali, [or] (S) meaning Sanskrit. And if the Lao alphabet is sufficient to write, for comparison, the original form of the word, it is also offered ...

2. True Lao words and words that are not known for certain where they came from, [I] do not indicate [any] origin with [it].⁸¹⁵

He then listed all the languages Lao words are derived from including Vietnamese, Khmer, Chinese, Thai, French, English, and Hindi among others.⁸¹⁶

Sila took up the task in his work to separate "true" Lao words, those that he saw as indigenous, from those that were foreign; yet he included among the "true" those of uncertain origin, which lessened the coherence of the category, and pointed to the ambiguous nature of his efforts. But he was driven to do this anyway because it fit with the aims of the nationalist language project, which was not only to create a national language, but also to defend it from foreign, especially Western influences. The rising use of English and French was to be kept under watch,

⁸¹⁴ Enfield, "Lao as a national language," p. 259.

⁸¹⁵ Sila, *Lao language dictionary* (Vientiane: Ministry of Education, 1963 [reprint]), p. ໓.

⁸¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. ໔.

and the Lao language was to be promoted and elaborated wherever possible. Scholars have pointed to a conflict in the Literature Committee among those who supported spelling words according to “orthography,” or “phonetically.”⁸¹⁷ Sila has been viewed as an advocate for orthography, but he only supported it for Pali-root words. When French and English words appeared they added much confusion to his system and he saw no need to write them any way other than phonetically.⁸¹⁸

Nationalist History Project

There was a wave of new histories written during the neo-colonial years. The most well-known of them was by Sila Viravong, which would be translated into English in 1964, but there were also important works by Oukham Phomvongsa, and Khamman Vongkottrattana, and others as well, including some by former loyalists. Collectively, these were the first modern national histories of the country written by the Lao themselves, a new generation of modernist historians whose efforts marked a distinct break with the past.⁸¹⁹ Tempered by the quest for modernity, which they used to reimagine the past, modern historians were now for the first time able to pursue the entirety of their history with modern historical methods, presenting a complete narrative of the Lao. Reflecting the recent shift to the era of popular sovereignty and modern democracy, they gave special attention to the vexing question of the origins of the Lao people, seeking to define and detail it as much as possible. Their most significant finding was the discovery of the “birth of the Lao race” (ກຳເນີດຊາດລາວ).⁸²⁰ Taken together, these efforts were central to the Royal Lao

⁸¹⁷ Enfield, “Laos as a national language,” p.265-266.

⁸¹⁸ Sila, *Lao language dictionary*, p. iii.

⁸¹⁹ They were to a degree anticipated by earlier Issara and loyalist works of Somlith Patthammavong and Katay Sasorith.

⁸²⁰ Maha Sila Viravong, ພົງສາວະດານລາວ [“Chronicle of the Lao”] (Vientiane: Ministère de l’éducation nationale, 1957) p. 8.

Government's attempt to forge a post-colonial nationalist identity, specifically as it was an intellectual elite project to promote nationalism through history. Historical works were thus promoted by major political figures of the Royal Lao Government, and disseminated widely through state schools, government newspapers, and radio. While the Royalist elite worked to fashion a workable identity that could resist communism and mediate with the West, it was ultimately subsumed by the old Issara view of an exclusionary form of hyper-nationalism limited to the Lao race and culture which came to dominate, especially in narratives such as the "birth of the Lao race." The central ideology of Royal Lao Government thus became an exclusionary hyper-nationalism, not inclusive of minorities, while the old loyalist multiethnic nationalism fell by the wayside. Moreover, this hyper-nationalist idea of a Lao race provided dangerous motivations and rationales that led some to plunge the country into the Second Indochina War.

The new histories were deliberately modern, yet this was not without contradiction. They would employ modern citation practices, using parenthetical or footnote notations. Some works included bibliographies of Thai, Lao and French works. Modernist historians would not say they were authors, but merely "compilers" striving to portray themselves as objective and neutral historians, presenting a truthful, original, and unabridged account, without any extraneous interpretation. A serious study of manuscripts began at this time and it became possible to challenge myths. This introduced a major difficulty inherent in the modernist program: the intellectual elite were seeking to rescue their history from obscurity, but to do this they had to bring it up to modern standards, which itself involved rejecting some portion of the tradition deemed fanciful or false.

Phetsarath himself weighed in on this problem, explaining what should be preserved and what should be removed in order to modernize Lao history in a forward to another work:

In truth, the history or the chronicles of the Lao race, there are already many volumes such as: the *Nithan Khun Bulom*, the Lan Xang chronicle, the Luang Prabang chronicle, the Champassak chronicle. But these books do not speak to the history of the Lao race, not one, because [they] are stories that are composed afterwards. Therefore the origins thus are myths [ນິທານ] in the majority. For example, [tales of] *chao ratsi* and *phi-fa phi-thaen*. To speak to the history of the Lao race, thus establish the origin, take it from Khun Bulom: from around the year 1600 of the Buddhist Era. The years up to then [it] is still yet likely [there] will be myths mixed in still. As for true history, [it is] there since the period of Phaya Lang, which is since the year 1814 Buddhist Era (1271 Christian Era). Besides that, the books I mentioned, each volume, [one must] also likely pass-over some various sections following also.⁸²¹

In Phetsarath's discourse, *nithan* had become incredible, unbelievable or fantastic. He opposed it to “true history” (ບັດສາດໂດຍແທ້). Phetsarath's views are all the more interesting because he spent the last years of his life in Laos writing a history of the country that was to be published in French and Lao.⁸²² As Phetsarath's discussion shows, there was a deep tension at work in the first nationalist histories between tradition and modernity.

The intellectual elite stated explicitly that the purpose of writing new history was to spur nationalism among the people, which was central to their project. Thus Oukham dedicated his 1959 biography of the famous sixteenth century King Xai Settha to “the countrymen who lost their lives in the defense of the nation and the revival of independence of the Lao nation, in every period, every age, to all please!”⁸²³ Thus in Oukham's work there were already signs of the later ກູຊາດ (“rescue the nation”) trope that would become a hallmark of post-1975 historiography.⁸²⁴ These statements and other similar ones confirm history was being rediscovered in the nationalist mode.

⁸²¹ Oukham Phomvongsa, ຄວາມເປັນມາຂອງລາວ ຫລືເລີ່ມຕົ້ນຂອງລາວລາວ [“The origins of the Lao or the story of the Lao race”] (Vientiane: National Youth Association, 1958), p. ໑. The date 1271 is traditionally associated with the start of the Phraya Lang line of kings, who were later overthrown by the quasi-legendary Fa Ngum.

⁸²² Evans, *The Last Century of the Lao Royalty*, p. 133. See also *ibid* p. 136, this is mentioned in Katay's eulogy of Phetsarath, “Only history and its perspectives now interested this high monarch.”

⁸²³ Oukham, *His Majesty Xai Settha the High King*, p. i.

⁸²⁴ Oliver Tappe, “Faces and Facets of the Kantosou Kou Xat – The Lao “National Liberation Struggle” in State Commemoration and Historiography,” *Asian Studies Review* vol. 37, no. 4, 2013. A similar phrase appears in Vietnam in the 1940s and perhaps in Chinese communist literature as well. Thanks to Bruce Lockhart for this comment.

Phetsarath himself had his own unique ideas on the rationale for the new history writing of the 1950s. To him it was deeply related to the post-colonial situation of the country:

Considering that we Lao did lose [our] independence, falling to be a colony of other nations for 242 years already...all the Lao people thus do not know the vast, immense history of their own nation. This is because various countries that came to be our master, prevented [historical study]. [They] did not want to let the citizens that lived under their power be able to study completely the history of their own nation. This is because [they] feared that the Lao people may be awakened, which will make the ruling of us difficult and troublesome for the one who is master.⁸²⁵

The purpose was not simply to stir nationalism among the people, but according to Phetsarath, to defend their newly won independence. This impulse had its echoes with previous Issara efforts to decolonize the mind during the late 1940s. It was not enough for France to leave the country. One had to change one's thinking from the colonial era to fully adjust to the new independent period. Phetsarath saw that people must discover their own history to realize their own capacity for greatness, which would thereby instill an independent spirit, and encourage people not to be cowed to any foreigner, including Westerners.

It is noteworthy that in all the works of this new wave of histories, there first appeared a periodization of "lost independence." What was lost must in the present be fully recovered and protected; independence was thereby fetishized among the intellectual elite. In Sila's 1957 work the "lost independence" period only constituted the years of Thai domination of the Lao, but in Oukham's later chronology it was expanded to include a period of French domination, which mirrored the Issara position in the 1940s controversies. Sila and others would revise their work to fit Oukham's periodization in later editions. Yet this also introduced a distortion into Lao history whereby even pre-colonial periods were defined by the status of the country as independent or a colony, even though such modern political notions were being used in anachronistic situations.

⁸²⁵ Oukham, *The origins of the Lao*, p. ໑-໒. Phetsarath dated the colonial era to the division of Lan Xang (traditionally dated to 1707-1713).

The center piece of the elite project to promote nationalism via history was the narrative of the “birth of the Lao race.” However, in Oukham’s work, it is clear that the “birth of the Lao race” had garnered support from across the political divide in the kingdom, from the so-called “radical” “leftist” ex-Issara like Phetsarath, to “moderates” or “neutralists” like Souvanna Phouma, and “rightists” former loyalists like Boun Oum, who all wrote forwards promoting the book. Only Souphanouvong did not publicly endorse it. Boun Oum said that Oukham’s work was a “candle” revealing that the racial ancestors of the Lao were good. He concluded that the new history should be broadcast to the world:

The study of the history of the race is important and a necessity of every race, every language [group]. The Lao race has always been a great race and has always prospered [being] civilized already... [It is] proper that all Lao people together will seek to see [it], then lead it out to be spread to all the various countries in the world to know, [and] see [it].⁸²⁶

Souvanna Phouma, then prime minister, sent a letter via his secretary noting that he had “received it and instructed [the secretary] to inform [Oukham] of his great gratitude and good wishes.”⁸²⁷

Phetsarath for his part wrote an extended forward introducing the work.

Phetsarath had by this time returned from exile in Thailand in his old age, but he was not idle. After noting the importance of history to education, in his introduction to Oukham’s history he says, “the Lao race is a race that is one of the great and old races of this world. [Of] all it is a race that has ever had civilization since long ago.”⁸²⁸ Phetsarath continued arguing that early settlements along the Yangtze were Lao, not Chinese and that the Lao thus were already a settled people in the time of Egypt and Babylon, at the dawn of Western civilization.⁸²⁹ Thus, Phetsarath

⁸²⁶ Oukham, *The origins of the Lao*, p. ໑.

⁸²⁷ Ibid, p. ໗.

⁸²⁸ Ibid, p. ໑. “ຊາດລາວເປັນຊາດທີ່ໃຫຍ່ແລະເກົ່າຊາດໜຶ່ງໃນໂລກນີ້ ທັງເປັນຊາດທີ່ເຄີຍມີຄວາມຮຸ່ງເຮືອງມາແຕ່ກ່ອນແລ້ວອີກດ້ວຍ.” Punctuation in the original.

⁸²⁹ The Lao were partly reacting against earlier notions of a greater Thai race that allegedly included the Lao. See Scott Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the creation of a Thai identity* (Singapore: National University of Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).

was able to maintain that the Lao were the “elder brother” of humanity even in the modern world.⁸³⁰ Taken together, all of these endorsements show that the “birth of Lao race” was central to how the Royalist Lao elite saw their country and their place in the wider world, especially in the neo-colonial years.

Yet what really distinguished this period was that the intellectual elite project to instill nationalism through history was not limited to the elite, but also was actively promoted by the state. For instance, the effort found support in the Ministry of Information, which praised Oukham’s work saying it would “lead the advertising [of the book] for the benefit of the study of the history of the nation for interested persons...”⁸³¹ Likewise, the Literature department promoted Sila’s history in a similar manner, which they called “a torch, shining light on the path in the dark night, a beacon to the person interested in reading of their own nation...”⁸³² Sila himself transferred his copyrights to the Ministry of Education so that they could print and distribute it “to the people all across the Lao kingdom.”⁸³³ In this way such works gained a much wider audience than at any time previously, popularizing elite views among the masses.⁸³⁴

The new history also filtered through to the schools, beginning to appear in the curriculum. The Ministry of Education for instance published a map of the ancient migration of the Lao from

⁸³⁰ In another document Phetsarath refers to the “Kha” as the eldest brother. See further Ian Baird, “Millenarian movements in southern Laos and northeast Siam (Thailand) at the turn of the twentieth century: Reconstructing the involvement of the Champassak Royal House” *South East Asia Research* (2013) 21(2).

⁸³¹ Oukham, *His Majesty Xai Settha the High-King*, p. iv.

⁸³² Sila Viravong, ຜົງສາວະດານລາວ [“Chronicle of the Lao”] (Vientiane: Ministère de l’éducation nationale, 1957), p. i.

⁸³³ Ibid.

⁸³⁴ The elite used modern printing presses, but also benefited from an expanding education system. In the 1959-1960 school year there were 99,302 students in government schools according to official statistics. See Kingdom of Laos, *Annuaire Statistique du Laos: Quatrième Volume, 1953 à 1957* (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, 1961), p. 119. In the same year there were 1,088 elementary schools, 310 pagoda schools, 105 Groupes Scolaires, 55 rural schools, six colleges, two technical schools, one lycée and one university. Over the 1960s one focus of the Ministry of Education was the building of schools, especially rural ones. Moreover, the government was not content to rely on physical schools, but also turned to new technology, employing radio to reach distant pupils who would otherwise be left behind by the RLG education system.

China.⁸³⁵ Yet in the neo-colonial years especially, the elite turned to technology, making use of modern forms of mass media to popularize their works. Thus, before it was ever in print, Oukham's history was serialized in the government Lao language newspaper, *Khosanakan*, and broadcast on Radio Lao. Indeed, Oukham said it was easier to publish his work using mass media than to actually print a book, which was prohibitively expensive.⁸³⁶ It is no surprise then that a few years later Radio Lao would include the Nanzhao theory (i.e. the idea that Lao migrated south from the old kingdom of Nanzhao) in its educational broadcasts on history.⁸³⁷

There was also a public celebration of the newly recovered Lao history, especially to commemorate the 2500th year since the death of the Buddha. Just as Sila's history was published in time to mark the occasion, the government was unveiling a statue of one of the newly feted glorious kings of the past, Xai Settha(thirat), appropriately located in front of the That Luang, which was attributed to the ancient king's hand. When the CDIN renamed all the streets, one of the major streets in Vientiane was named after the famous king. Oukham released a book dealing specifically with the reign of Xai Settha in 1959 to coincide with the new statue. He created Xai Settha in the trope of a "heroic king" (ວິຣະກະສັດ), an exemplar to be emulated. He also wrote a song that illustrated the ideals of the hero king:

King Xai Settha, King Xai Settha,
 Warrior skilled and brave, hero of the Lao
 Warrior skilled and brave, hero of the Lao
 King Xai Settha, King Xai Settha,
 Protect the Lao, come succor [us] from danger,
 Fight the enemy, the commoners
 That march to oppress [us], let [them] break and flee away
 Protect the Lao, let them remain long-lasting,
 Security reaching to us, all we Lao

⁸³⁵ *Education*, no 5, January 1960, p. 48. See also the map included in Oukham, *The origins of the Lao*.

⁸³⁶ Oukham, *His Majesty Xai Settha the High-King*, p. v.

⁸³⁷ Kingdom of Laos, ວິທຍຸໂຮງຮຽນ ["Radio school"], Week 5, "Lao history: the original kingdom of the Lao" (Bangkok: light of arts publishing house: 1964) p. 102-109. Other Lao history radio broadcasts included a lesson on the Khom and Lawa, including the racial extinction of the latter, see *ibid*, Week 3, "Suvannaphumi" p. 89-90.

[he] is a hero, [he] is a hero,
 That every Lao, praises and worships,
 When war, [he] fights, when peace [he] prepares,
 Protect, take care, the people,
 Improve the country, prosperous and civilized,
 Famous in distant lands, Xai Settha,
 Warrior, skilled and brave, hero of the Lao,
 Warrior, skilled and brave, hero of the Lao,⁸³⁸

One can only imagine how RLG soldiers might have felt hearing this song that reimagined the old king as a great military leader, on the eve of the Royal Lao Government's war against the communists.

The theme of the “heroic king” was especially developed as Oukham referred to Xai Settha as *maharaja* (ມະຫາຣາຊ), the “high king” or with regard to his short-lived unification of the kingdoms of Lan Na and Lan Xang, the “emperor.” He applied the same term to the ancient Indian ruler Ashoka, establishing an equivalency between two. His history celebrated a time when Lao were one of the dominate powers on the mainland, standing equal to the Thai and facing off against the mighty Burmese empire. In the sixteenth century conflagration, the Lao fared better even than the Thai, coming to their aid and not vice versa. Oukham's work, like other nationalist histories of the time, sought ultimately to establish an equivalency between the glories of the Kingdom of Lan Xang, embodied by Settha, and the current Royal Lao Government. The government's installation of a statue of Xai Settha was one concrete manifestation of that impulse. In the 1990s, when the Lao People's Democratic Republic began publishing histories, they also eventually sought to establish an equivalency with the glories of the past, but they were actually following what the Royal Lao Government had already done.

Part of the nationalist history project entailed ensuring that people resisted communism. Royalist history works that were clearly in service to the present also became enlisted in the fight

⁸³⁸ Oukham, *His Majesty Xai Settha the High-King*, p. ii.

against communism. Oun Sananikone, the former Lao Pen Lao and Lao Issara leader and a current deputy in the National Assembly, makes this clear in his forward to Oukham's biography of Settha:

I hope most that this book should be able to revive Lao-ness, Lao patriotism, [and] Lao sacrifice for the nation. Let it be a fire that ignites, spreading to the mind of every Lao compatriot until all are reached. Especially at this time in which *Lao people of all races* desire solidarity to be of one mind in order *to resist the evil disease* of one group of people, which is the enemy of the Lao nation, and currently menaces the Lao nation in this time the same way as [during] the reign of the foot of his majesty King Xai Settha, the high king. And by his genius, the King did lead the Lao nation to pass from danger and catastrophe and did defend the independence of the Lao nation all throughout his reign.

I make the highest wish that this book should be one lamplight and is shining on the path [so that] all the united brothers and sisters of the Lao nation are conscious that we are born Lao, must defend Lao-ness and the independence of the Lao nation to be an inheritance to pass on to the next generation of the Lao onward in order that Lao should be Lao until heaven and earth are destroyed.⁸³⁹

Oun Sananikone here repeats the classic Lao anti-communism formula: Lao culture or Lao-ness was the antidote to communism. By referring to the “Lao of all races,” he explicitly tried to reach non-Lao, now showing some awareness among the elite for the importance of minorities in the fight against communist subversion. He did not explicitly mention the word communism, but only referred to it by a euphemism, “the evil disease” without mentioning the “persons” who are its source by name (the North Vietnamese and mainland Chinese). Even so the reference would be obvious to anyone reading it in 1959.

The ways in which the Lao elite used history as a tool for the present is abundantly clear when Oun made an equivalency between the Royal Lao Government's fight against communism and Xai Settha's sixteenth century stand against Burmese invasions. He ends with apocalyptic visions which have more in common with prophecy manuscripts of the nineteenth century, which nonetheless still influenced the outlook of the elite.⁸⁴⁰ In Oun's writing, one can see that the Royal

⁸³⁹ Oun Sananikone, ຄຳນຳຂອງຜູ້ຈັດພິມ [“Forward of the publisher”] in Oukham, *His Majesty Xai Settha the High King*, p. viii-ix.

⁸⁴⁰ Phetsarath ends with the same exact phrase in his forward to Oukham, *The origins of the Lao*, p. ໑.

Lao elite believed they could resist communism, and perhaps even attract minorities to rally to their side with the glories of their own history.

One of the most important and neglected aspects of the new histories was their treatment of the Issara. Grant Evans has suggested that the Pathet Lao were able to appropriate and thus claim the legacy of the Issara as their own, uncontested.⁸⁴¹ In Sila's 1957 work, which has received the most attention, no mention is made of the Issara. The impression has formed then, especially since Sila was himself an ex-Issara, that the Royalist historians ignored the Issara.⁸⁴² In fact both Khamman and Oukham claimed the Issara legacy for the Royal Lao Government in the neo-colonial years. Thus the Issara legacy was contested between the Pathet Lao, who at times called themselves the "Issara" (Neo Lao Issara) and even used the Issara flag in battle, and the Royal Lao Government, which included the majority of the elite ex-Issara who themselves had founded the movement. Khamman's work is critical of the French, and provides the only sympathetic account of the Issara in this period. While Oukham did not write a full account of the Issara, he did include them in his chronology, specifying that: "the Lao nation or all the kingdoms of Lan Xang gained their independence unifying to be a single kingdom called "the kingdom of Laos" in the year 2488 of the Buddhist Era (1945 Christian Era) [being] since then independent to the present."⁸⁴³ In this short passage he fully endorses the Issara view that the colonial bond was irrevocably broken in 1945. Yet his formulation is diplomatic and does not reveal any clash between Issara and King Sisavang Vong, but instead simply cites the King's declaration of independence in 1945 (not

⁸⁴¹ Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty*, p. 20. See also Nakhonkham, *Sixteen Years in the Land of Death*.

⁸⁴² The 1957 edition ended in 1893 without treating the colonial era or later events. Sila's later secondary school text book published in 1973 granted the Issara major significance in Lao history.

⁸⁴³ Oukham, *His Majesty Xai Settha the High-King*, p.

indicating whether he takes this to be in April or November) and not explicitly mentioning the Issara.⁸⁴⁴ In a revised edition of his work, Oukham discussed a future project on the Issara:

Now [I] will write some of the details or [I] might print a more extensive volume separately [concerning] Laos since the declaration of Lao unity and indivisibility; then the declaration of independence of B.E. 2488 [1945] and the struggle to gain independence completely in the present day. Especially, in the said part I will compile various details of the Lao Pen Lao committee, the Lao Issara government and the Pathet Lao to be a separate Lao history.⁸⁴⁵

But it seems this project never came to fruition. Nevertheless, it was on the agenda for some in the neo-colonial years, but it was not seen as important as reviving the ancient glories of the Lao. At any rate, from Oukham's brief comments it is certain that he held a sympathetic view of the Issara, if for no other reason than he endorsed their central claim that colonialism ended in 1945, thereby rejecting any French presence after that as entirely illegitimate. Moreover, the government itself was not above using the Issara legacy in direct ways, such as sending the ex-Issara war-chief General Sing Rattanasamay to negotiate with the Pathet Lao in 1961.⁸⁴⁶

The only major French-language history text to be found in the neo-colonial years was *Le Laos, histoire moderne du XIVe au XIXe siècle* which appeared in 1960 by Khamphao Phonekeo, the director of primary instruction and former education minister. The text was written for use at the School of Law and Administration, which was originally founded by Phetsarath in 1928 to train Lao to serve in the colonial administration. Khamphao was motivated to write a history for the same reason as other elite, saying: "national independence requires the Lao youth to turn towards the history of their country."⁸⁴⁷ Khamphao's history is interesting in that it defines the

⁸⁴⁴ This points to an inherent weakness of textual sources, which is that some issues were simply too sensitive to write about. Thanks to Ian Baird for this comment.

⁸⁴⁵ Oukham, *The origins of the Lao*, p. 157.

⁸⁴⁶ Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 91.

⁸⁴⁷ Khamphao Phonekeo, *Le Laos, histoire moderne du XIVe au XIXe siècle* (n.p., 1960), p. i.

“modern” period as beginning in the fourteenth century in the reign of Fa Ngum, who unified the country and introduced Buddhism:

It is in this conception that we attempt to divide the history of Lan Xang into 3 great periods:

1-ancient history: from the origins to Fa Ngum (so-to-speak from the beginning of the Christian era until 1353).

2-modern history: from Fa Ngum to Ounkham (so-to-speak from 1353 to 1885).

3-contemporary history: from Ounkham or from the French protectorate to our day (so-to-speak from 1885 to our day).

It is the second period, the most important, which interests our present study. The first technical revolution which was known in Laos came from China around the XIVth century.⁸⁴⁸

Thus, modernity did not arrive with the French, but was actually to be found deeper in time in the early history of the country. Khamphao certainly was indebted to French scholarship on Laos, yet he presented his students with an alternate path to modernity, that owed more to influences from India, and interactions with China than it did to Europe. European modernity was therefore only the latest form and was not universal, but contingent and particular. Moreover, when dealing with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he gives an account of the rise of “European hegemony” which he says is “the great modern fact of Asia.”⁸⁴⁹ He thus provides a wide-ranging discussion of imperialism at a time when not many other Lao works did. Khamphao’s work is proof that Francophone Lao too were capable of generating a new historical synthesis in the neo-colonial era. Yet he appears to have accepted the “birth of the Lao race” thesis at least implicitly; he did discuss the central idea of it, that there was a single “Thai race” in the past that gradually was divided up over time.⁸⁵⁰

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 27.

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 5, see his discussion of the “Thai empire.”

American Cultural Influences

This section considers American cultural influences on the RLG, especially on Lao views of modernity and anti-communism. Further considered are Lao who visited America and new Lao civic organizations, especially the Lao Scouts, which was influenced by the US in this period.

While the Royal Lao Government elite developed a modern Lao culture in various projects (see chapter five), this was not the only cultural current of the time. In the midst of a global Cold War, confrontation between the Americans and Soviets brought together two vastly different cultures: American and Lao. Neither was really prepared for such an encounter. The elite remained largely Francophone. Even those who felt themselves strongly anti-French, still spoke and wrote French fluently, while espousing the values of the French revolution.⁸⁵¹ The Americans did not know of much at all about Vietnam...and even less of Laos. They of course looked down on Lao, adopting hastily the colonial mindset of the French: there was no country, but only a “gentle” docile people, with no great culture or literature to speak of, only a history of domination by others, who must be propped up to save the free world.⁸⁵² The Francophone elite could likewise look down on the Americans, who seemed but a distant echo from the refinement and grandeur of France. Added to this was a lack of a common language between the Frenchophone elite and the Americans.⁸⁵³

In spite of these obstacles, there were at times powerful American cultural influences felt in the country. “America” (ອາເມຣິກາ) or simply the “United States” (ສຫະຣັຖ) made a big

⁸⁵¹ Even the CDIN’s paper *Lao Hakxa Sat* was in French.

⁸⁵² Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling*.

⁸⁵³ Many American officials sent to Laos were chosen in part due to knowledge of the French language. Some correspondence between US and RLG officials was conducted in French too.

impression, at least in some domains like music and film⁸⁵⁴, although the most significant American cultural influences were on Lao views of anti-communism and modernity. While Lao had previously looked to France, America increasingly became a new model to consider. It is important to note that US influence in the period was not simply unidirectional. For example, the US became a major funder of Lao cultural projects to bolster history and literature. In this way the US through organizations such as the Asia Foundation had the effect of strengthening the burgeoning Lao cultural works, which were themselves partly reacting against continuing Western (i.e. American) influence.⁸⁵⁵ Many such works carried an emblem of America aid, a shield emblazoned with the image of two hands shaking, in spite of the fact that such a gesture was not customary in the country. Other images showed a roman figure holding Royal Lao Government and US flags, which may have appealed somewhat more to the Francophile elite.

In considering how the US portrayed itself to the Lao, there is no better source than the US Information Service (USIS), which created many works of propaganda to promote the US brand of modernity and anti-communism, while striving to shape Lao perceptions.⁸⁵⁶ Since few people knew English, the USIS sought to engage the people through Lao language documents, which could reach the broadest segment of society. How exactly or to what extent the USIS influenced various Lao discourses is a complicated question. Yet during the neo-colonial years, some people would now for the first time see the USA as the path to modernity, while balancing this with admiration for Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, South

⁸⁵⁴ On the other hand, one political scientist found during his field work in July to October 1974 there were limits to Lao tolerance of American film: “The write also observed during the field work that, even when there were good relationships with the United States, the Laotian government heavily censored most of the Hollywood and other Western movies showing in Laos. The reason was that they ran counter to the Laotian customs and culture and might be harmful to them.” See Pornsak Phongphaew, “The Political Culture-and-Personality of the Laotian Political-Bureaucratic Elite.” (Ph.D. diss., The University of Oklahoma, 1976), p. 120.

⁸⁵⁵ See further Ford, *Cold War Monks*.

⁸⁵⁶ Askew et al., *Vientiane*, p. 122.

Vietnam and India.

There are many examples of the US posing as the new model of modernity, such as the US booth at the That Luang festival, which was visited by King Savang Vatthana in November 1963.⁸⁵⁷ The US portrayed itself as the model of modernity in several USIS propaganda works. In a comic book on American history, the story pointedly ended with the successful American economy, which prospered due to modern science.⁸⁵⁸ The space race was another avenue to showcase American modernity.⁸⁵⁹ The comic promoted the basic idea that: “the rapid advance of science makes [one] hope that the life of humanity will be better than the past”, which the comic suggested was manifested by a nuclear power plant.⁸⁶⁰ In promoting the benefits of US aid to countries around the world, the US was said to “share scientific and industrial knowledge” such as “insecticides” (ຢາຂ້າແມງ), which may have sent unintended messages to the Lao reader about the value of eradicating “insects that destroy plants.”⁸⁶¹ While modernity offered unprecedented powers over nature, it involved dubious actions concerning for Buddhists and naturalists alike.

Another USIS pamphlet entitled simply “America” featured large photos, short simple text, and sought to claim the US as the incontestable new model of modernity. It sought to impress the reader with various aspects of America, such as the sheer size of the country, of which the booklet said it is “unbelievable that the United States is combined [as] one and the same nation.”⁸⁶² It was also portrayed as a racial utopia where one could find “good people of every race.”⁸⁶³ It played up

⁸⁵⁷ ຂ່າວພາບຮອບສັບດາ Friday, November 8, 1963, no. 8, (Vientiane: Ministry of information and propaganda), p. 2.

⁸⁵⁸ USIS, ພາບປະຫວັດສາດ ອະເມຣິກາ [“American History Comic”] (n.p. 1962), p. 46-47.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 47.

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁶¹ Ibid, p. 44.

⁸⁶² USIS, ອະເມຣິກາ [“America”] (n.p. 1960), p. 1.

⁸⁶³ Ibid. *The America History Comic* had a similar comment about Hawai’i.

the immigrant background of Americans, which may have resonated with the Lao, who were exploring their own imagined history of migration from ancient China at the time. Yet the US portrayed itself as homogenous, whose peoples “speak a single language, the majority observe the same customs and traditions and respect the law together as one.”⁸⁶⁴ Katay in particular had previously admired the homogenous portrayal of the country as a model of what a modern nation should look like.⁸⁶⁵ Yet most important were the many photos of life from around America; most attractive would be ones of modern farming, showing off the latest machines, but one could also view cities, highways, dams, and diverse environments.

One major change in the period is that anticommunism, which already existed in the country since the semi-colonial years, nonetheless began a shift to become US-oriented.⁸⁶⁶ Prior to this, Lao anticommunism had been informed by French works of the 1930s, but those other sources evidently became less important during the neo-colonial years. Rather than creating anti-communism *ex-nihilo*, the US instead used their influence primarily to shape an idea already known among the educated elite. Yet the US also tried to influence the average person, and so popularized its view of anti-communism to a further extent than other foreign powers previously had. The USIS’s comic book history of America promoted cultural and historic achievements to the Lao, but it also promoted American anti-communism, such that the average person could now look to America for guidance on this question.

While the American history comic explains US history, it also gives the American account

⁸⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 2.

⁸⁶⁵ Katay Sasorith, *Le Laos: Son évolution politique sa place dans l’Union française* (Paris: Editions Berger-Levrault, 1953), p. 16.

⁸⁶⁶ Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty*, p. 165. Savang Vatthana spoke to the US about communism as early as November 1946 at the Franco-Siam negotiations in Washington D.C. The Issara published their views on anti-communism in December 1948.

of the Cold War, arguing that it began after World War II when the Soviet Union did not let its “satellite” nations receive American aid via the Marshall plan.⁸⁶⁷ The Soviets were portrayed as obstructing international cooperation at the UN, whereas the US always followed international law, cooperating with the international community, at least as it is portrayed in the comic book. There are many comparisons made between the Soviets and the Americans in the comic, always favorable to the US of course, but the most striking must be how the Soviets were contrasted to the Americans in terms of their treatment of other countries.

The division between the free world and the Soviets appeared everywhere. In one case [the US] let twenty nations receive independence...

[Filipino diplomat:] “The Republic of the Philippines thanks the US, who gave independence according to the agreement.”

In another case, fifteen nations, which at one time had been independent, were taken control of by the iron curtain [ມ່ານເຫລັກ] of communist imperialism [ຈັກພັດນິຍົມຄອມມູນິສ].⁸⁶⁸

The comic sought to explain the Cold War as a division of the world between the “free world” and Soviet imperialism. The Pathet Lao would charge the US with being “imperialists,” which made the issue a contested one. Yet individuals on all sides felt Laos was caught between two superpowers, each with their own imperialist tendencies. The USIS comic on the other hand posed the US as a peaceful global hegemon, whether to counter communist wars in Greece and Turkey by the Truman Doctrine, or elsewhere by nuclear deterrence under Eisenhower. In every conflict it was involved in, the US always had a just cause, always begrudgingly called upon to take up arms to maintain order in the world. Eisenhower was quoted as saying, “My country must build, not destroy; and must make the international community agree to not make war on each other.”⁸⁶⁹ Eisenhower, especially, was portrayed as using nuclear power “for the benefit of

⁸⁶⁷ USIS, *American History Comic*, p. 43.

⁸⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 43-44.

⁸⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 45.

mankind” in medicine, the economy, industry and to “stop war.”⁸⁷⁰ It is difficult to find any indication of what the audience reception might have been to the comic, although one can surmise that Lao may have been somewhat skeptical when reading of John F. Kennedy’s claim in his inaugural address to end poverty, disease, and war.

One way to see the impression America made on Lao at the time is to consider the writings of Lao who travelled to America and wrote about their experiences for those at home. In a feature called “letters from America” a Lao monk, Phra Maha Phim Phone, described his experiences on studying and traveling in America for readers of the *Muang Lao* magazine.⁸⁷¹ The account had important similarities, and some dissimilarities, from travel writings of Francophone Lao during the semi-colonial years who wrote about visits to Paris and other parts of France. For instance, as he began to travel Achan Phim Phone made observations on Hong Kong, where he saw the people seemed to have the same culture as him.⁸⁷² He then went to Japan, where he commented on the country’s beauty.⁸⁷³ Just as in the semi-colonial era, the theme throughout Achan Phim’s letter is that studying in America permitted him to travel the world, and to act on a wider global stage. Once in America, he comments on the vastness of the country, echoing the “infinite horizon” of France as witnessed by Francophone Lao in the semi-colonial era. Achan Phim Phone then began six weeks of intensive English language study. Seeing everyone else, his peers from many countries, speak English, Achan Phim wrote of his desire to learn the language. He studied with people from many other countries, meeting people from Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Italy, and Iran among others. In meeting these people, Achan Phim

⁸⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁷¹ Phra Maha Phim Phone, ຈົດໝາຍຈາກອະເມຣິກາ [“Letters from America”] *Muang Lao*, May 1960, p. 90-92.

⁸⁷² Ibid, p. 90.

⁸⁷³ Ibid, p. 91.

tells them about his country, his culture, his religion, and by doing so he feels more strongly Lao, representing his whole country on the world stage.⁸⁷⁴ Yet he also at times feels a countervailing universal connection to the entire world in his travels, such as his observation that “the purpose of every religion is joined together in a single end.”⁸⁷⁵

There were a number of American cultural organizations which appeared at the time, like the Junior Chamber (the “Jaycees”) and the Rotary Club of Vientiane. One organization, the Lao Scouts, demonstrated the new influences of America in the midst of the Cold War.⁸⁷⁶ The Lao Scouts (ສະກຸດ) had originally been formed in 1947 as a Franco-Lao organization by Savang Vatthana and two French teachers who worked at the recently opened Luang Prabang secondary school.⁸⁷⁷ The organization grew quickly, expanding to Vientiane in 1948, the local branch of which was headed by the future neutralist Interior Minister Pheng Phongsavane⁸⁷⁸ and French instructors at the Vientiane college, including Jean Deuve, an inspector. It was officially recognized by the government on March 4, 1950. Afterwards it “expanded to every place across

⁸⁷⁴ For a theoretical account of this phenomenon, “Co-figuration” see Wynn Wilcox, “Introduction” in Wynn Wilcox (ed.) *Vietnam and the West: New Approaches* (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP Publications, 2010).

⁸⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁶ Creak, *Embodied Nation*, p. 94 discusses the scout movement in the context of a wider militarization of society in the early 1950s and links the Lao scout movement to the *Lao Nyai* era association.

⁸⁷⁷ The name of the organization in Lao reflects the French pronunciation of the word. Thanks to Bruce Lockhart for this comment. The French teachers were André Louis Aufauvre and Guy Leherbier. George Durieux became involved when the organization expanded to Vientiane. The institutional history of the movement was included in the Lao scout handbook, *Scout Friends* [ເລືອບສະກຸດ] (n.p., n.d. [ca. 1963?]), p. 9-16.

⁸⁷⁸ Born on July 19, 1910 at Pakham in Luang Prabang, Pheng graduated with a C.E.P.C.I. degree. He thereafter entered the colonial administration. He became a Chao Muong in 1942. In late 1945 he created the Lao Action Committee to oppose the Issara. In 1947 he was elected a deputy of Luang Prabang (Lao Renovation party). In the 1951 elections he was again elected a deputy from Luang Prabang for the Progressive party. From 1951-1953 he served as secretary of state to the Interior. In 1954 he was Minister of Economy and Public Works. In 1955 he was re-elected from Luang Prabang. In 1959 he was president of the National Assembly. By January 1960 he was a vice-president of the Rally for the Lao People. In September 1960 he was honorary president of the Youth Committee, a neutralist organization. In November he was president of the committee of neutrality and unity. From 1961 to 1962 he was an adviser to the Souvanna Phouma neutralist government at Khang Khay and vice-president of the Neutralist party. He represented the neutralist faction at tripartite talks at Namone. In the second coalition government he was Minister of Interior and Social Security. He later became Minister of Foreign Affairs in May 1964. In 1969 he was Minister of Interior again. In 1975 he was sent to a re-education camp. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1964*, p. 357. For an interview from 1959 see Halpern, “Lao Project Paper no. 19,” p. 46-48.

the kingdom.”⁸⁷⁹ In 1955 some scout masters were sent to train in France and the next year there was a major rally in Savannakhet. While the movement’s origins lay in the semi-colonial years and harkened back to Vichy France, by August 1957 the organization broke from French influence:

On August 3 1957 the association sent two scout masters to participate in the [Ninth World Scout Jamboree] at Sutton Coldfield, Great Britain. When [they] had returned, the Lao Scout Association withdrew from the protection [ອາຣັກຂາງ] of the French and did select Mr. Pheng Phongsavane to be the head as before. At the end of the year, the association sent 16 scout masters to make a visit of friendship with the Thai Boy Scouts at Bangkok.⁸⁸⁰

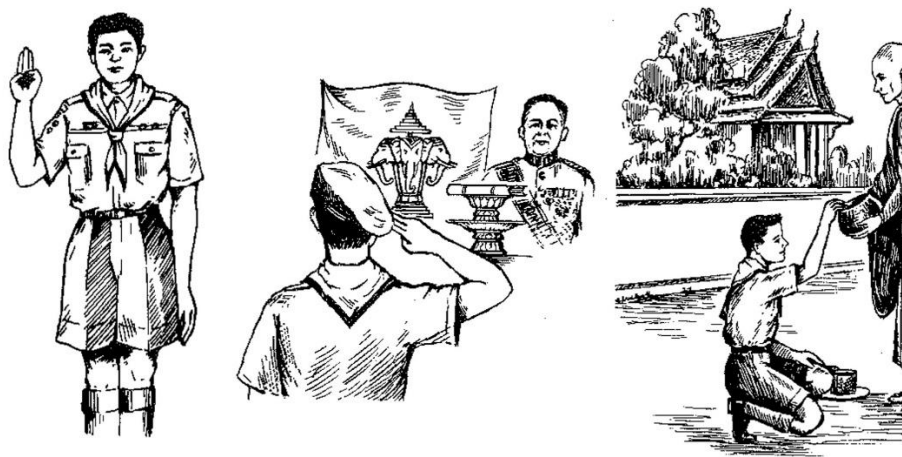
It is noteworthy that the bonds of the Lao Scouts to the French association are described with the same term that was used to describe the French protectorate of Luang Prabang Kingdom. To Lao, the word would have a distinct echo of colonialism. Thereafter, the Lao Scout Association would become a member of the World Organization of the Scout Movement, associating with similar movements in Thailand, Malaysia, India and the Philippines, circulating in an Anglo-American neo-colonial world of the 1950s and 1960s, and growing a large membership only after breaking away from France.⁸⁸¹ The organization was also opened to women (ສະກຸດຕິ) at this time. The Lao scout movement itself was a distinctly anti-communist movement.⁸⁸² There were major gatherings of the Lao Scouts in 1958-1959 in Vientiane, Champassak and Luang Prabang at which Savang Vatthana and other elite sought to rally the youth.

⁸⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 10.

⁸⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 11-12.

⁸⁸¹ The Lao Scout Association officially joined the WOSM on November 20, 1959 at the seventeenth international congress in India, p. 14. After attending the 9th Jamboree in Great Britain, the Lao scouts sent 21 members to the 10th Jamboree in the Philippines, the first such event held in Asia.

⁸⁸² On the related Thai scout movement see Katherine Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).



(images from *Friends of the Scouts*⁸⁸³)

The international scout movement began around the turn of the twentieth century and following its founder Baden Powell, was distinctly Anglo-American, colonialist, militarist, nationalist and masculine. All of this was to be found in the Lao scout handbook, which included detailed descriptions of the military-style dress, including an explanation of various symbols worn on the uniform (patches) and their meanings. The handbook also described inspections, a lengthy section on marching and concluded with a lesson on how to be a good citizen. For instance, the oath:

By looking to my honor
 I swear that I will try
 -to serve my nation, religion, and king
 -to help others every time
 -to follow all rules and regulations of the Lao Scouts⁸⁸⁴

The rules were highly important to the Lao Scout movement, fostering values of honesty, helpfulness, service, obedience to superiors (“rule no. 7 the scout in work must not disobey the orders of a superior and work until a complete result without delay”), and right actions (“rule no.

⁸⁸³ Ibid, p. 3-4.

⁸⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 5.

10 the scout must have good intentions in every speech, thought and action”).⁸⁸⁵ Some rules fostered nationalism: “rule no. 4 the scout must be friends with everyone and think [they] are friendly brothers born of the same womb.”⁸⁸⁶ In general the organization promoted devotion to King and Nation. The publishing and distribution of the handbook was funded by the USIS. Moreover, some of the marching commands were given in English as well as Lao.



(Photo of Lao Scouts participating in a drive to widen the streets of Vientiane)

⁸⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 6.

⁸⁸⁶ Ibid.

In the neo-colonial years, the Lao Scouts had evolved to become a nationalist youth organization under the direction of the elite.⁸⁸⁷ As Prince Sin Xaisanom said in a forward to the Lao Scout handbook,

Your humble servant hopes that all friends can join hands to encourage the Lao Scout Association going forward. The Lao Scout Association has the objective to teach children in body, speech, and mind in order to make [them] citizens of the nation by being accustomed to good conduct, being observant, and to help oneself in times of difficulty to promote a mind to be of benefit to the people.⁸⁸⁸

It was a nationalist organization that remade the individual into a tool of the state. The organization came to fore, especially at the beginning of Savang Vatthana's reign. This coincided with the publication of citizenship texts which were added to the school curriculum. The Lao Scout movement then became an elite project, which was active throughout the country. The scouts appeared in government propaganda.⁸⁸⁹ They participated in drives to modernize the country, such as widening the roads of Vientiane, which was an initiative led by Phoumi Nosavan.⁸⁹⁰ They were also trained to put out fires, and to know the traffic laws. There were annual mass rallies held for the Lao Scouts in Vientiane, attended by the RLG elite. The Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma could be seen congratulating members personally, "on the day of the scouts mass rally that has scouts come from all over the country, every region of the nation."⁸⁹¹

⁸⁸⁷ Halpern, "The Lao elite," p. 70 notes that the CDIN "have played an important role in organizing these groups" and added that they used them for political purposes such as building schools.

⁸⁸⁸ Ibid, p. i.

⁸⁸⁹ ຄວາມຈະເຣີນຂອງວຽງຈັນ ["Prosperity of Vientiane"] (n.p., n.d.), p. 21.

⁸⁹⁰ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 150. Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 131.

⁸⁹¹ *Prosperity of Vientiane*, p. 21.



A year later in 1964, radio broadcasts about the Lao Boy Scouts (ລູກເສືອລາວ) reveal how the movement had evolved after five years of the Second Indochina War (1959-1964). The movement had been renamed, abandoning the French name for one more associated with the Thai and the Americans.⁸⁹²

Duties of a Lao boy scout

1. The kingdom is the place of Lao patriots. The boy scouts' blood is [of] Lan Xang. [They] have a spirit of generosity and bonds of friendship. Without delay they should help one-another build the nation. We are able, possibly, to be a great nation, [by] giving energy for the aspirations to prosper abundantly.
2. We join to be a member of the scouts, [our] mind must be not a little courageous in the face of any nation, not boasting, [but] volunteering to preserve the good. Even though a war of invasion comes, the scout must defend the border area like a stupa that we worship.
3. We boy scouts, have many duties. Danger, [we] should help suppress, end [it]. Blood of earth, [our] minds must be concerned pwith] firmly as far as there may be danger which destroys. We nation of men, without regret, give [our] lives for the restoration of our Lao nation.⁸⁹³

⁸⁹² Dr. Lockhart has suggested the Thai boy scout movement had become increasingly pro-government and anti-communist under Sarit and other Thai generals.

⁸⁹³ *Radio school*, Week 5, p. 37.

The broadcast indicates how the Lao Scouts became entangled in the war. They were to be a force that was totally loyal to the state. The repeated ominous references to foreign invasion suggest that after five years of war, the Scouts were once again being mobilized for war against the enemy. As Simon Creak has observed, the Scouts had already been used with much success as advanced scouts during the Viet Minh invasion of April 1953.⁸⁹⁴

Early Anti-Americanism

This section considers an important, although complicated subject, with special attention to Lao elite writings, especially those of Phetsarath and Khamman Vongkotrattana, which have not been discussed in this regard. I also briefly consider neutralist and communist influences on anti-Americanism, which contextualize what would otherwise be merely inchoate expressions.

There was a latent anti-Americanism which remained mostly submerged in the neo-colonial years, but that at times would burst into the open unexpectedly.⁸⁹⁵ There must have been hushed questions among Lao about the sudden close embrace of the new benefactor and ally, likely giving rise to numerous conversations on what to do and what course of action might be possible. Even the strongly pro-US CDIN could observe the “anxiety about the arrival there [Laos] of a slightly cumbersome and perhaps somewhat boisterous ally, the United States.”⁸⁹⁶ While the RLG may have been forced by the circumstances to rely on US aid, and there even existed a certain basic understanding on communism, this did not mean there was no discord between Lao and

⁸⁹⁴ Creak, *Embodied Nation*, p. 94.

⁸⁹⁵ Ian Baird has suggested this sentiment was more common in oral accounts of the period. See further Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 329, which notes some government officials felt the US treated them as pawns.

⁸⁹⁶ Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 105.

Americans, who were frequently at cross purposes. Often Lao objections to the Americans did not explicitly oppose them, but rather focused on effects. Contrary to the Pathet Lao stereotype of the RLG as the “lackey” of the Americans, there was in fact a subdued hostility even in the early years of US involvement, particularly at the height of the US neo-colonial intervention into Laos, during the Eisenhower administration.⁸⁹⁷ But the feeling was also more diffuse and persisted even after the US changed tactics. In some cases, reliance on US aid bred resentment.⁸⁹⁸ Given the important role it played in the revolution of 1975, anti-Americanism should not be ignored in the RLG era.

The earliest anti-American sentiment appeared not long after the Americans arrived. For example, after the November 1957 Vientiane agreements were approved the US criticized them. Many Lao were upset by this response, “it created the worst possible effect for the U.S., one of selfish ill-temper.”⁸⁹⁹ Even among government leaders expressed concern about the Americans. After Phetsarath’s return to the country in March 1957 he was critical of the American aid program, saying that “Aid should work itself into a position where it abolishes any further need of itself.”⁹⁰⁰ In an interview with *Lao Presse* Phetsarath made a point of saying he would visit Pathet Lao regroupment areas in Phongsaly and Sam Neua.⁹⁰¹ In the same interview, he was highly critical of recent political problems in the country and spoke bluntly when asked about the danger of communism if Pathet Lao military units were reintegrated into the RLA:

I do not think so. It is not because one has contact that one becomes a communist. The Americans exaggerate the danger of communist subversion. It will not be because the Pathet Lao becomes part of the national community that Laos will be communized.

⁸⁹⁷ See for example, Neo Lao Hak Sat, *Twenty Years of Lao Revolutionary Struggle* (n.p.: Neo Lao Haksat Publications, 1966), p. 13, which leaves “valets” untranslated from the French; there is also a reference to the “Lao puppet government” beholden to the Americans.

⁸⁹⁸ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 104

⁸⁹⁹ Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 60.

⁹⁰⁰ Tom Dooley intimated that some of Phetsarath’s comments were not “pro-American”, quoted in Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty*, p. 128.

⁹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 123.

I think that the Pathet Lao are, before everything, sincere patriots. The greatest danger of communist subversion will be a result of the wrong use of the foreign aid we receive.⁹⁰²

Rather than going along with the Eisenhower administration's assessment of the situation, Phetsarath saw the real danger to the country was not the Pathet Lao, but the Americans themselves, and specifically the abuse of US aid which had wreaked havoc in the country:

The utilization of foreign aid is defective. It serves to outrageously enrich a minority, while the majority of the population remains poor...From my residence in Vientiane I can see luxury cars cruising the streets...

It is important that such practices cease. Many will be unhappy that I say this, but it is the truth. One can no longer tolerate such filthiness. These facts are known by the population. It is this that constitutes, in reality, the true danger of communism in Laos, because it will finish by creating such discontent among people who continue in poverty, and these people will be easy prey for propaganda.⁹⁰³

This is a highly lucid assessment that was made months before the NLHX victory at the polls, but Phetsarath was old, sick and had no power. While the CDIN led a campaign against corruption it was no match for the scale of the problem. On the other hand, Phetsarath's criticism does suggest a level of openness to criticism of the government in power, permitted even in the government's own newspaper, *Lao Presse*.

Phetsarath then went on to criticize the excessive use of aid on the military, noting that it pulled people out of the normal economy and it "cannot be of much use to defend the country in case of foreign invasion" saying it would be "foolish" to try to fight Laos' neighbors.⁹⁰⁴ He believed the only real security needs for the country was a police force and that soldiers should receive practical occupational training for use after service. Aid should be used for education to end the country's chronic dependency on foreigners, which persisted. He thereby recalled the

⁹⁰² Ibid, p. 124.

⁹⁰³ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid. Phetsarath's assessment agreed with that of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff.

colonial era when foreigners dominated the cities, which was an unhappy analogy for the independent RLG.

But there was a deeper issue apparent in Phetsarath's comments that was not simply about corruption or government incompetence. US aid had brought enormous change to the country, not just long-awaited development and modernization, but also sky-rocketing inflation, rising inequality, and new values of unbridled capitalism from Cold War America. Phetsarath, in discussions with the American Anthropologist Joel Halpern observed the negative side of the new capitalist spirit in the country, saying: "most of the young people in Laos now value money more than honor."⁹⁰⁵ The country, he felt, was in a "moral decline" brought on by the Americans. Having had a largely subsistence economy, followed by lackluster French investment in the colonial era, the Americans came to promote capitalism more fully than at any time previously. While the Royalist elite certainly were anti-communist, not all of them were obviously strong proponents of capitalism. Thus, Phetsarath hoped the RLG's dependency on American aid might be temporary: "his hope was that Laos might become self-sufficient in several years and might not require any more foreign aid," which would set the country free to determine its own development path.⁹⁰⁶

If one looks at Phetsarath's writings from the neo-colonial years, the issue of anti-American sentiment appears even in seemingly unrelated subjects. When he returned to the country, he mostly stayed out of politics but became strongly interested in history, joining others to remold it, especially concerning "the birth of the Lao race." His unique contribution was to reframe it in terms of "white" and "yellow" races. Phetsarath was reacting against the French, but also the

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 130.

⁹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Americans as well, with his feelings evident in his discussions on the Lao in comparison to “whites”:

As for the Lao race, it always had civilization ever since a long time ago already... Two thousand two hundred years B.E. ago, we Lao people knew how to cultivate the silkworm to make silk and patterned fabrics already, and yet [we] also knew how to make sand into glass.

...the Lao people have always thus progressed very much more than the white-skinned people.⁹⁰⁷

There is a similar comment in Khamman’s study of early Lao history, which was published only a few years later in 1961. Phetsarath continued to illustrate his point by arguing that the legendary founder of Lan Xang, Fa Ngum’s fourteenth century army used advanced guns before Caucasians: “...but at the same time, the white-skinned people still searched to invent new large cannon. As for small guns, [they] still had not yet invented them and still sought to invent them in AD 1510 (B.E. 2053): 158 years after the war in Phouan country.”⁹⁰⁸

Phetsarath was deeply influenced not only by the Thai, but also by the Japanese, and still saw the world in terms of a clash between white and yellow races. Between his return to the country in 1957 and his death in 1959, he may have been driven to make such statements as a veiled criticism of the Americans who were taking a more prominent role in the country, dashing his hopes that with the departure of the French the country would be free of Western influence. Consequently, one of the first things he did on his return was to criticize the Americans. But he clearly exercised influence over younger historians then working in the country like his relative Khamman Vongkotrattana, and Khamchan Pradith, whose own history would appear in 1971. Khamchan spoke of a golden age during the mid-seventeenth-century under the famous King Soulinyavongsa, and he boasted about how “the King spread Lao civilization all over every place

⁹⁰⁷ Oukham, *The origins of the Lao*, p. ๓-๔.

⁹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. ๔.

reaching other countries. [One] did not speak of yellow skin or white skin – [only] interest with the progress and civilization of the Lao.”⁹⁰⁹

Khamman Vongkotrattana became one of the most prolific historians of the RLG era. He was a member of the Front Palace aristocratic family of Luang Prabang, related to Phetsarath, Souvanna Phouma, and Souphanouvong among others. Much of his work was later reprinted by the National Library after he passed away. In several of his works he was critical of the French, and in his 1961 history he wrote a sympathetic account of the Issara and Phetsarath’s role. In one of the first historical accounts expressing anti-American sentiment, he interjected a description of the US atomic bombing of Japan at the end of World War II in his discussion of the Japanese coup of March 1945 in Laos:

Next in the ninth lunar month, ... Emperor Hirohito of Japan then surrendered to the allies because the United States of America, the great power, did drop atomic bombs [ລູກຮະເບີດປະຣະມານູ] on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

United States of America drops atomic bombs on Japan

[It] was used for the first time on August 6, 1945 on Hiroshima, which had 349,969 people [before the attack]. Seventy-eight thousand one hundred fifty people died, 37,425 people were wounded [and] 13,083 people were missing [due to the attack]. [It] was used for the second time on Nagasaki, which had 252,630 people [before the attack]. Thirty-seven thousand eight hundred eighty-four people died [in the attack]. Afterward on August 14, Japan, beaten, surrendered and signed the treaty of defeat on the US Navy ship Missouri on September 2, 1945.⁹¹⁰

A USIS comic history of America had explained the bombing very differently:

Now Harry S. Truman, the new President was confronted with a decision that was terrible: should [he] use the atomic [bomb] on Japan or not?

Truman decided to use [the bomb] to be an example to inspire fear, [then] the war will end and many people will not need to die because of the long war. In the month of August, the atomic bomb was dropped on the two cities in Japan. Each city burned for two weeks...

⁹⁰⁹ Khamchan Pradith, ບັນລັກສາດ ການທູດລາວ [“History of Lao Diplomacy”] (Vientiane: Pakpasak press, 1971), p. 9.

⁹¹⁰ Khamman Vongkotrattana, ພົງສາວດານຊາຕິລາວ ຄວາມເປັນມາຂອງຊາຕິແຕ່ຕົກຕໍາບັນ [“Chronicle of the Lao race: Origins of the race since ancient times”] (Vientiane: National Library of Laos, 1973), p. 168.

To the Missouri Naval boat...General MacArthur accepts the Japanese surrender. The Second World War which was fought for defending the freedom of the people is over.⁹¹¹

In stark contrast to Khamman's account of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the US account omitted any reckoning of the death toll and speaks only of the good uses the US had made of atomic energy, and of its use of nuclear weapons for peace. On the other hand, Khamman's writing, one of the few RLG publications of the time not funded by the US, is a unique statement not found in other history works of the time, which did not include any justification at all. Yet it would come to be prophetic in the ensuing American bombing campaign of the eastern Pathet Lao zones of the country (especially the Plain of Jars and the Ho Chi Minh Trail). While American bombing of Japan at once marked the beginning of the atomic age, Khamman wrote about it as a warning to Lao about the Americans, whom he felt were dangerous and capable of extreme violence and inhuman savagery, especially to Asians.

One of the most potent episodes of anti-Americanism in the neo-colonial years was Kongle's coup of August 9, 1960. His movement was profoundly nationalist, yet it was also a convergence of strong anti-Americanism and neutralism. By one account, Kongle was led to lead the uprising after being treated as a "colored man" at a US training base in the Philippines.⁹¹² His cause was to "save the country from foreigners," which at the time likely meant foremost the Americans. Arthur Dommen witnessed Kongle's speeches, and noted the populist element of

⁹¹¹ USIS, *American History Comic*, p. 42.

⁹¹² Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p. 160. Ian Baird has suggested the French played a role in events and Jean Deuve in particular (personal communication). See further Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 389-391, where Dommen notes that three days before Kongle's coup, General Phoumi Nosavan demanded the French withdraw their military training mission in response to a French request in June 1960 that the American's end their own training operations via the Program Evaluation Office. Moreover, on August 9, 1960 the French prevented Phoumi from landing at Seno military base forcing him to land at Ubon Thailand. Dommen suggests the French saw their opportunity to push Phoumi aside in favor of a Kongle and Souvanna Phouma neutralist government in which the US would have much less sway. The most interesting evidence Dommen provides is from a French newspaper which reported August 17, 1960 that the coup "benefits from discreet but effective sponsorship of Prince Souvanna [Phouma] and of the French Embassy." Ibid, p. 391.

them.⁹¹³ Kongle's popular support was evident when he retreated from Vientiane and was followed by a number of students and monks.⁹¹⁴ Kongle's movement, and its support (which other coups lacked) among Vientiane people grew out of a strong anti-US sentiment and desire for neutrality, which had grown under the CDIN government into a populist cause; something the movement's followers longed to achieve, yet was blocked repeatedly by the US and the CDIN.⁹¹⁵ Kongle's coup even won the support of the National Assembly, which voted out the CDIN government headed by Prince Somsanith and returned Souvanna Phouma to power.⁹¹⁶ This led to the toppling of the CDIN government, which was temporary, yet the same essential urge would return to destroy the kingdom in 1975 (see chapter eight).

The Pathet Lao were the greatest source of anti-American sentiment in the country, and it was already widespread in some quarters. The Pathet Lao made much of the fact that they never put down their arms, never stopped resisting since 1945, implicitly arguing there was no difference between one white foreigner (French) or another (American): both would only ever oppress the Lao, who themselves were trapped in an unending colonial bondage. The Pathet Lao criticized the US more often than the RLG, purposely avoiding criticism of the King, to draw on anti-foreign sentiment to gain as large a following as quickly as possible. According to one source Pathet Lao guerrillas would seek to win over villagers by appealing specifically to anti-American sentiment:

⁹¹³ Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*.

⁹¹⁴ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 121. Stuart-Fox and Bucknell, "Politicization of the Buddhist Sangha in Laos," p. 63. Although some later return to Vientiane from the Plain of Jars.

⁹¹⁵ Demonstrators in support of the coup later marched through the streets of Vientiane carrying signs reading "PEO Go Home." Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 390.

⁹¹⁶ On the other hand, Sisouk Na Champassak wrote that the National Assembly only voted in favor of Kongle's coup because it was bowing to pressure from a large crowd which surrounded the building. See his *Storm Over Laos*. Moreover, Oudone Sananikone, who was held under armed guard during the coup claimed that the demonstrators in Vientiane had been infiltrated by North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao agents. See his *The Royal Lao Army*.

We come to liberate you. The government is a lackey of the Americans. We are only the scouts, but behind us are several hundred armed men. Do not be afraid; they will not hurt you. The Pathet Lao is for the people.⁹¹⁷

The Pathet Lao sought to tap into a populist nationalism widespread in the post-colonial RLG era, to harness it and redirect it to their own ends, venting an unquenchable fury against the US and their RLG puppet. The Pathet Lao were in this way more concerned with taking back the homeland from foreigners than with Marxist ideology which was hidden by the movement's leaders; thus, they were able to draw support from ex-Issara followers.⁹¹⁸

Despite fierce attacks by the US and the RLA, the Pathet Lao were still able to spread its anti-American message, which may have been received more readily than is currently known.⁹¹⁹ The lines of communication between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Government were kept open during the unfolding Second Indochina War and even “rightist” newspapers would publish letters from the Pathet Lao, such as one which appeared in *Lao Lan Xang* newspaper on December 3, 1965:

Per the Geneva agreement on Laos of 1962, a letter was sent on November 21 [1965] to the head of the joint [International Control] Commission... Phoumi Vongvichit said the following:

“If ... the imperialist [ຈັກພັດນິຍົມ] Americans still consist of wicked deeds [ກາງຮ້າຍກັມ] going forward, the force of the Lao must be born, of necessity, to do whatever is necessary in order to resist, divide and protect the neutrality of the Lao.”⁹²⁰

The Pathet Lao described the US in the same way that US propaganda had referred to the Soviet Union, the North Koreans and the People's Republic of China: as an “imperialist.” Since at least

⁹¹⁷ Quoted in Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 117.

⁹¹⁸ Oudone Sananikone observed many in the RLA were from the Issara. See his *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 12. See further Clive Christie “Marxism and the History of the Nationalist Movements in Laos” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* vol. 10, no. 1, (1979). See especially, *ibid*, p. 154 which describes the Pathet Lao as an anti-foreign movement of “national liberation” whose nationalist credentials were established by opposing the US. However, Christie ignores the Issara, being biased in favor of the loyalists, and he further distorts the RLG as simply a victim of the US during the war years. In general, he, like others, ignores RLG nationalism.

⁹¹⁹ The rapid rise of the Pathet Lao from 1959 to 1963 across the country is difficult to parse out from the major support that North Vietnam was investing in the insurgency in these years.

⁹²⁰ *Lao Lan Xang*, December 3, 1965, p. 8.

1957 the Pathet Lao had appropriated the discourse of neutrality and peace, which would become more potent later in the 1970s. Yet what the Pathet Lao were calling for was at root an anti-American “resistance.” It was key to the Pathet Lao’s appeal to the people, and as the war dragged on and the costs mounted their message would only grow in appeal. The elite had already rejected communism due to their reviling of the social upheaval experienced in the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Yet if backing the US led to the same or even a worse outcome, some would no doubt waver and perhaps reconsider their position.

Quest for Modernity and Capitalist Disruptions

Modernity was the watchword in the neo-colonial years. It was something talked about constantly and impacted on various fields as diverse as health, agriculture, transportation, education, politics, culture, science and so on. Buzz words of “modern” (ທັນສໄມ), “development” (ພັດທະນາ), “prosperity” (ຄວາມຈະເຣີນ) were to be everywhere found. One of the major parties led by Souvanna Phouma and Katay Sasorith was itself named the national “progress” (ກ້າວໜ້າ) party in these years. Newspapers followed suite with names like *Lan Xang Progress*. In the developing young state, the quest for modernity was the most important government policy. The government was facing a legacy of French neglect, and struggled with a massive problem to build up the economy, infrastructure, and education, thereby solving the country’s major socio-economic problems. The problems were enormous, but with US aid and advice there was new energy to tackle the old problems of the country that had never been addressed under the French. The Royal Lao Government and the US would now bring to fruition all the failed, incomplete plans leftover by the French, along with a host of new plans.

Modernity was, moreover, a key ideological battlefield in the government's struggle against the Pathet Lao. The government took up the old loyalist cry, arguing if it could successfully navigate a period of dependency on foreign powers in return for aid, then it could offer the people real development, more than the communists could ever hope to achieve with their destructive ways. Thus, the Royal Lao Government leaders' quest for modernity was not merely self-aggrandizing or even self-enrichment, although that was part of it. Royal Lao Government modernism was key to its appeal to the nation, to winning popular support for the young state and therefore to assuring its survival. By the early 1960s, government leaders would even claim they had achieved major successes, outdoing even what the French had done, while the country slipped into war.

Yet the failure of the Royal Lao Government's quest for modernity was a fatal flaw that the Pathet Lao seized upon to criticize the government heavily, turning people away from the government. US aid had brought new levels of prosperity to the country yet it also introduced serious inflation, rising inequality, and official corruption, disrupting society with new capitalist values and inviting foreign meddling, which cast the government as a "puppet" of foreign powers.⁹²¹ In this way the Royal Lao Government elite, including the ex-Issara, found themselves in a position similar to that of the loyalists during the semi-colonial years. With the outbreak of the Second Indochina War, the Royal Lao Government's quest for modernity was at once removed from events as the conflict rolled on, and yet remained at the very center of what the conflict was about.

⁹²¹ Viliam, *History of Aid to Laos*.

The quest for modernity had been a desire since the colonial era, yet it was fundamentally reshaped during the Cold War. Prior to the neo-colonial years, modernization was the work of the French colonizer giving the “fruits” of modernity (e.g. hospitals, schools, roads), which was a civilizing mission to ‘uplift’ the people. In the post-colonial independent period, the Royal Lao Government had to choose between following the US or the USSR as the model of modernity. The Americans and the Soviets offered the world the choice of two radically different models of modernity, which was the central ideological struggle of the Cold War. But, for the Royal Lao leaders, the choice was obvious; they did not want to unleash a social revolution which would lead to their own downfall any more than they wanted to give up observing Buddhism. Through the country’s strategic significance in the Cold War, the Lao were given aid by the US, that spurred a frenzy of activity, in which the quest for modernity peaked. The US provided not simply funds, but also new ideas, technology and techniques, as the US became the new model of modernity.

The quest for modernity was the Royal Lao Government’s vision for the future, seeking to solve the country’s major socio-economic problems and satisfy the aspirations of the people. One only need look at the many advertisements of the neo-colonial years to see a vivid representation of Lao aspirations for modernity.⁹²² One can see an idea of a modern lifestyle appeared during the neo-colonial years, which began to filter down to everyday life, to be found in the popular print culture. For example, the ads which appeared in the *Muang Lao* magazine all promoted a modern lifestyle and one could find in the same magazine features on “music and cinema” or on the modern woman. Some ads still consisted mostly of traditional images, such as an advertisement for the national lottery which featured *thevada* holding bags of money, flying to *erawan*, the three-headed elephant mount of Indra and symbol of the kingdom, who was seated in the clouds, while on the

⁹²² Many thanks to Saowapha Viravong for pointing this out to me.

ground a single ox-cart was carrying away its winnings.⁹²³ Women were often the scene for the fantasies of modernity to play out, such as an ad for *Lao A* beer, which included a Lao woman smiling, wearing thick red lipstick and painted nails, portraying the era's ideal modern Lao woman.⁹²⁴ Many ads featured a mix of tradition and modernity, such as image of a Lao woman in traditional dress working at a modern typewriter at a "school of new Lao education" whose curriculum included "subjects that [one] cannot avoid and that everyone must know."⁹²⁵

There were highly visible signs of the new modernity in some parts of the country, especially urban areas: air conditioning, movie theaters, bars, night clubs, bowling alleys, postal and telephone services, electricity, newspapers and so on.⁹²⁶ Vientiane was the center for all this modernity to come alive: glittering new government offices, foreign embassies, police stands, Wattay airport, Dong Dok Teachers college, the radio station, and much more. Modernity came to neo-colonial Laos as an array of things, such as modern conveniences, that elders looked on with disdain and the youth with fascination. In an ad for a "travel air conditioner" one had a device that could change the temperature, cooler or warmer as desired, that could be rolled to any room (the kitchen, guest room, the office, the bedroom), and that even "the average family is able to buy and use."⁹²⁷ Thus, one could manipulate one's natural surroundings, provided they had the cash to purchase it and the electricity to run it.

Modernity in the neo-colonial years took on a decidedly capitalist mien. One could observe it for instance in an advertisement for new luxury homes:

⁹²³ *Muang Lao*, vol. 2, no. 13, May 1960, p. 80.

⁹²⁴ *Ibid*, back cover.

⁹²⁵ *Lan Xang Kao Na*, Sept. 22, 1965, p. 8.

⁹²⁶ Frank Lebar and Adrienne Suddard (eds.) *Laos: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* (New Haven: Human Relations Area File Press, 1960), p. 2.

⁹²⁷ *Muang Lao*, vol. 2, no. 13, May 1960, p. 69.

This home is a modern style home fit for the new times... The person who desires to build this home must [as a result] have security and the foundation of status throughout life... He will sit on the upper deck, in the afternoon, comfortably in the shade.

...[he] will feel happiness when the gentleman can live in a home that is correct according to the principles of nature. The order of the house will make him have a life that is orderly always, together with a life of permanent security and wealth. The person that knows art oneself is a person that builds the security of the nation.⁹²⁸

The ad portrays a life of ease among the new rich, with a luxury accommodation that was a private retreat. Luxury homes thus became status symbols in the neo-colonial years, and granted access to new values of capitalism: modernity, comfort, privacy, decadence, wealth. The featured house was listed at 1,250,000 kip, which was out of reach of all but the wealthiest of Vientiane, and suggests how the illicit proceeds of the official corruption was used.⁹²⁹ Yet it also suggested how limited, narrow and exclusionary the quest for modernity had become by 1960. Only the rich few could ever hope to achieve such a life, which raised serious questions in a democratic and Buddhist society. It likewise pointed to the formation of new social classes at the top of society.

A more pragmatic view of the quest for modernity emerges from the government's economic planning. The first five-year economic plan (1954-1959) was adopted by the National Assembly in April 1953 with the goal to raise the economy and society as quickly as possible to "the status of a modern and prosperous State."⁹³⁰ Much of the plan focused on transportation. The need to boost agriculture (rice, tobacco, timber, cattle) was recognized, but the priority was the "improvement of the basic road network and ...re-equipment of river transport."⁹³¹ Transportation consumed over fifty percent of the budget, "without which no productive development of the country is possible."⁹³² This was followed by agriculture which got slightly more than twenty

⁹²⁸ Ibid, p. 72.

⁹²⁹ In US dollars the house price would be 15,625 at the official exchange rate of 80 kip to one dollar.

⁹³⁰ "The Five Year Economic Plan for the Kingdom of Laos," Appendix A in Frank Lebar and Milton Graham, *Laos* (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Inc., 1955), p. 253-269. Ibid, p. 254 for quotation.

⁹³¹ Ibid, p. 256

⁹³² Ibid.

percent, and social services (health, education), which received a mere seventeen percent. The plan would do little for health or education, which were “not immediately productive.”⁹³³

When considering such economic planning, it is clear how little technical capacity the government had to address the wide range of problems it faced. There was a shortage of accurate information on land and mineral resources. There was not even a dedicated office for planning, only a proposal for a General Planning Commission along the lines of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Likewise, the first five-year plan reveals there was no local capital to fund the proposed budget, forcing the government to rely almost entirely on foreign aid. The plan called for soliciting French private capital and financial institutions. US aid was becoming increasingly important to the budget, increasing their foreign aid contribution from one percent in 1951 to twenty percent in 1953.⁹³⁴ The government had difficulty accounting for inflation, noting that during the First Indochina War that new construction work in urban areas caused prices to increase.⁹³⁵ Part of problem was that the government did not know how much currency was circulating in country, and could only hope that military expenses would decrease as peace returned.

In introducing the first five-year plan, the Prime Minister, Souvanna Phouma, spoke of the unique challenges confronting post-colonial nations:

To these reasons must be added the more particular reasons of nations which during the last decade have acceded to political independence: to raise the standard of living in order to avoid the domination of subversive ideas, and to establish economic autonomy without which real independence cannot be achieved.⁹³⁶

The quest for modernity was at this early stage still perceived as being most important to preserve independence. The “subversive idea” mentioned was of course communism. Yet the first five-year

⁹³³ Ibid.

⁹³⁴ Ibid, p. 260.

⁹³⁵ Ibid, p. 265.

⁹³⁶ Ibid, p. 254.

plan addressed the aspirations of the country, it was “evidence of a collective desire, of a national dream which hopes to become realized...”⁹³⁷ The National Assembly was asked to pass the plan to “establish for the country these objectives...which will lead it in good time to the rank that other nations have already assigned it.”⁹³⁸

By the early 1960s there were some signs of the fruits of modernity. The government popularized its achievements in high quality publications showcasing its successes with large, glossy photos. The language of these documents was simple and concise, obviously meant for as large a public readership as possible. Yet the government propaganda reveals the major ideas of the quest for modernity.

Vientiane was to the country, like Paris to France, the center of modernization. The government published a photo pamphlet on the city, with short captions and text to spread the idea that country had become modern, especially in Vientiane. The opening of the pamphlet marks the transition: “In the last ten years Vientiane, the capital of the Lao kingdom, has changed a lot and expanded immensely.”⁹³⁹ The pamphlet stresses the importance of the youth in modernization: “The enterprises of all the youth of the nation is of the highest importance to the prosperity and progress of the nation.”⁹⁴⁰ One key term repeated throughout the text is “modern” (ທັນສັມຍ), which was used to label everything that was new as good, revealing a sense of how the elite saw modernization in the country:

Vientiane is a city that is continuing to develop anew to be modern. It is a city that gives rise to the idea again that is the hope of all Lao. Everyone wants to see the country have peace and tranquility, to have well-being for all the people of the nation and to have prosperity [and] civilization for the

⁹³⁷ Ibid, p. 267.

⁹³⁸ Ibid.

⁹³⁹ *Prosperity of Vientiane*, p. 1.

⁹⁴⁰ Ibid.

nation, which the Lao people, every person supports this desire and persists, fighting to make the long-held dream come true in the future.⁹⁴¹

The elite reflected a sense of achievement and boasted of a sentiment they claimed to share with the people of a desire for modernity. They further linked modernity to prosperity and civilization, by which the country could be redeemed. Long delayed, the quest for modernity was now being finally realized under the guiding hand of the RLG elite, or so it would seem from the text. The desire for modernization in the RLG was similar to what emerged in many post-colonial nations, including in Southeast Asia.⁹⁴²

Much of the RLG's achievements seen in Vientiane concerned the city's role in the modernization of education. The government leaders knew that in order to achieve any of their goals the people needed to have a modern education by raising the standard of education to build a competent professional workforce ready to compete in the modern world and to respond to any crisis. Yet the legacy of the French left them with enormous gaps in education. In 1950, the primary schools replaced French with Lao as the language of instruction, yet it would be a much greater struggle to do the same with secondary schools. As indicated in government propaganda about Vientiane, the ultimate aspiration was to open the first university staffed by Lao professors, where Lao was the language of instruction:

The thing that shows the prosperity of the city of Vientiane the most is education. Currently, Vientiane is the center of education in the kingdom of Laos. The national center of teacher training is expanding every year, having not less than 200 students each year pass graduate exams to be a teacher in primary schools across the country... The technical school, college [ວິທຍາລັຍ], law school, medical school, [each] train Lao youth to have an important role in the development of their own country to make it prosperous and civilized throughout.

According to the long-term plans of the government, [there] will be built a new college in another place and will be the first place that is opened [that is of] the highest level of instruction in Lao language, taught by Lao teachers themselves. As for foreign languages, it will only be taught as a special subject.⁹⁴³

⁹⁴¹ Ibid.

⁹⁴² Thanks to Ian Baird for bringing this to my attention.

⁹⁴³ Ibid, p. 13.

The goal was nothing less than nationalizing the education system and removing the final vestiges of French influence. It was related to wider efforts associated with the CDIN to remove the last remnants of colonialism from the country. Dong Dok teacher college was the site of the future university, which would be founded “in the near future.”⁹⁴⁴ It was already a place with 1,400 students that came from around the country. Students at Dong Dok were products of the modern educational system and “will build anew in the modern way their study and the aspiration to be a teacher in the near future.”⁹⁴⁵

There were many depictions of the successful student. Photos showed students reading books, using microscopes and globes, and doing physical exercises in the school yard. These images were mixed with aspirations for the future of the country. For the medical student, for instance, “It is hoped that soon the Kingdom of Lao will have enough doctors in the fields of health and hygiene for the people throughout the Kingdom.”⁹⁴⁶ Medical students were photographed using microscopes and “to learn about the treatment of disease and illness.”⁹⁴⁷ Likewise, technicians from the vocational school were training “to meet the needs of the country.”⁹⁴⁸ Nurses were said to “smile brightly as they receive their diplomas” and that “next they will have duties to serve their compatriots together.”⁹⁴⁹ Yet Vientiane could not yet provide for all the educational needs of the country. Thus it was also a time when many more students than ever went abroad for training and education in foreign countries, especially France and the US:

⁹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 14.

⁹⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 16.

⁹⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 17.

⁹⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁹ Ibid.

Youth that go study in foreign countries or people that train in the country, responsible in the affairs of the nation, go together [to Vientiane] every year. The enterprises of the youth of the nation is of the highest importance to the prosperity and progress of the nation.⁹⁵⁰

The youth were seen as the bearers, the hope for the future of the country, the ones on whose shoulders rested the quest for modernity more than any other.

Not all of the concern with education at the time was due to its role in the economy, but also its role in shaping modern society and societal norms. When the Royal Lao Government elite took control of the education system, they began for the first time to seriously transmit their values to future generations, especially nationalism. As one government propaganda pamphlet said of education in Pakse, it:

...helps to open the eyes and ears of the youth, not just in the south, but all over... They are taught to know about their country, occupations, and countries around the world in order to be knowledgeable in all subjects, in order to make oneself by practice be a good citizen of the nation, having ability to serve one's own country and to defend the independence, sovereignty, territory, peace, and progress of the nation.⁹⁵¹

The Royal Lao Government elite had other uses for education. They saw it as a tool to discipline the youth, to form good citizens – aims that were not unlike those of the Lao Scout movement. The government saw the young students of the day as the soldiers of tomorrow who would maintain the country's independence, filled with civil duty, and a strong nationalist spirit jealously guarding the nation.

Yet as much as education may have advanced in the country during the neo-colonial years, the government still could not reach everyone.⁹⁵² There were never enough teachers, or schools, especially in the rural and remote areas of the country. The government turned to technology to

⁹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 1.

⁹⁵¹ Kingdom of Laos, ຄຳສັ່ງປາກເຊ ["Pakse"] (n.p. n.d.), p. 12.

⁹⁵² In the 1961-1962 school year there were 99,312 students in government schools and an additional 9,589 students in private schools. Kingdom of Laos, ສະຖິຕິປະຖົມສຶກສາປີການສຶກສາ 1966-1967 ["Primary School Statistics: School Year 1966-1967"] (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, n.d.), p. 28. By the early 1970s, despite the war, the number of students enrolled would surpass three hundred thousand.

find novel solutions to these problems that had plagued the country since the colonial days, launching a “Radio School” via Radio Vientiane.⁹⁵³ The Vientiane broadcaster had recently boosted its broadcast capacity to better compete with Radio Hanoi and Radio Peking in Cold War broadcasts.⁹⁵⁴ Japan provided “500 radio sets for schools in outlying villages and rural centres for community education.”⁹⁵⁵ By 1967 the director of Radio Lao, Kath Dittavong, claimed that “about one in every three Laotians has a radio set.”⁹⁵⁶

The Radio School was a daily broadcast in the mornings at 8 a.m. and the evenings at 6 p.m. Many topics for lessons included such typical subjects as history, religion, geography, language and grammar, but also morality, ethics, hygiene, civics, proverbs, physical education, agriculture, animal husbandry, family life, strange oddities from around the world, and so on. Some lessons were given in the form of a conversation between two people, but most were in the form of a teacher giving a lesson to the student audience. The broadcast was in Lao, and in as much as the subjects taught consisted of Lao language, history, and religion, the Radio School was a way to spread Lao culture to the margins of the country. The Radio School was also an important means to teach the government’s form of nationalism. Thus the Radio School taught lessons on the major national holidays, both the secular holidays of army day, constitution day, independence day, and the nationally observed religious holidays.⁹⁵⁷ Broadcasts often included patriotic songs too, and one can imagine the teacher calling on students-listeners to sing along to the national anthem, *dok*

⁹⁵³ See further UNESCO, *International Yearbook of Education: 1962* (Geneva: International Bureau of Education, 1963), p. 217: “The new primary school syllabuses will involve intensive use of teaching by radio.”

⁹⁵⁴ See Kingdom of Laos, *Plan de developpement economique et social: periode de 5 ans du 1er Juillet 1959 au 30 Juin 1964* (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, 1959), p. 102. Radio was seen by the government as an especially important means “to educate the Lao masses, of whom the majority is illiterate...”

⁹⁵⁵ Unesco, *International Yearbook of Education*, vol. XXVI (Geneva: International Bureau of Education, 1965), p. 197.

⁹⁵⁶ John Lent, “Mass Media in Laos,” *International Communication Gazette* no. 20 (1974), p. 178. The official population total for 1967 was 2,759,000 which would suggest over 900,000 had a radio set.

⁹⁵⁷ *Radio School*, Week 2, p. 52-57.

champa, songs devoted to Lao youth, the beauty of the flag, or a song entitled “born Lao.” There was for instance, a song on the constitution:

Oh Lao constitution, friendly to my mind
 Our Lao people have rights in governance, freedom and equality
 Able to lead the nation permanently we join in body and mind
 To help the national territory, to help the national territory

Chorus:

Oh constitution, [the king] told the Lao nation,
 The system of governance, as a democracy, helps hearts and minds be woven, isn't it?
 Lao nation joins [to be] one family, upholds the lineage, resolves the mind
 To make the nation progress, permanently, to make the nation progress, permanently

Oh Lao constitution, friendly to my mind,
 Our Lao people have rights in governance,
 Resolve mind, life and body [for the] constitution, because [it] is the legal system,
 Appointed by the citizens, appointed by the citizens
 (chorus again).⁹⁵⁸

There was even for a time a magazine devoted to the new modern education system, *Education*.⁹⁵⁹ Skimming through the pages, the young teacher could find articles on the latest government initiatives to improve education, articles on school facilities, teachers, the curriculum or even student outcomes.

In a pamphlet from the early 1960s, Pakse was highlighted as another show-case of the successes of the quest for modernity and a “new and modern” city.⁹⁶⁰ The introduction said “Pakse is a point in the expansion and development which lets [one] see the characteristics of Laos generally.”⁹⁶¹ In Pakse the ພັດທະນາ (“development”) of the elite was made manifest. The flurry of building in the city was celebrated, which brought forth a “new radio station, damming water to improve the flow of electricity and a new teacher’s training college, in buildings that are

⁹⁵⁸ *Radio School*, Week 4, p. 133. See also *ibid*, week 5, p. 135.

⁹⁵⁹ *Education*, no. 1-12. (1959-1960).

⁹⁶⁰ *Pakse*, p. 5. A note on the back cover also explains that a photographer was invited by the King to take the photos that appeared in book.

⁹⁶¹ *Ibid*.

prominent to the eye.”⁹⁶² People were said to be “moving into the city every day.” The authors boasted that recent building in city “shows that Pakse is the city that will prosper fastest in the country.”⁹⁶³

In their own quest for modernity, the elite had finally achieved in Pakse what the French never could through the integration of the country by means of modern transportation. Pakse was now the transport hub of southern Laos. Travel and trade to Thailand was “convenient” and free for all.⁹⁶⁴ It had been a frequent complaint during the colonial era and was a demand of the Issara, that the French had limited travel to Thai and redirected it to Cambodia and Vietnam. But, now Pakse was at the center of a road network binding it with Savannakhet, Khammouane, and Vientiane, that worked “in all seasons” and even reached Luang Prabang.⁹⁶⁵ The revolution in transportation was completed by the new air travel, which was yet another sign of the modernity of the Royal Lao Government:

...an airfield of Pakse that is modern, having an airline communicating between Pakse and other major cities in Southeast Asia. But the point of interest for all the people that come visit Pakse is the sign that reads: “welcome to everyone”⁹⁶⁶

The propagandists also claimed that the new modernity in Pakse was not just for the enjoyment of the elite, but for anyone. Left unsaid was the fact that one needed enough money to purchase a ticket, itself resulting from the new capitalist impulse. Modern amenities in the Royal Lao Government were open to anyone, irrespective of ethnicity, class, gender, religious persuasion

⁹⁶² Ibid.

⁹⁶³ Ibid.

⁹⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁶⁵ The French had made some of these roads *Routes Coloniales* prior to this. Before 1893 there were extensive footpaths and cattle roads in conjunction with river transport.

⁹⁶⁶ Ibid. See further p. 7, which notes there were two airlines in Pakse.

and so on, if one only had the money.⁹⁶⁷ To draw in the reader, the cover of the pamphlet featured a commanding aerial view of the city.

To achieve their visions of modernity for the future of the country, the elite reformed the land and reshaped the environment to bring nature under the government's control in a classic act of modernization. Thus, the Pakse pamphlet spoke of "modern vehicles that have great power to be able to plow the land, excavate tree roots and stones that are not of benefit."⁹⁶⁸ And the forest is leveled "to be a flat area, a place that may be used for the benefit of the people."⁹⁶⁹ Photos accompanying the text show Lao technicians operating modern tractors, demolishing sites with jackhammers and driving heavy trucks down dusty roads. Some of the key words in the pamphlet included "benefit" (ປະໂຫຍດ) "currently" (ປະຈຸບັນ) and "to show" (ສະແດງໃຫ້ເຫັນ). By sheer repetition of these words, readers could see the quest for modernization was being realized under the Royal Lao Government. The old problems which had formerly plagued life were now being swept away, relegated to the past as country moved forward to the future. Yet the quest for modernity was itself under threat: "If the country has peace, trade and export [are] probably convenient. The fighting and killing every day is the enemy standing in way of leading our nation to progress."⁹⁷⁰

Significantly there was a special place in the Royal Lao Government's quest for modernity reserved for hydro-electric dams. Production of electrical energy in the semi-colonial years was

⁹⁶⁷ Outhine Bounyavong's famous story "Death Price" shows another side of air travel riven with corruption and official misuse. See Outhine Bounyavong, *Mother's Beloved* (ແມ່ນັ້ນ) Bounheng Inversin and Daniel Duffy (eds.) (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

⁹⁶⁸ *Pakse*, p. 16.

⁹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

achieved mostly by wood-burning generators.⁹⁷¹ Dams were mentioned in the first five year plan, which judged them to be the “most important” resources of the region, yet they could not be developed immediately but had to be studied first and their use was “not envisaged in the immediate future.”⁹⁷² Through developing dams the elite sought to exploit natural resources to provide a much needed renewable source of energy and thereby the means for electrification of the country. More broadly, they were seen as the engine to drive the larger economy and important to early Lao capital accumulation. The *Pakse* pamphlet showcases an early dam outside Pakse, describing it as follows:

Having usable electricity shows the civilization and the modernity of the country. The one large area where the water is dammed is at *Xelapam*, established outside Pakse city. This dam is able to improve the flow of electricity to new industrial factories and to let people use [electricity] everywhere sufficiently.⁹⁷³

With dams, as with radio and air travel, the elite could show that Laos was indeed civilized and modern. The elite’s central claim was that the Kingdom of Laos was now modern, which was repeated over and over again in discussion of many areas. As they succinctly put it: “in the kingdom of Laos one sees the modern world.”⁹⁷⁴ The quest for modernity was central to the government’s appeal to the nation to back them against the Pathet Lao. Maybe there were foreigners meddling in the country and maybe the country was aid-dependent, but the elite had achieved the long-awaited modernization of the country, providing for the needs of the people and assuring that the future of the country was brighter than ever.

⁹⁷¹ Lebar et al., *Laos*, p. 241. For 1949-1952. Generators were at Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Thakhke, Savannakhet, and Pakse. There was also one at the Phontiou mines. Many commentators of the time mentioned the hydro-electric potentials of the country when discussing development, see Lebar et al., *Human Relation File 23: Laos*, p. 31.

⁹⁷² Lebar et al, *Human Relation File 23: Laos*, p. 255.

⁹⁷³ *Pakse*, p. 17.

⁹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 12.

Yet however much real progress had been achieved, during the neo-colonial years the quest for modernity ultimately failed to fully realize the aspirations of all the Lao people. The Royal Lao Government relied on US aid and technical expertise to realize their quest – yet cooperation entailed high costs, which, although raising the overall economy, had deleterious effects for many. US aid was too large for the economy to absorb, which led to sky-rocketing inflation.⁹⁷⁵ For example, between 1954 and 1958 housing costs in Vientiane rose as much as 550 percent.⁹⁷⁶ Martin Stuart-Fox observes that the government, unwillingly to levy taxes, instead printed money, and that the money in circulation between 1960 and 1965 increased sevenfold.⁹⁷⁷

The project to modernize the country was contested by other forces. The RLG and Pathet Lao competed to modernize the country. As a result, RLG ideology could not neglect to address how to be modern. Yet in practice the Pathet Lao, with North Vietnamese aid, succeeded to modernize remote areas of the country in ways that the RLG struggled to match.⁹⁷⁸ The RLG's failures to modernize the country played into the hands of its enemies. The North Vietnamese expanded the ranks of the Pathet Lao by establishing schools where the RLG had none.⁹⁷⁹ In these schools teaching the Lao language to locals “went together with the training of cadres’ for the future.”⁹⁸⁰ The ethnic minorities especially sought knowledge of the Lao language. Christopher

⁹⁷⁵ Kingdom of Laos, *Annuaire Statistique du Laos: Quatrième Volume, 1953 à 1957* (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, 1961), p. 230-232 shows government figures for cost of living which increased over 400 percent from 1951 to 1960.

⁹⁷⁶ Askew et. al., *Vientiane*, p. 123-126, 147. This figure is for high-end housing in the city. The housing costs for “middle class” Lao grew 400 percent from 1950-1958. These figures were never official statistics of the government, but only estimates made by US embassy officials; their validity is uncertain. A real economic history of post-colonial Laos remains to be written.

⁹⁷⁷ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 130.

⁹⁷⁸ Especially, North Vietnam's learning of ethnic minority languages and customs was used to great effect. The RLG never developed such a capacity it seems. On North Vietnam's efforts see Christopher Goscha, “Vietnam and the world outside: The case of Vietnamese communist advisers in Laos (1948-62) *South East Asia Research*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2004), p. 153-154.

⁹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 155. See further Mai Na Lee, *Dream of the Hmong Kingdom* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), which describes how Pa Chay's earlier anti-colonial revolt (1918-1921) also included appeals to modernity.

⁹⁸⁰ Goscha, “Vietnam and the world outside,” p. 155.

Goscha thus observes “Paradoxically, Vietnamese cadres played an important role in the spread of the Lao national language, albeit for internationalist purposes.”⁹⁸¹ The RLG’s failure to expand education and other government services into remote parts of the country, often ethnic minority areas, bolstered North Vietnamese subversion. The North Vietnamese in Laos saw themselves as modernizers.⁹⁸² They would teach people “how to purify water, cook meat, procure salt, use modern agricultural tools, sew and develop local handicraft industries, even to build their houses differently.”⁹⁸³ The North Vietnamese began “literacy campaigns” which the RLG would later seek to counter with their own campaigns beginning in 1959 when the government began to take rural affairs seriously.⁹⁸⁴ When the North Vietnamese began working to recruit and convert people in 1954 many feared them and would flee, but the North Vietnamese were able to win them over.⁹⁸⁵ This begs the question, if the rural people of Laos naturally feared the Vietnamese, how could the RLG have possibly lost their loyalty? The government’s own failings in the rural areas must have been severe.⁹⁸⁶ Later Vietnamese works recall the people’s being won over by efforts to bring modernity which convinced them of Vietnamese concern “in their well-being.”⁹⁸⁷ Communism was offered as the “key to ending poverty, chaos and war wrought by “foreign aggressors.”⁹⁸⁸

⁹⁸¹ Ibid.

⁹⁸² Ibid, p. 156, “The Vietnamese admit today that their aim was to bring modernity to these backward peoples.” Ibid, p. 156-157, “The discourse of modernity was an important tool in the Vietnamese bid to win over converts and gain the trust of the Laotians.” Ibid, p. 173, the North Vietnamese also sought to eliminate “outdated superstitions, bad habits and social ills.” On North Vietnam’s aid to the nascent Pathet Lao health services see Kathryn Sweet, “Limited Doses: Health and Development in Laos, 1893-2000” (Ph.D. diss., National University of Singapore, 2015). See further, *ibid*, p. 174.

⁹⁸³ Goscha, “Vietnam and the world outside,” p. 156.

⁹⁸⁴ Ibid. See further, *ibid*, p. 172, which notes that in order to train Lao in the new ideology, the North Vietnamese “had to convince the Lao of the importance of learning and reading.”

⁹⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 155.

⁹⁸⁶ Ibid. Goscha notes the North Vietnamese working in southern Laos handed out photos of Sithon Kommadam, while among the Lao they distributed photos of Souphanouvong.

⁹⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 156.

⁹⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 157.

The Americans strove to introduce a “market economy” and so aid was used to import expensive consumer goods that catered almost exclusively to the elite. The arrival of capitalism had disruptive effects on a society that was still described as largely self-sufficient in 1955. The new capitalism abetted the amassing of private wealth, and the subsequent income inequality created new social classes, which were seen as a sign of progress. For the first time, homeless beggars and wage laborers appeared in Vientiane. Whatever modernization achieved was only in reach of a select few, resulting in new and unprecedented inequalities in society. The final death knell to the quest for modernity may well have been the resumption of fighting with the Pathet Lao in May 1959 that was brought home in the Battle of Vientiane that erupted on the streets of the capital in December 1960. Once the Second Indochina War began, any chance to bring real progress to the country slipped through the elite’s fingers. Nevertheless, in the long term, the Royal Lao Government’s quest for modernity remains an important legacy for the country, given the LPDR’s own efforts that so closely mirror those of the Royal Lao Government.

Post-Colonial Nationalism and its Discontents

There were several public events observed throughout the year honoring nationalism in country. In government documents, three holidays in particular were noted – Army Day on March 23, Constitution Day on May 11, and Independence Day, observed on July 19.⁹⁸⁹ These dates were overwhelmingly determined by France, but they were nonetheless viewed as nationalist celebrations. For instance, Independence Day was held on July 19 to mark the signing of General Conventions in 1949 wherein the French acknowledged Laos as a free state (within the French Union) for the first time, which the Issara saw as a victory for their cause. Phetsarath himself referred to July 19

⁹⁸⁹ See *Prosperity of Vientiane*, p. 19 which identifies these as being the most important holidays in the kingdom.

as the date of Lao independence. But RLG holidays were not only secular. The Royal Lao Government also turned popular Buddhist festivals into national holidays, specifically, the traditional lunar New Year, Visak and the That Luang festival.⁹⁹⁰ The elite thus continued the trend started in the 1930s when those at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute first began to fashion a nationalist form from the universal traditions of Buddhism. Public commemorations were used effectively to rally the masses to the state, notably by Phoumi Nosavan who used sporting events to promote nationalism.⁹⁹¹

The constitution was especially venerated in the kingdom. The government had a similar nationalist slogan to the Thai, but added “constitution” to give a slogan of “Nation, King, Religion, Constitution.” The constitution was an important symbol that appeared on many government documents, often depicted sitting atop a Buddhist offering bowl, surrounded by a shining halo. A copy of it sat in the National Assembly on the same level as a statue of the Buddha, showing it was indeed highly revered.⁹⁹² Promulgated on May 11, 1947, the constitution was never abandoned, but was instead revised, creating a long history of constitutionalism over the course of the Royal Lao Government. Grant Evans in his study of the monarchy noted King Savang Vatthana always sought to abide by the constitution.⁹⁹³ The constitution was publicly commemorated nationally on the same level as independence or the military. It was a point of pride for the elite because it symbolized that the Royal Lao Government was a modern democracy on the same level as other nations around the world.⁹⁹⁴

⁹⁹⁰ Joel Halpern, “The Lao elite” (1961), p. 36 noted government offices closed on these particular Buddhist holidays.

⁹⁹¹ Creak, *Embodied Nation*. Creak also provides a fascinating study of the first Independence Day ceremony.

⁹⁹² Prosperity of Vientiane, p. 5.

⁹⁹³ Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty*.

⁹⁹⁴ A similar impulse was behind the RLG’s celebration of United Nations Day observed in October to mark the date the RLG was accepted as a full member to that body in 1955. The date marked the RLG’s full acceptance by the international community.

Celebrated largely in Vientiane, with the King in attendance, Army Day was one of the major national holidays during the Royal Lao Government period. It was observed on March 23, the date the Royal Lao Army was founded in 1950. The holiday's importance only grew as the country descended into the Second Indochina War and the need to publicly honor the military's sacrifices grew. The most important celebrations for Army Day took place in Vientiane. At these events, King Savang Vatthana himself would come to honor the military, or as one Royalist work described a propaganda photo: "The foot of his majesty the King, the Lord of Life awards a medal to the brave troops on the day of the birth of the national army that is held in Vientiane."⁹⁹⁵ There was also a public ceremony in Pakse at which Prince Boun Oum was present, described as follows:

March 23 every year there is a celebration of National Army Day. [It] is marked in Pakse together with [one] in Vientiane in order to honor the brave soldier who is the wall of the nation. On this day, soldiers march on the field in a majestic manner. Soldiers have a heavy burden especially today that the country is being invaded, but the people support them always.⁹⁹⁶

The rhetoric of the propaganda text might very well have appeared in a speech given on the day in the neo-colonial years, perhaps delivered by Boun Oum. The text is accompanied by a photograph of Boun Oum at the microphone speaking, alongside Phoumi Nosavan, and Royal Lao Army troops marching, described as "brave" (ກ້າຫາງ) soldiers.

Army Day itself was a time to for grand speeches on the nation's unanimous feeling of deep gratitude to the soldiers. The RLA soldier became, in the highly militarized culture of the Royal Lao Government, a key site of nationalism as it was publicly commemorated in the neo-colonial years.⁹⁹⁷ Army Day was also a time for public speeches that spoke of the enemy (ສັດຕູ).

⁹⁹⁵ *Prosperity of Vientiane*, p. 21

⁹⁹⁶ *Pakse*, p. 21.

⁹⁹⁷ On the militarized culture of the RLG, see especially Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation*.

Often during Army Day celebrations, the event included government nationalist propaganda about the war also:

The Kingdom of Laos is currently being invaded from the outside. The independence and security of the Kingdom is threatened. The people and their national leaders are of one mind to stand up and fight those who come to invade and those who hope to destroy the freedom and the peace of our country. Therefore the people of the nation thus must fight for the independence of the country!”⁹⁹⁸

Words that were new in the 1940s had become commonplace by the neo-colonial years. In fact, “independence” and “freedom” were the signal ideals on which Royal Lao government leaders appealed to the public to support for war, fought in defense of these values. In government propaganda it was a war of foreign invasion, not a civil war, portraying the Pathet Lao as nothing more than the tool, or puppets, of foreign powers, who had no legitimate grievances against the government and no agency or revolutionary program of their own.⁹⁹⁹

The *Anousavaly* was the ultimate symbol of official Royal Lao Government nationalist veneration of the soldier. It was a monument to the soldier’s duties and sacrifice for the nation. The *Anousavaly* has often been mocked for being no more than a “concrete runway” as foreign observers dubbed it, but such commentary completely misses that it was a significant testament to the public commemoration of nationalism in the country.¹⁰⁰⁰ It was highlighted in propaganda on modern Vientiane, showing its construction still not yet finished. The government then called it the “monument for war veterans.”¹⁰⁰¹ The site chosen for the monument was highly symbolic itself. Being built in-between the National Assembly and the government offices down the road from the palace and the That Luang monument there was no place more central to the Royal Lao

⁹⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 20.

⁹⁹⁹ Thanks to Bruce Lockhart for this comment.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Askew et. al, *Vientiane* p. 128, yet see also p. 139 which provides better understanding of the monument. Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 131 dubs it “Phoumi’s folly.” Western criticism accords with LPDR views of the monument, as a placard presently placed at the site mocks it.

¹⁰⁰¹ *Prosperity of Vientiane*, p. 7.

Government. As the conflict dragged on for over a decade, and the costs of war continued to mount, it would become a solemn monument to the war dead. The *Anousavaly* thus at once celebrated and symbolized the ultimate mark of nationalism, the willingness of the people to fight and die for the nation.¹⁰⁰²

Other notable monuments created during the Royal Lao Government era included for instance, a monument to Katay Sasorith in the city of Pakse, built shortly after his death.¹⁰⁰³ He was remembered for his term as Prime Minister and described as “one who had always resisted in order to redeem independence [ກູ້ອິດສະລຳ].”¹⁰⁰⁴ At the ceremony to install Katay’s statue, there were thirty thousand people in attendance. A government pamphlet noted that many leaders of ability had come from the south and this remained true in the present, citing as examples Prince Boun Oum and the regional military governor who were both from Pakse. It also mentioned the annual festival at Vat Phou, which, even though it was not often promoted as a national Buddhist holiday like the That Luang festival was observed “some years the King, Prime Minister, and government officials, important persons come join [the festival].”¹⁰⁰⁵ Despite undertones of an enduring regionalism or even southern nationalism, these tensions were not unmanageable and, at times, Pakse was itself the scene of nationalist celebrations at the center of national attention.

Yet all was not right with post-colonial nationalism as it was developing in the Royal Lao Government during the neo-colonial years. The attempts to forge a national identity had the effect of displacing the loyalist-backed multiethnic nationalism of the semi-colonial years in favor of the

¹⁰⁰² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹⁰⁰³ Most statues created in the RLG era were of royalty. There was a statue of the late King Sisavang Vong that was given by the USSR. This statue holds a copy of the RLG constitution in its hand. The other statue of a king was the Xai Settha statue at That Luang.

¹⁰⁰⁴ *Pakse*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 15.

essentialist, Issara-derived, exclusionary, hyper-nationalism idea of a Lao race. Even as late as the neo-colonial years, there were efforts to moderate the worst excesses of the new nationalism, such as the introduction of new terms *Lao Theung* and *Lao Soung* to refer to different ethnic minorities. But these efforts were hindered by Royal Lao Government elite themselves who still stubbornly used the older, pejorative terms *Kha*, *Yao* and *Meo* frequently.¹⁰⁰⁶ Moreover, in official population statistics the government still conceived of the population as consisting of three races: Lao, “Kha,” and “Meo-Yao”.¹⁰⁰⁷ There are also many reports of the time of ethnic minorities experiencing discrimination at the hands of the government.¹⁰⁰⁸ Yet the government persisted in its efforts to coopt ethnic minorities and in one document, a new value of equality appeared alongside earlier values of freedom and independence. This was not merely an academic exercise. Government relations with minorities became much more significant when the first Pathet Lao bases were established in Phongsali and Sam Neua in 1953, and only grew more significant over the course of the neo-colonial years.

¹⁰⁰⁶ It may be that the older terms were used by some because they were familiar. Thanks to Ian Baird for this suggestion.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Kingdom of Laos, *Annuaire Statistique du Laos: Quatrième Volume, 1953 à 1957* (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, 1961), p. 53, table 16 “percentage of principal ethnic races in Laos.” Ibid p. 54 offers a breakdown of each “race” and where they resided in the country.

¹⁰⁰⁸ See Halpern, “The Lao elite.” Halpern noted RLG society in the late 1950s was biased in favor of the ethnic Lao which led to the government providing aid to Buddhist temples, but not other religious sites of worship, p. 80. He further noted a certain racial hierarchy he discerned where tribal Tai served in the economy in a position similar to the Vietnamese working in low, menial occupations as gardeners, domestics, drivers, etc whereas the “Kha” must be coolie laborers and the “Meo-Yao” avoided towns altogether, p. 80. He interviewed one Khmu near Luang Prabang who remarked “to us every Lao is a boss” p. 82. He added that the government feared the Chinese and Vietnamese communities were in contact with the PRC and DRV respectively and that the RLG discriminated against them in respect to taxes (although they were influenced by practices set by the French colonial administration), p. 56. He quoted a minister who said “We are trying to collect taxes from the Chinese and Vietnamese, and then we will start on the Lao.” Even Touby Lyfoung the respected Hmong leader and member of the National Assembly and later Privy Council who is often an example of ethnic minorities who successfully assimilated in the RLG – even he complained of discrimination. In speaking on the topic he said that Hmong did relatively well in Xieng Khouang. having their own officials, schools, clinics and so forth, but this was not the case with Hmong elsewhere in the kingdom, such as Luang Prabang: “But this is not the situation in Luang Prabang...where there is discrimination in the administration.” He added “there should be a Meo [sic] representative on the court, for example, because often Meo do not know Lao, or speak it very poorly.” Touby made these comments in an interview with Joel Halpern. See Halpern, “Lao Project Paper no. 19: Laos Profiles” (1961), p. 141.

Yet as hyper-nationalism grew ascendant, it even led in extreme cases to a denial of any ethnic diversity in the country. Published in 1956 when he was Prime Minister, Katay Sasorith's statement on this subject is already well known among scholars and has been widely cited:

For Lan-Xang, unlike many other empires past and present, but like present-day Laos, lumped together within the limits of its territory a number of populations that were extremely homogeneous. If we leave out a few ethnological Minorities (Khas, Meos, etc...) that are scattered here and there, generally in the heights, the whole of *Muong Lao* spoke the same language, honoured the same genii, cultivated the same religion and had the same usages and customs. The same cannot be said either of any of the ancient empires, nor of India or of the Great China of present day.¹⁰⁰⁹

In his denial, Katay was most likely imitating the Thai although he was also influenced by the Americans.¹⁰¹⁰ But the Thai offered the most relevant example, who themselves at the turn-of-the-century, banished official use of any other ethnonyms (e.g. "Lao" in Isan areas) in favor of a single blanket term, "Thai."¹⁰¹¹ Katay was himself a prominent member of the Issara, who lived for years in exile in Bangkok, and the movement owed a number of influences to the Thai. Katay and the rest of the Lao elite each had their own experience attending French schools and living in cities during colonial era where they felt Lao were made to be a minority in their own country.

What is less known is that these views were not limited to Katay, but could be found throughout the Royal Lao Government in the neo-colonial years, especially in the education system. The idea of a homogenous state that was "only Lao" was promoted widely. In a fourth grade civics textbook used in the classroom and published by the Ministry of Education, it stated:

A nation is a community of all the people who have a single race, having the same customs, mores and language. For example, the Lao nation is the community of Lao whose race is Lao, having the same customs, mores, and language.¹⁰¹²

¹⁰⁰⁹ Katay Sasorith, "Historical Aspects of Laos," in René de Berval (ed.), *Kingdom of Laos* (Saigon: France-Asie, 1959). This collection of articles first appeared in French in 1956.

¹⁰¹⁰ He admired the fact that immigrants to the US had to assimilate to the majority. See Katay, *Le Laos*, p. 16.

¹⁰¹¹ David Streckfuss "The mixed colonial legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai racist thought, 1890-1910" in Laurie J. Sears (ed.) *Autonomous histories, particular truths: Essays in honor of John R.W. Smail* (Madison: Center for Southeast Asia Studies, University of Wisconsin, 1993).

¹⁰¹² Kingdom of Laos, ດູດບຸຮຽນໜ້າທີຟົວເມືອງປະຖົມ4 ["Civics textbook, grade four"] (Vientiane: Ministry of Education, 1967), p. 8.

The civics textbook goes on to list duties of citizenship, such as obeying the law, paying one's taxes or showing respect to the national flag. This text suggests that Thai notions of a single Thai race (that was formulated in the face of imperialist aggression from France at the end of the nineteenth-century) had continued to influence Lao notions of race, even as late as the neo-colonial years. The elite saw themselves facing an external threat and made similar moves to create a united front against foreign aggression.¹⁰¹³ However, they did not address the fact that the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese pursued simultaneously the opposite strategy as the French had to Thailand half a century before, with a battle cry now among the minorities of equality of all ethnic groups. The need to form a strongly unified identity and notions of a Lao race were too deeply ingrained to mount an effective response.

If this was the only example it would not be fair to claim it as widespread, but there are plenty of other examples from the Ministry of Education. In its January 1960 issue, the Ministry's journal, *Education*, published a sample lesson-plan including a historical map showing the ancient Lao migration from China, with accompanying text:¹⁰¹⁴

Lesson plan: In each classroom there might be students [of] many groups [ຈຳພວກ], for example descendants of Lao of the south, or Lao of the north, of this race [ຊົນຊາດ] or that tribe [ຊົນເຜົ່າ]. The teacher [may] pick some students, to ask: "what [type of] people are your parents?" The student answers: "my parents are Tai-Luang Prabang." The teacher [may] select many new students again. The students may answer like this: my father is Tai-Vientiane, but my mother is Tai-Thakhek, or my parents are Tai-Sam Neua, or other [responses]... The teacher [may] ask many new students again: "what race [ຊົນຊາດ] are you?" The students might reply like this: I am Lao race, or Tai-Lao, Tai Phouan, Tai-Lue, Tai-Dam, Tai-Daeng, Tai-Meo, Lao-Thoeng etc... As the case may be, the teacher can observe that the questioning of students will inevitably elicit responses that are conjectural beliefs. The teacher takes the opportunity to explain as follows: even though [you] may be in the south, or the north, do not say [you] are of this race or that tribe, anyhow, when we join

¹⁰¹³ Similarly, M.K. Gandhi resisted untouchable calls in the 1930s led by B.R. Ambedkar for separate quotas in colonial India. See further Guha, Ramachandra (ed.), *Makers of Modern India* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 189.

¹⁰¹⁴ Soth Phetrasy, ຕົວຢ່າງບົດສອນພົງສາວະການ ["Sample lesson [on] history"] *Education*, January 1960, no. 5, p. 49-55. Soth Phetsarasy may well have been a NLHX candidate in the 1960 general elections. Later in 1972 he was perhaps the NLHX representative in Vientiane. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 386 and 835 respectively.

together in the lands of the Kingdom of Laos, [there] is only the Lao race, or [you] may say [you] are Tai-Lao...¹⁰¹⁵

Justification for this view was based on the “birth of the Lao race” theory which posited that 4,000 years ago there was a single race, the Ai Lao (ອ້າຍລາວ), that over time was divided.¹⁰¹⁶ The story of the break-up of the Ai Lao was a popular theory at the time for its resonance with the recent division of the Lao under the rule of France and Thai, which the Issara feared would lead to the racial extinction of the Lao, and that later mutated into a fear Sino-Viet domination at the time of the CDIN. The lesson then turned to teaching the “birth of the Lao race,” but it shows that the Ministry of Education’s official journal, *Education*, was actively promoting to all its teachers the idea that everyone was exclusively Lao. In the next issue, the same author goes on to discuss the importance of teaching Lao as the official language to minorities.¹⁰¹⁷ Halpern himself discussed minority issues with an education official who replied: “Ours is a small country and we must strive for unity. Missionaries have done us a great disservice by trying to teach in languages other than Lao. It is harder for tribal children to learn Lao than for Lao to learn the French they must have for education beyond primary school.”¹⁰¹⁸ The government was very clearly attempting to assimilate the minorities to the dominant Lao culture.¹⁰¹⁹

Illustrating its pervasiveness, the same ideas were broadcast over the airwaves by Radio Laos during its educational programming. In a broadcast of the “Radio School” on August 4, 1964

¹⁰¹⁵ Ibid, p. 49. The lesson plan demonstrates the tendency among Lao to use ‘tai’ as part of their ethnonym. ‘Tai’ in this context simply means ‘people.’

¹⁰¹⁶ Ibid, p. 50.

¹⁰¹⁷ Soth Pherasy, ຄວນສົ່ງເສີມພາສາລາວ [“The worthy promotion [of] Lao language”] *Education*, February 1960, no. 6, p. 29.

¹⁰¹⁸ Halpern, “The Lao elite” p. 80-81. He added one government official denied there was any problem for minorities saying “they have equal rights to vote.”

¹⁰¹⁹ The Pathet Lao were not able to completely transcend ethnic Lao drives to assimilate minorities. They continued to use RLG terminology (Lao Loum, Lao Theung, Lao Soung) which even though it provided neutral terminology for different peoples labeled all as Lao. Thanks to Ian Baird. See further Grant Evans, “Apprentice Ethnographers: Vietnam and the Study of Lao Minorities,” in Grant Evans (ed.), *Laos: Culture and Society*.

at 8:00, the teacher of an introductory lesson on geography, when discussing the ancient boundaries of the kingdom under Fa Ngum, went so far as to claim that:

In the reign of King Fa Ngum, the high king, our country had an immense, vast realm, to the west, to the east, to the south and to the north, Lao had seized a land [that] was expanding and [of] the citizens in this great domain, there were only Lao, all.¹⁰²⁰

This lesson was repeated in several other broadcasts in the same month.¹⁰²¹ Yet how was a broadcast entirely in Lao supposed to appeal to non-Lao people in the country? Even if one were not a native speaker, and one still managed to learn enough Lao to follow along with the lesson, one was presented only with lessons about Lao culture, religion, and history, to the exclusion of any other culture in the country. Finally, listeners were told that they were not from any minority group, but were in fact all Lao.¹⁰²²

The exclusionary form of hyper-nationalism was the most significant cultural act of the RLG elite. However, the intellectual elite's efforts to bind the country together in a united front against foreign enemies may have been the biggest chink in the armor of the Royal Lao Government's emerging nationalism. It is notable that the rise of this form of nationalism was not from external or foreign influence. It was all in the hands of the intellectual elite themselves. Yet in spite of Pathet Lao successes, assimilation may not have been entirely a failure, if one considers the Kongle coup. The only Westerner to interview Kongle at the time reported that Kongle motivation hinged on the question: "why should Lao fight Lao?"¹⁰²³ This is a profoundly nationalist statement, but importantly, if the quote is an accurate translation of what Kongle said in Lao, there is a possibility he did not qualify between those who were ethnic Lao and minorities.

¹⁰²⁰ Radio school, Week 1, p. 76.

¹⁰²¹ Radio school, Week 2, p. 42.

¹⁰²² It was also a case of conflating nationality and ethnicity to a degree. Thanks to Bruce Lockhart for this important comment.

¹⁰²³ Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 389. Kongle was interviewed by the English journalist Estelle Holt in April 1963 on the Plain of Jars.

He himself was from the Brao ethnic background, yet he may have been motivated by strong nationalist sentiments to espouse an inclusive, even perhaps assimilationist, view of the country as some did at the time.

Conclusion: Build the Nation, Rally the Race

Those labeled as “rightwing” in the RLG and the ideas associated with them in the neo-colonial years have not received the attention they deserve. This has obscured important events in the country, not least of which was the opening stages of the Second Indochina War in Laos. There was a powerful connection between the intellectual elite’s discovery of the “birth of the Lao race,” the government’s efforts to assimilate minorities to the dominant Lao culture and the outbreak of the Second Indochina War with North Vietnam and their proxy, the Pathet Lao – behind which stood menacing Red China. It was a defensive war to save the Lao race from extinction or as Sisouk Na Champassak, a prominent member of the CDIN phrased it: “For Laos the fight against Communist subversion is a struggle for existence.”¹⁰²⁴ He added “if the little kingdom of Laos fell into Communist hands it would disappear from the map. It would probably be integrated into a Thai unit and become a sort of People’s or Social Republic linked to Greater China.”¹⁰²⁵ The noted anthropologist Joel Halpern wrote in a Rand report for the US government: “Many...Lao elite feel that the Pathet Lao pose a direct threat to...their way of life.”¹⁰²⁶ Their response, he said, was

¹⁰²⁴ Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 109. Oudone Sananikone made a similar comment describing North Vietnam’s offensive as one “that would hazard the very existence of Laos.” See Oudone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 128.

¹⁰²⁵ Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, p. 108. The Issara similarly feared the country would disappear from the map (see chapter two). See further Evans, *A Short History*, p. 184 which noted the Hmong also feared “extermination if the communists took over.”

¹⁰²⁶ Halpern, “The Lao elite,” p. 85.

marked by fear and confusion.¹⁰²⁷ King Savang Vatthana was personally very upset by the North Vietnamese invasion.¹⁰²⁸

It is striking then to consider the very same idea appears in the memoirs of top officers of the Royal Lao Army. Major General Oudone Sananikone was an important leader of the RLA who later wrote a personal account of the army. In the midst of his account of the escalation of the war in 1964, which was characterized by increasing attacks by the North Vietnamese, he included profoundly anti-Vietnamese comments revealing how ethnic tensions informed his view of the nature of the conflict. When describing North Vietnamese expansions of the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Lao territory he observed:

In order to ameliorate the chronic problems of overpopulation and underproduction in North Vietnam, the French administration of Indochina had permitted any Vietnamese who wished to cross the frontiers to settle in any part of French Indochina. Thousands of Vietnamese had, during the period of French domination, fled the poverty of their homeland and settled in Laos, most of them in the fertile Mekong Valley. Consequently, colonialism in Laos came quite naturally to the Vietnamese. Thousands of people who were brought from North Vietnam to work [on the Ho Chi Minh Trail] in Laos settled there permanently. They exploited the areas in which they settled just as all colonists have done all over the world.¹⁰²⁹

Oudone viewed the Second Indochina War in terms of a conflict between separate, distinct racial groups that were locked in a struggle for terrain and resources. As a result, he claimed the single most important effect of the Ho Chi Minh Trail itself was not its use as a logistical supply route supporting North Vietnam's invasion of South Vietnam. Rather more important was "the establishment of permanent Vietnamese settlements in Laos."¹⁰³⁰ He further claimed the North Vietnamese engaged in illegal logging and mining for gold, stripping the land bare as they

¹⁰²⁷ Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 375 notes that "feelings of insecurity heightened" and that King Savang again sought US security guarantees in case of war.

¹⁰²⁸ Ibid, p. 376.

¹⁰²⁹ Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Advice and Support* (Washington D.C.: Office of Chief Military History, 1984), p. 120. See further *ibid*, p. 121 where Oudone notes that "Even Souvanna Phouma...could see that the North Vietnamese incursions into Laos portended worse to come." See also *ibid*, p. 130.

¹⁰³⁰ Ibid, p. 120.

constructed the roads.¹⁰³¹ Thus, while the US fought to interdict the movement of men and material along the Ho Chi Minh Trail top RLA leaders like Oudone fought to prevent their country from being colonized, overtaken by Vietnamese settlements that arose in the wings of a conquering army.

It is no coincidence that at the very same moment as the country faced this existential threat that scholars such as Maha Sila Viravong were writing about the origins of the Lao race amid the disappearance of other earlier peoples who failed to prevail in the Social-Darwinian survival of the fittest. History was marshalled to ready the people for the coming onslaught. Thus, a statue of the greatest war hero of the old kingdom of Lan Xang, Xai Settha was installed in front of the national shrine, the That Luang, while members of the elite drew comparisons between Settha's defense of the country from the Burmese in the sixteenth century and the RLG's fight against communism in the present.

The nationalism crafted by the elite was problematic. It was troubled not by a lack of nationalist spirit as has been widely observed, but rather suffered from an overabundance of it. This in turn gave rise to an exclusionary form of nationalism, a hyper-nationalism articulated as the belief in a "Lao race." Some minorities responded positively to the assimilationist stance of the elite, notably the Hmong leader Touby Lyfoung, who fought for a Hmong enclave in an otherwise Lao dominated society.¹⁰³² But many more minorities rallied to the Pathet Lao whom called for equality of the ethnic groups. On the other hand, nationalism was a rallying cry among the government leaders. Halpern himself observed the most "potent" anti-Pathet Lao rhetoric linked them to "the detested Vietnamese."¹⁰³³ He quoted an official who remarked: "We detest the

¹⁰³¹ Ibid, p. 121.

¹⁰³² For Touby's support for assimilation see Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 140.

¹⁰³³ Halpern, "The Lao elite," p. 54.

Vietnamese because they would like to sit on our heads.”¹⁰³⁴ Anti-foreign sentiment, a side-effect of the Cold War alliance with the US as well as a legacy of French colonialism evolved into new fears of resurgent Communist China and North Vietnam in the Cold War.

This limited the nationalist vision of the elite, who promoted an overly-simplistic idea of the nation that was not fit for critical challenges facing the country. There were various ethnic minorities on the borders of the RLG that facilitated cross-border mobility, which came to present a threat as the Pathet Lao enlisted these peoples.¹⁰³⁵ The RLG responded by trying to impose an overly simplistic solution onto a complex reality of great ethnic diversity by formulating a single national identity. It was a failed bid to gain or enforce loyalty among an array of peoples, especially on the borders. As much as the RLG elite may have perceived the young state as their own eternal Lao state along the Mekong, the legacy of colonialism left them with quite a different territory and populace that was far more ethnically heterogeneous than their romantic ideals allowed.¹⁰³⁶ RLG ideology was woefully inadequate to truly unify the country.

¹⁰³⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰³⁵ The North Vietnamese did the same. Chu Huy Man was an important cadre operating in Laos for the North Vietnamese who was ethnic Tai. He led the DRV military advisory group to the Pathet Lao, the Group 100. See Goscha, “Vietnam and the world outside,” p. 164, 169.

¹⁰³⁶ It is perhaps ironic that pre-colonial Lao states (such as Luang Prabang) were better at managing ethnic minorities at the margins of the state, whom willingly served as border guards. See Vanina Bouté, “Political hierarchical processes among some Highlanders of Laos,” in Francois Robinne and Mandy Sadan (eds.) *Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia* (Brill: Leiden, 2007).

PART THREE: NEUTRALIST YEARS (1962-1975)

CHAPTER SIX: NEUTRALISTS AT WAR

Introduction

Neutralism is one of the most complicated phenomena of post-colonial Laos, yet it had an enormous influence on the final years of the Royal Lao Government, which by then was referred to as the “Neutralist government of Laos.”¹⁰³⁷ While many scholars have given great attention to neutralism during the first coalition government (1957-1958), it has received far less attention from 1962 when it became official government policy or in the period of the third coalition which has not been studied in detail.¹⁰³⁸ Neutralism did not disappear with the collapse of the second coalition government (June 1962 - April 1963) but continued to influence the government even amid the escalation of the Second Indochina War.¹⁰³⁹ While the Pathet Lao withdrew from the second coalition government in April 1963 the tripartite government organization continued. After 1962 the Geneva Agreements were seen as providing for the legal basis of the government. As a result, the Second Indochina War in Laos was profoundly shaped by late RLG neutralism (1962-1975). In general, neutralism was at once closely related to elite forms of anti-communism and Buddhism.

¹⁰³⁷ Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Washington D.C.: Office of Chief of Military History, 1984), p. 146.

¹⁰³⁸ See Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*. Grant Evans refers to the period after 1962 as “the eclipse of neutralism,” *A Short History of Laos*, p. 124. See further Bruce Lockhart, “The Fate of Neutralism in Cambodia and Laos” in Malcolm H. Murfett (ed.), *Cold War Southeast Asia* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 2012), which analyzes the neutralist foreign policy of the RLG, but does not address neutralism’s influence on the RLG’s conduct of the Second Indochina War in Laos. His central point that in spite of the government’s neutralism that neutrality itself remained impossible is well taken. Further he notes an important US policy shift on Laos during the John F. Kennedy administration, when the administration redefined Lao neutrality from “pro-Western and neutral” to “anti-communist and neutral,” p. 215-216. On the other hand, his suggestion that the RLG’s “neutralist stance” was not meaningful after 1962 is arguably a hasty judgement, p. 221. Moreover, I disagree with his assertion that the government became “less Neutralist” during the course of the war, p. 209. While it was clearly not neutral in the war years, it remained neutralist.

¹⁰³⁹ Stuart-Fox, in his *A History of Laos*, portrays neutralism as defeated with the loss of independence of the neutralist Kongle forces, but neglects its continued influence on shaping events, especially the conduct of the war and RLG policy.

Yet after 1962 neutrality itself became intimately linked to the independence of the country. US officials observed the neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma “regards the preservation of the Geneva settlement as indispensable to the survival of Laos.”¹⁰⁴⁰

Above all, this chapter will address the seemingly contradictory rise of neutralism, not to say neutrality, after 1962 with the great expansion of the Second Indochina War in Laos under putatively neutralist leaders. How did Souvanna Phouma, the champion of neutralism in the 1950s, lead his country in war since 1962? As Minister of Defense, what role did he play in shaping the scope and conduct of the war? Was the leadership of the Royal Lao Government simply a victim of US domination, or could they possibly have had their own agency in the Second Indochina War?¹⁰⁴¹ By early 1969, Souvanna even went so far as to tell “the Soviet ambassador that he, Souvanna Phouma, was responsible for the American bombing.”¹⁰⁴² As will be shown, Souvanna Phouma played a leading role in the bombing campaign.¹⁰⁴³ He was heavily involved in its conduct, but also determined key aspects of it, not least of which was its secrecy.

¹⁰⁴⁰ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, vol. XXVIII, Laos*, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1998), p. 578. See further Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 575 where Dommen notes the importance of the Geneva Accords even as the second coalition government collapsed: “The agreement itself, oddly perhaps, was never formally renounced by any of the signatories; like gravity, it seemed to exert an all-pervasive force. Even after the Soviet Union abdicated its Article 8 responsibility as co-chairman for supervising implementation, the agreement continued to have a breath of life.”

¹⁰⁴¹ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 126 which portrays the RLG as a mere pawn of the US and North Vietnam. See further Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 147 which likewise noted “The escalation of the war meant the steady marginalization of both the RLG and the PL in its conduct.” Evans adds that once Souvanna Phouma authorized US bombing he was sidelined by the Americans: “now they [the Americans] began to work almost independently.” Thus he portrayed the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail as “a massive bombing campaign directed by American generals.”

¹⁰⁴² Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 698.

¹⁰⁴³ In reassessing the RLG elite’s role in the war I do not intend to deflect blame for the US for its actions in the war. There were US persons who escalated the war whom are addressed in other accounts. Arthur Dommen especially called attention to US Ambassador William Sullivan’s role in what Dommen saw as greatly expanding the air war during Sullivan’s long tenure (December 1964 to March 1969). See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 603.

In marked contrast with US neo-colonial intervention of previous years, the US and RLG leaders were largely in agreement and had reasons to work together, albeit not without friction.¹⁰⁴⁴ Since their country was being invaded by a powerful foreign army, Souvanna Phouma and other government leaders did have their own very real reasons to fight. The invasion was a violation of both the neutral status and the sovereign independence of the country.¹⁰⁴⁵ When negotiations broke down Royal Lao Government leaders sought to halt what they saw as a communist takeover of their country, and were willing to use any means to stop it, in an effort to safeguard the democracy they had built since 1945.¹⁰⁴⁶

Nevertheless, it is unmistakable that war had a marked effect on the evolution of neutralism in the country after 1962. As a result, a more militant form of neutralism appeared, which was promoted by the government as it rallied the people to fight against a litany of violations by North Vietnam of the country's neutrality and sovereignty. Yet the government was not the only one to tout neutralism. There was, in fact, a competition with the Pathet Lao over the meaning of true neutrality that was only settled with the end of the war.¹⁰⁴⁷

¹⁰⁴⁴ See further Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 146. On the other hand, there were still neo-colonial tensions between the erstwhile allies the US and RLG that even top leadership of the RLA committed to the Second Indochina War would raise. Major General Oudone Sananikone describes such tensions while discussing how Special Guerrilla Units undermined the RLG: "Here was a large nation—the United States—hiring soldiers of a small nation—Laos—to fight primarily for the objectives of the large nation on the territory of the small nation against an invader—North Vietnam—and on behalf of another small nation—South Vietnam." See Oudone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 140.

¹⁰⁴⁵ For example, when negotiating the peace agreement at the end of the war, RLG negotiators defended US actions in the country saying they were "taken in support of the royal government against aggression from the DRV." Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, 840.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 122-134 looks in-depth at the reasons for why war was renewed in 1964 and apportion blame on the rightists, leftists, the US and North Vietnam, but neglects the motivations and rationale of so-called neutralists to go to war. Lockhart, "The Fate of Neutralism," p. 210, 222-223 on the other hand charges both the US and North Vietnam with responsibility for the failure of Lao neutrality.

¹⁰⁴⁷ See further Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 494, which notes there was an "enormous gap" in understanding of what was meant by "peace, independence and neutrality" between the RLG and Pathet Lao.

In historical studies of the Royal Lao Government after 1962 the Second Indochina War in Laos has attracted the lion's share of scholarly attention, with little study of the rest of society in these years (see chapter seven). One clear exception is the work of Grant Evans who showed a vibrant civil society arose in the later years of the Kingdom of Laos (see chapter eight).¹⁰⁴⁸ There have been important new studies on the Pathet Lao movement during this period by Vatthana Pholsena, Oliver Tappe, Christopher Goscha and Martin Rathie, but not enough comparable work has been done on the Royal Lao Government in recent years.¹⁰⁴⁹ Pholsena's work is especially important for providing rare oral histories of survivor's experiences of the bombing.¹⁰⁵⁰ Official US Military histories have also gradually appeared.¹⁰⁵¹ Channapha Khamvongsa and Elaine Russel have written an influential study of the bombing campaign, but like many studies of the war they focus almost exclusively on the US; although they have laudable reasons for doing so their study unfortunately leaves little role for RLG in the war.¹⁰⁵² Yet the US could not have waged war in the

¹⁰⁴⁸ Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: Land In-Between* (NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2002), p. 150-160.

¹⁰⁴⁹ See for example valuable oral history of the Pathet Lao movement: Vatthana Pholsena, "Highlanders on the Ho Chi Minh Trail: Representations and Narratives" *Critical Asian Studies*, 40:3 (2008); and Martin Rathie, "The History and Evolution of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party." Although he addresses the period before 1962, several works of Christopher Goscha are also important to understanding the Pathet Lao. Christopher Goscha, "The Revolutionary Laos of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: The Making of the Pathet Lao Solution" (1954-1962)" in Christopher Goscha and Karine Laplante (eds.) *L'Échec de la Paix? L'Indochine entre les Deux Accords de Genève (1954-1962)* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2010). See further Christopher Goscha, "Vietnam and the world outside: The case of Vietnamese communist advisers in Laos (1948-62) *South East Asia Research*, vol. 12, no. 2 (July, 2004). Scholarship on the Pathet Lao is more developed than that on the RLG.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Vatthana Pholsena, "Life under Bombing in Southeastern Laos (1964-1973): Through the Accounts of Survivors in Sepon" *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 9.2, (2010)

¹⁰⁵¹ Bernard C. Nalty, *The War against Trucks: Aerial Interdiction in Southern Laos, 1968-1972* (Washington D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, U.S. Air Force, 2005). Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction in Southern Laos, 1961-1968* (Washington D.C.: Center of Air Force History, 1993). Victor B. Anthony and Richard R. Sexton, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The War in Northern Laos, 1954-1973* (Washington D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1993).

¹⁰⁵² Channapha Khamvongsa and Elaine Russell, "Legacies of War: Cluster Bombs in Laos" *Critical Asian Studies* 41:2 (2009). They also refer to the bombing campaign as "illegal" for among other reasons violating the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962 when in reality those agreements were already dead letter. This work is important to address contemporary UXO issues in the country, but there is still much more original research to be done on the war; especially with US documents from the military, CIA, State Department, USAID, etc. See further Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 592, 702, who argues the US had a legal basis under the Geneva Accords of 1962 to defend the RLG at its request, which came from the Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. Ibid, 575, notes that all parts of the agreement were not working by September 1963. Dommen makes a careful analysis of the

country were it not for the fact that the Lao had already decided to go to war themselves. The impact of the war on the country was massive and far too little is known about its real effects. Huge numbers of the population became refugees of the war. Frederic Benson has made an important contribution to the study of war-refugees making use of new primary sources.¹⁰⁵³ There have been further studies of the variety of experiences of the war among different ethnic groups across the country by Ian Baird, Olivier Évrard, and Hjorleifur Jonsson.¹⁰⁵⁴ Most of these studies focus on the Second Indochina War in Laos on the ground, which provides valuable insight, but they tend to ignore the RLG leadership that made the Second Indochina War in Laos – the war appears much less coherent as a result.¹⁰⁵⁵ Even after over forty years since its conclusion, there still remain many misperceptions surrounding the Second Indochina War in Laos. The full significance of the war itself will remain obscured so long as the RLG and the leading elite are neglected.

Rise of Neutralism

On June 23, 1962, a final agreement was made on the Plain of Jars concerning the composition of the second coalition government and subsequently an international conference at

agreement and finds a number of flaws in it, concluding (p. 455) that “these flaws resulted in its breakdown almost from the moment it was signed.”

¹⁰⁵³ Frederic C. Benson, “Indochina War Refugee Movements in Laos, 1954-1975: A Chronological Overview Citing New Primary Sources” *Journal of Lao Studies*, Special Issue 2015. Fred Branfman’s original 1972 study remains important; see Fred Branfman, *Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life under an Air War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

¹⁰⁵⁴ Ian Baird, “The US Central Intelligence Agency and the Brao: the Story of Kong My, a Non-Communist Space in Attapeu Province, Southern Laos” *Aséanie* no. 25 (June 2010). Hjorleifur Jonsson, “War’s Ontogeny: Militias and Ethnic Boundaries in Laos and Exile” *Southeast Asian Studies* vol. 47, no. 2 (September 2009). Olivier Evrard, “Oral Histories of Livelihoods and Migration under Socialism and Post-Socialism among the Khmu of Northern Laos” in Jean Michaud and Tim Forsyth (eds.) *Moving Mountains: livelihoods and identities in post socialist Southeast Asia* (University of British Columbia Press, 2011).

¹⁰⁵⁵ Moreover, several studies repeat uncritically CIA claims to have acted without any RLG oversight, but it is a claim that needs to be investigated.

Geneva declared the Lao country neutral and independent; yet this important moment was overshadowed by the collapse of the second coalition and the escalation of the war less than one year later.¹⁰⁵⁶ A narrow focus on the failure of neutrality to save the country from war, admitted as never being a realistic prospect, and its misuse by politicians has overshadowed more nuanced understandings of neutralism as a broader intellectual and social movement within the kingdom.¹⁰⁵⁷ Ignoring these wider movement limits understanding of the escalation of war from 1964 onward and the later peace movement of the 1970s. Moreover, an insufficient attention to neutralism in the 1960s clouds our understanding of its real effects on the fall of the RLG in 1975, including how it took center stage in the final years of the country. Given all of the above, this chapter will seek to explain the neutralist movement and especially how it was able to influence the course of events in the 1960s. Even though neutralism could not prevent the escalation of war, it would remain a major force in the country, now led by avowed neutralists, and would be the single greatest domestic force driving the efforts for war and peace.

After 1962, neutralism became the central political issue in the kingdom. Bruce Lockhart observes “neutralism/neutrality” (ຄວາມເປັນກາງ) became a “buzzword” in the RLG political discourse.¹⁰⁵⁸ There was likewise a discernable rise of neutralism at the time among all political

¹⁰⁵⁶ Clive Christie on the other hand points to the Kongle coup of August 1960 as the moment neutralism began to gain prominence in the country. See further Clive Christie, “Marxism and the History of the Nationalist Movements in Laos” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1979), p. 151. Likewise Lockhart, “The Fate of Neutralism” points to the Kongle Coup as the starting point for the RLG neutralist foreign policy that led to an opening of relations with the USSR, the PRC and the DRV as well as a host of European socialist countries, p. 209. The RLG also received socialist-bloc aid. For a recent treatment of the 1962 Geneva conference see Nicholas Tarling, *Britain and the Neutralization of Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i press, 2011). For an excellent account of the chaotic period which followed the 1962 accords see Frederic Benson, “Unraveling the 1962 Geneva Accords: Laos 1962-1964” in Stephen Sherman (ed.) *Indochina in the Year of the Dragon* (Houston: Radix Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁵⁷ Lockhart, “The Fate of Neutralism,” p. 222-223 observes US and North Vietnam activities made neutrality for Laos unrealistic.

¹⁰⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 210. While there is no distinction in the Lao term, the elite made the distinction themselves when using French. Lockhart presents an excellent account of the government’s own neutralist foreign policy in this period,

factions. The Pathet Lao professed neutrality when fighting erupted at the end of the first coalition government in 1959; and they continued to invoke it even as they grew in military power across the country.¹⁰⁵⁹ For the Royal Lao Government, neutralism became the only policy that was workable after June 23, 1962, especially after the fusion of “neutralists” and “rightists” in the wake of the April 19, 1964 coup, even as the country descended into war.¹⁰⁶⁰ Souvanna Phouma created a new political party, the Lao Neutralist (political) Party (ພັດ(ການເມືອງ)ລາວເປັນກາງ) on May 26, 1961 that took a central role in government for a few years, a distant echo to the CDIN in the neo-colonial years of the late 1950s.¹⁰⁶¹ Souvanna Phouma became the leading political figure in the country thereafter, and US officials referred to him as the “key element” of the political order created by the Geneva 1962 agreements.¹⁰⁶² The neutralist years were marked by political stability notably absent in the neo-colonial years. This political stability:

which involved opening relations to socialist countries. It is fascinating that the RLG maintained diplomatic relations with North Vietnam throughout the Second Indochina War in Laos.

¹⁰⁵⁹ For example, the Pathet Lao made numerous overtures to the Royal Lao Government to restore peace after the outbreak of war in May 1959. See Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos*.

¹⁰⁶⁰ What I describe as the “fusion” or merging of neutralists and rightists others have characterized as the neutralists being absorbed by the rightists. For the latter view see for example Lockhart, “the Fate of Neutralism in Cambodia and Laos.” See also *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Laos, vol. XXVIII*, p. 381 which notes that the neutralist leader Souvanna Phouma had backing from all anti-communist forces in the country (specifically the King and the Sananikones). Phoumi Nosavan’s exile in February 1965 increased stability under Souvanna’s leadership.

¹⁰⁶¹ This Neutralist Party was the successor to earlier neutralist movements including the Committee for Peace and Neutrality, which formed in late October 1960 in Vientiane, by Souvanna Phouma, Kongle and their supporters, or Pheng Phongsavan’s Five Principles Party and ultimately traced back to the earlier Santhiphap Pen Kang Party. For Pheng’s party see Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 402. Dommen described the Five Principles Party as “intending to be a party of socialist, though not Marxist, principles reflecting the communalism of the Lao village somewhat akin to the rural socialism of nineteenth-century Russia.” The party name referred to Nehru’s Five Principles (Panca Sila), which was popular among neutralists in Asia at the time. See further Phinith Savèng, Souk-Aloun Phou Ngeun and Thongchanh Vannida, *Histoire du Pays Laos, de la préhistoire à la république* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998), p. 137, which states simply Santhiphap became the Neutralist Party.

¹⁰⁶² Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, May 25, 1964, NARA. This was true even as early as February 2, 1961 as Ambassador Brown told Kennedy “there was only one unifying force in the country and I thought that that was Souvanna.” See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 437.

Rests on an understanding among Souvanna, the military, and – to a lesser degree – the conservatives and neutralists, which aims at preserving Lao independence and the attributes of neutrality and tripartitism.¹⁰⁶³

Souvanna was in good company, as King Savang Vatthana came out strongly in support of neutralism, having first professed support for the movement shortly after the Battle of Vientiane in early 1961.¹⁰⁶⁴ Moreover, the King played a central role in the short-lived second coalition government which took Luang Prabang as its “neutralized” capital. After the second coalition government was formed, the King went on an international tour to secure support for the country’s new neutrality in early 1963, visiting the Soviet Union, People’s Republic of China, Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Myanmar, and Cambodia.¹⁰⁶⁵ In Phnom Penh Savang publicly thanked Sihanouk for playing an important role in bringing the Geneva Conference about and both leaders expressed support for neutrality before Savang went on to Thailand. In these years, there was wide consensus forming that neutralism was the only possible political future for the country.

Yet many observers have discounted neutralism after the collapse of the second coalition, and thus neglect its influence on the Second Indochina War in Laos. How can neutralism really be considered a major intellectual movement when the neutralist leaders themselves escalated the war in the country? How can this glaring contradiction be reconciled? It is unmistakable that the two leaders who escalated the war, Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong each professed neutrality and were associated with it. The rise of neutralism across all political factions should not obscure the fact that real differences remained, especially between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Government. The fractures dividing these two power blocks ran so deep that even the idea of neutralism itself became contested and fought over. The Neutralists forces themselves became split

¹⁰⁶³ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Laos, vol. XXVIII*, p. 381. This assessment was made in May 1967.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Grant Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty*, p. 191.

between General Kongle's RLG-aligned forces and Colonel Deuane Sipraseuth's Pathet Lao aligned forces.¹⁰⁶⁶ The Pathet Lao themselves argued that Souvanna Phouma had lost his neutrality and had been coopted by the right, which made his government "illegal" (violating Geneva).¹⁰⁶⁷ Therefore the Pathet Lao-aligned neutralists were the only true neutralists remaining and should hold the neutral seats of the tripartite government.

The fundamental question at stake in the looming struggle was what exactly did it mean for the country to be neutral and what kind of neutralism should it be? Should it be anti-communist, or not? Should it be supported by foreign powers whom might guarantee its neutral status, and if so what foreign influence (or level thereof) was acceptable? Or must it be entirely free from foreign influence, following a policy that was strictly neutral? Ultimately the country settled the question on the battlefield, with each side fighting for what it viewed as its version of the proper neutralism. The Royal Lao Government saw itself under attack by combined Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces that endangered the peace and neutrality of the country, while the Pathet Lao fought to save the country from becoming an American military base. It did not matter that neutrality was only an illusion by this point, abused by all sides.

The first stages of the Second Indochina War in Laos began in 1959 under the CDIN government as a war against communism. With its escalation in 1964, the war had been transformed; it was now a war to restore peace and neutrality as well as to define exactly what neutrality meant. Yet in fighting the war maintaining at least the appearance of neutrality was

¹⁰⁶⁶ The Kongle Neutralists, numbering about 10,000 soldiers, gradually lost their effectiveness as they were pushed off the Plain of Jars by the Pathet Lao in April 1964. When Kongle himself was sent into exile in the fall of 1966 the new leader of these forces Sengsouvanh Souvannarath thereafter cooperated closely with the RLA, sharing the same Headquarters and wearing the same uniforms. See Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 125-126. The Pathet Lao-aligned Neutralists on the hand remained a small (about 2,500), marginal force throughout the war. The focus on neutralists as a military force, independent or not, has obscured other aspects of neutralism in the period.

¹⁰⁶⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Laos, vol. XXVIII*, p. 758.

important to RLG war chiefs. Neutrality was so important to Souvanna Phouma that he willingly ceded battlefield advantages and risked the lives of his own soldiers to avoid any actions he felt would violate of RLG neutrality:

He [Souvanna] felt it to be of prime importance that Laos preserve the appearance of neutrality in the war... Even when his own Lao army units were in danger of being annihilated by the advancing North Vietnamese, Prince Souvanna resisted permitting the USAF to bomb in support of the beleaguered units. The [RLA] commander in chief or his deputy had to convince the prime minister on each occasion when only the immediate application of American airpower would save the Lao unit. Only then would Souvanna Phouma permit this action which he considered a breach of Laos neutrality.¹⁰⁶⁸

Even if one might observe to the glaringly obvious fact that the country was not neutral, but engulfed in a major war one still needs to account for the fact that top leaders of the RLG still perceived their country as neutral in the conflict and acted accordingly. Souvanna Phouma himself guarded Lao neutrality in a vain hope to limit the scale of the war and prevent others (China, Russia) from becoming, or escalating their involvement.¹⁰⁶⁹ After 1962 the RLG elite perceived that without neutrality, Laos would be conquered and partitioned by its powerful neighbors. In this respect, RLG ideology evolved to incorporate neutralism. Thus, neutralism began to mutate in the already highly militarized society of post-colonial Laos, especially as the country was drawn into the regional conflict of the Second Indochina War.

Yet neutralism did not go away as the war escalated. One need only look at the Neutralist party's paper *Middle of the Road* (ສາຍກາງ) to see that neutralism continued to be a major ideology that was espoused by leading Royal Lao Government figures. Important figures of the party were involved in the paper. Souvanna Phouma served as "adviser" while his close supporter Khamchan Pradith was editor until traveling abroad to serve as the government's UN representative. The

¹⁰⁶⁸ Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 133.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Ibid, Oudone added that on the same basis Souvanna criticized "North Vietnam invasion and the South Vietnamese offensive into the Tchepone area of the Laos panhandle."

paper included biographies of top party figures, such as (former Kongle-ist) Interior Minister Pheng Phongsavan, General Kongle himself, Police-General Soukan Vilaysan¹⁰⁷⁰ (director of the paper), Prince Sisoumang Sisaleuamsak,¹⁰⁷¹ Souk Ouphavane, General Amkha Soukhavong,¹⁰⁷² and Maha Chansouk Sourinyachak among others.¹⁰⁷³ Many had been involved in the government put in power by the Kongle coup.¹⁰⁷⁴

Yet the neutralists were markedly less of a coherent group than either the Issara or the CDIN had been in their years of ascendancy.¹⁰⁷⁵ After major defeats in the elections of 1967 the

¹⁰⁷⁰ Born in Vientiane, he served in the colonial administration before rallying to the Issara government in 1945 in which he served as police commissioner of Vientiane. From 1946 to 1949 he went into exile in Thailand where he served under Katay Sasorith in the propaganda service. In 1949 he returned to the country and joined the police as a commissioner. By 1958 he had risen to become the Director of National Police. In 1960 he joined the neutralists after the Kongle coup. After the Battle of Vientiane he followed the government to Khang Khay on the Plain of Jars. In 1961 he was the Secretary General of the new Neutralist Party. In the wake of the April 1964 coup he was named Secretary of State to Veterans. In 1975 he was sent to a re-education camp by the new LPDR regime where he died. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1964*, p. 367.

¹⁰⁷¹ Born in Luang Prabang, he was a nephew of Sisavang Vong and trained as a doctor. In 1945 he served in the Lao Issara government in the health service. The next year he commanded Issara forces north of Luang Prabang. From 1946 to 1948 he was in charge of the Issara in the north. In 1948 he returned to the country from exile and subsequently joined the Royal Lao Army's medical service. He was captured by the Pathet Lao and held as a prisoner from 1953 to 1956. In August 1960 he joined the new government of Souvanna Phouma established in the wake of the Kongle coup and served as Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Social Welfare. By October of that year he led the government's efforts to negotiate with the NLHX. After the Battle of Vientiane in December 1960 he was Minister of Interior for the Souvanna Phouma government established at Khang Khay. By June 1962 he was again a minister in the second coalition government. In April 1964 he was arrested by the Kouprasit and Siho coup against Souvanna Phouma. By 1970 he was Minister of Telecommunications. In 1975 he was sent to a re-education camp by the new LPDR regime. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1964*, p. 364-365.

¹⁰⁷² Born in Paksane, he joined the French army in 1941, enlisting in the first Lao military forces permitted by the French, the *compagnie de chasseurs laotiens*. By 1945 he had been promoted to Sergeant and joined the Franco-Lao anti-Japanese guerrilla resistance. Later he fought "Vietminh" guerrillas in 1947. He was one of the first Lao officers in the French Army before transferring to the Royal Lao Army in 1950. By the end of the decade in 1959 he had risen through the ranks to become a brigadier general and deputy commander in chief of the RLA. During the chaotic events of late 1960 he was arrested by forces loyal to General Phoumi Nosavan and was held as a prisoner in Savannakhet until June 1962. Then he served as the top Neutralist military officer reporting to Souvanna Phouma. He was tasked with rebuilding Neutralist forces. In April 1964 he was arrested during the Kouprasit and Siho anti-Souvanna Phouma coup and held for several days. At the height of the war in 1969 he was Inspector General of the Royal Lao Army. In the 1972 elections he was elected as a deputy from Paksane. In 1975 he fled the country to France. See Deuve, *Le royaume du Laos, 1949-1964*, p. 335.

¹⁰⁷³ *Middle of the Road*, no. 93, February 8, 1964, page 10-12. Ironically many of these neutralist leaders would be sent to re-education camps by the Pathet Lao in 1975. See further Joanna C. Scott, *Indochina's Refugees: Oral Histories from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1989).

¹⁰⁷⁴ For a list of these individuals, see Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 391. One notable absence was Chan Pao Vanthanouvong, a former leader of Santhiphap.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Even the ex-CDIN appeared like a more coherent group in the neutralist years. See further Lockhart, "The Fate of Neutralism," p. 206 where he describes the neutralists as "a more amorphous faction."

neutralist party was defunct for two years until 1969. Yet by 1969 a new party led by Prince Sopsaisana (Union des Nationalistes pour la Démocratie libérale, ພັກເສຣີປະຊາທິປະໄຕ) was formed for “the protection and application of the Geneva Accords of 1962” showing that even the rightists were promoting neutralism in the final years of the RLG.¹⁰⁷⁶ The party enjoyed a large majority in the National Assembly with forty-eight of fifty-nine seats. While the Nationalist Union for Liberal Democracy did seek to replace the second coalition government with a “majority government” they also spoke of “disengagement” with the US and “coexistence” with the Pathet Lao.¹⁰⁷⁷ Other neutralist parties emerged, such as the Movement for the New Way, which itself emerged from Mittasone members (see chapter eight). The Movement for the New Way would have an outsized role in the third coalition government and was involved in the fall of the RLG. After 1962, it was the neutralists or those who promoted neutralism in its various forms, that decided the fate of the country in war and in peace.

The Neutralist party paper *Middle of the Road* did cover world and national news along with editorials and important topics like politics, and the economy as one would expect; but it also included more diverse topics like features on manners, religion, society, youth and even dictionary entries. The paper was an important source for spreading the Neutralist party’s ideology. For example, one finds in every paper a clear statement of what party stood for in the form of a diagram outlining the party platform:

5 Elements:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Peace <li style="padding-left: 20px;">a. Body <li style="padding-left: 20px;">b. Speech | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4) Independence <li style="padding-left: 20px;">a. economically |
|--|--|

¹⁰⁷⁶ Mongkhol-Katay Sasorith, “Les forces politiques et la vie politique au Laos” (Ph.D. diss., Pantheon-Sorbonne University, 1973), p. 165.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Ibid.

- c. Mind
- d. Solidarity
- e. Peaceful Co-existence

b. politically

2) Economy

- a. Role of individual
- b. Role of family
- c. Role of local area
- d. Role of nation

5) Neutrality

- a. Western camp
- b. in-between
- c. Eastern camp

3) Development

- a. Of colonies
- b. Of states

The first point is depicted at the bottom of the diagram from which an arrow points upwards diagonally, denoting that peace was the foundation of the party. Each of the five points was further elaborated in separate diagrams that appeared in other issues of the paper. The meaning of the numbering also varied. While one may infer that placing “economically” ordinarily first under “independence” suggests the importance that a strong economy provided for sovereignty, on the other hand, the numerical order under “development” served to differentiate two kinds of development in the world. One should note that the sub-points of “neutrality” are the only ones that were unnumbered in the original diagram, and the reader was meant to infer Laos’ position between the two camps. Further, characterizing the two camps as “east” and “west” was a rejection of the Cold War perception of the world divided among capitalist “free” countries and communist countries, which for some among the Lao elite appeared really to be not unlike the colonial era. The fact that in every issue of the paper, a diagram appeared on page two of every issue, suggests this diagram was important to explain what the party was in its own terms to its readers and supporters. The party platform was clearly indebted to the earlier Peace and Neutrality group, and

Bong Souvannavong's own philosophy.¹⁰⁷⁸ Yet Bong Souvannavong never joined Souvanna Phouma's Neutralist Party because it was not strictly neutral, but increasingly pro-US.

There were several factors contributing to the evolution of the new militant form of neutralism taking shape in the country. One important element was the political "fusion" of the rightists, especially former members of the CDIN, with the neutralists, which appeared most strongly with the escalation of war. This "fusion" was effected to the point that members of the elite from all sides of the political spectrum of the Royal Lao Government supported the escalation of war in the mid-1960s. After the collapse of the second coalition in 1963 a militant neutralism was enlisted to serve as the dominant ideology to fight the war. Yet this also allowed anti-communism to creep in and influence the thinking of the neutralist elite, demonstrating that the elite never resolved the basic conflict between two poles of neutralism and anti-communism, at the root of which lay Buddhism.¹⁰⁷⁹ The elite RLG ideology had by this point become an irreducible amalgam of anti-communism and neutralism, with conflict between the two driving all political struggle in the Royal Lao Government.

Official (Militant) Neutralism

As the Second Indochina War dragged on in the country, it may appear as though RLG leaders became totally absorbed in the conflict, leaving neutralism to wither on the vine; yet in fact the neutralist cause was taken up by the government which fashioned an official neutralism. All

¹⁰⁷⁸ See further Clive Christie, *Ideology and Revolution in Southeast Asia 1900-1980: Political ideas of the Anti-Colonial Era* (Curzon, 2001), p. 152-156.

¹⁰⁷⁹ In a US Special National Intelligence Estimate report of May 1967, Souvanna Phouma was described as "increasingly anti-communist." See *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Laos, vol. XXVIII*, p. 381. Bruce Lockhart has suggested that Souvanna and his followers may well have lost faith in the possibility of negotiation with the Pathet Lao or that they were at all distinct from North Vietnam, which is an important, additional pragmatic reason. Souvanna did become aware of Souphanouvong's subservience to North Vietnam while he led his government at Khang Khay. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 445.

government diplomacy and warfare in the neutralist years were justified in terms of the Geneva Accords of 1962, which henceforth became the core of RLG ideology. For example, the government continued to release White Papers documenting the alleged violations of the Geneva Agreements by the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese. Further, on February 24, 1965, the National Assembly passed a resolution denouncing the DRV for violating the Geneva Accords of 1962.¹⁰⁸⁰ In this regard, the Second Indochina War in Laos was presented to the public as one massive violation of the agreements guaranteeing the country's neutral status.

In the government newspaper *Lao Presse*, weekly or even daily reports were printed on the latest violations of the ceasefire by the Pathet Lao. In October 1965, *Lao Presse* reported that there had been over 2,000 discrete violations since 1962. Typical reports would list the date, time and location of every violation and include a brief description of the attack.¹⁰⁸¹ In these instances, a “letter of protest” was always sent to the Pathet Lao representative of the ceasefire committee. As a mark of equanimity and fairness on the part of the government, the Pathet Lao was permitted to lodge similar protests for what it viewed as violations by the Royal Lao Government. Even as the war grew in intensity, the Royal Lao Government felt compelled to laboriously document all violations of the treaties, which harmed peace and neutrality, by the Pathet Lao and their North Vietnam backers. In so doing the RLG sought to establish itself as the true upholder of neutralism.

One such White Paper was published by the Ministry of Information entitled *Hopes and Disappointments concerning the Geneva Accords of 1962*.¹⁰⁸² It asserted that the signatories to the agreement were bound to recognize and respect the sovereignty, independence, neutrality, unity

¹⁰⁸⁰ Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 702.

¹⁰⁸¹ See *Lao Presse*, “Violations of Accords of the Ceasefire,” November 11, 1965, page A-2.

¹⁰⁸² Kingdom of Laos, *ຄວາມຫວັງແລະຄວາມຜິດຫວັງກ່ຽວກັບສັນຍາເຊື່ອມວປີ1962* [“Hopes and Disappointments concerning the Geneva Accords of 1962”] (Vientiane: Ministry of Information, Royal Lao Government, n.d.). This document may have been published at the end of 1964. See further Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 598.

and territory of the Kingdom of Laos. The principles enshrined in the agreement became slogans internalized by government officials, and were fundamental to how the RLG understood the people's aspirations. Those who violated the accords were the enemy of the country. The White Paper added that on June 8, 1964, the country's neutral status was incorporated into the law.¹⁰⁸³ Neutralism met the aspirations of the people who welcomed the treaty with "joy and happiness" and who had "suffered great hardship because of decades of war."¹⁰⁸⁴

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma is portrayed as having a special role in creating peace along with Cambodian Monarch Sihanouk and the superpowers (ມະຫາອຳນາດທີ່ຍິ່ງໃຫຍ່) America and Russia. Indeed, he was portrayed in heroic terms: "These aims, are the very same aims of the efforts and exertions of Prince Souvanna Phouma, who had diligence for a very long time."¹⁰⁸⁵ The contrast with the Pathet Lao was stark. If Souvanna was the upholder of order after 1962 and the one who created neutrality and a government of national unity, then the Pathet Lao sought to destroy it all:

Up to today, how are the results of the implementation of the treaty of 1962? In truth, one must say that the implementation of this treaty is not as expected at all.

The coalition government of national unity that was established by agreement at Zurich (6/22/61), at Phnom Penh (8/4/61), at the Plain of Jars (6/21/62) was not able to implement various points of the treaty fully. Concerning domestic and foreign policies, the country did not fail completely. The coalition government still administers the country and foreign countries still recognize it as legitimate. But anyway, the ceasefire still has not yet appeared. The Neo Lao Hak Xat still makes a war of national liberation to the present...and an important matter, unprecedented in history is the ministers of the Lao Patriotic Front side who officially observe regular duties there and flee from their own ministries in order to go secretly to the rebel areas to resist their own government. Thus the NLHX holds the Vientiane government is nothing more than the group that seized power in Vientiane. These difficulties distort the truth most strangely in the era. Everything that the NLHX fabricates will only lead to a barbarous society and no order at all.¹⁰⁸⁶

¹⁰⁸³ Ibid, p. 6.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 8-9.

In the Royal Lao Government's view, while the government obeyed and respected the law, the Pathet Lao were outside the bounds of civilization, respecting no law. The Pathet Lao were the enemies of peace and neutrality which the RLG struggled to uphold.

The crux of the issue was that the government accused the Pathet Lao of not being truly neutral. It was signatory to all treaties yet "did it want the Lao country to be truly neutral or not?"¹⁰⁸⁷ The government continued "everyone doubts this matter very greatly."¹⁰⁸⁸ Yet questioning the Pathet Lao's devotion to neutralism led to a broader indictment of the whole movement:

This doubt is multiplied every day because of [the NLHX's] qualities and means that are dictatorial to individuals, to gather power absolutely and because [they] do not respect other political parties. And that's not all, they still destroy other political systems as well.

According to the truth, since signing the treaty in 1962, the NLHX have only acted according to an evil policy of theirs alone which is to change the government and political system of the country, [over]taking the democratic system according to their own documents.¹⁰⁸⁹

If one recognizes similarities in the rhetoric of the Neutralist government after 1962 and that of the earlier CDIN government, then one may perceive how exactly distinctions between neutralism and anti-communism became blurred in the Royal Lao Government era, especially during the war years (1959-1973). The government did not stop accusing the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao of seeking to overthrow the RLG just because it was now led by neutralists like Souvanna Phouma and not rightists like Phoui Sananikone and the CDIN.

In the aforementioned White Paper, the government went on to accuse the Pathet Lao of being a front for the North Vietnamese Army. Yet the North Vietnamese troops could not hide and

¹⁰⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 9.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 10

¹⁰⁸⁹ Ibid.

were to be found in every part of the country (although unevenly distributed). The Pathet Lao “help conceal” the Vietnamese:

...for benefit...because the NLHX does not have the might of the people’s support. The Lao people do not know any reason [why] the North Vietnamese soldiers thus invade the Kingdom of Laos. The NLHX want to build society according to their dreams but they are surely not able to do it; thus [they] turn to a policy of force.

...They do not have truth at all, and only seek to protect their policy [to overthrow the government], their position that is not neutral even a little. They only use [it as a] method to obstruct and tyrannize absolutely. If it is like this, [the NLHX] will do what is necessary and thus [they] will come discuss the Lao problem and even agree to be truly neutral or the appearance of that.¹⁰⁹⁰

The RLG White Paper concluded that the latest offer from the Pathet Lao for “true neutrality” made in October 1965 was not real. To the government, the Pathet Lao had neither neutrality nor popular support. They were entirely a foreign movement. The real aim of the Pathet Lao was to make Laos a part of North Vietnam when the US left the country. The entire Pathet Lao movement had never existed without the North Vietnamese. Thus “this age is the age of the liar.”¹⁰⁹¹

The government continued to publish similar White Papers over the years, with some for foreign consumption and others for domestic audiences. It published a collection of documents, the most important of which contained a reprint of the Geneva Accords of 1962. In the forward, Souvanna invoked the values enshrined in the agreement of peace, neutrality, independence, democracy and prosperity:

...It is the policy that the government of His Majesty the King, great lord of life, did not try to retreat from; and [it] is a way that we sacrifice everything [in] every way all of [our] lives in order to achieve the said aims.

The government decided to adhere strictly to the policy of neutrality and national unity...But the neutrality of our country has not been able to receive the result fully because there is one group of people [who] have the objective of wanting to demolish the unity of the nation. We who are good citizens of the Kingdom of Lao absolutely do not yield to let it happen like this. We must defend the stated aims always and try to build our Kingdom to be a country at peace, neutral, democratic, united and prosperous forever.¹⁰⁹²

¹⁰⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 11-12.

¹⁰⁹¹ Ibid, p. 13.

¹⁰⁹² Kingdom of Laos, ເອກສານກ່ຽວກັບການຮວມລາວ [“Documents concerning the Lao Union”] (Vientiane: Ministry of Information and Propaganda, Royal Lao Government, 1968), p. 1.

The government published this booklet in order that the Lao people of “every class” would know the Geneva Accords of 1962 and the relevant government policies “fully” and to see the government carry these out “every day.”¹⁰⁹³

Finally, one year later another *livre blanc* (“white paper”) was published by the government in 1969 meticulously documenting “flagrant violations” of the Geneva Accords and “acts of aggression” by North Vietnam for the international community.¹⁰⁹⁴ Annexed documents listed individual North Vietnamese soldiers captured in the country, as the government sought to prove its case to the international community. As the preface noted, this White Paper was highly critical of North Vietnam: “Hanoi, intensifying its policy of aggression, multiplies on all Lao territory its acts of war, violating daily our borders, encouraging rebellion; in a word, repudiating more each day, its solemn commitments taken at Geneva in 1962.”¹⁰⁹⁵

Gradually, a militant neutralism emerged. Even those deemed rightist were caught up in the new mood. In his magazine, Prince Sopsaisana wrote an article on “Neutralism and the neutrality of small peoples” in which he called for neutrality, but not neutralism as such.¹⁰⁹⁶ He took up the question of neutralism because its various points had become so muddled that it was a question raised even by “neutralist deputies” of the National Assembly.¹⁰⁹⁷ There was what he called an “extreme confusion” concerning neutrality and neutralism. He noted that the ideal for young states that had no interest in the Cold War would be to not belong to either of the two blocs. He quoted a Lao proverb to that effect: “when a buffalo attacks an ox it’s the grass which is

¹⁰⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Kingdom of Laos, *Livre blanc sur les violations des accords de Genève de 1962 par le gouvernement du Nord Vietnam* (Vientiane: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Printing house, 1969).

¹⁰⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹⁶ Prince Sopsaisana “Le neutralisme et la neutralité des petits peuples” *Echo de la Liberté*, November 1965, vol. 4, no. 33.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 7.

trampled, and which perishes first.”¹⁰⁹⁸ He said his country was “paying the price” for being caught between the superpowers. He cautioned that generally speaking if part of the population within the country “continues to manifest the desire to rest on one of the two blocs against the other” then neutralism cannot work, thereby endorsing a vision of strict neutrality for the country.¹⁰⁹⁹ He also viewed international recognition, especially by the superpowers as essential and quoted Norodom Sihanouk in this regard.

In his discussion, Sopsaisana considered the Cold War (“east and west”), the marginal role of small states, and the disposition of the US, the USSR and the PRC to Laos as all essential aspects of the question. The communists, he said, sought to enlist small peoples on its side “in order to forge a large alliance against the Free World” and he acknowledged the US did likewise by means of its own propaganda.¹¹⁰⁰ While he concluded the US supported but did not encourage neutrality, he was also suspicious of the USSR and PRC tolerance for it, mentioning the examples of Tibet and Hungary.¹¹⁰¹ For Laos he said the ideal would be “national reunification in the framework of a neutralization in the Austrian manner.”¹¹⁰² With Russian support, Austria enjoyed “a policy of really neutral and not neutralist!”¹¹⁰³ This was possible because there was no communist party there.

In Laos, the Chinese and North Vietnamese wanted to maintain “the zone occupied by the Pathet Lao.”¹¹⁰⁴ Thus, the Pathet Lao do not want a neutral solution, which would prevent them from “communizing” the territory.¹¹⁰⁵ Sopsaisana noted the Pathet Lao forces had renamed their

¹⁰⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 8.

¹¹⁰² Ibid.

¹¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

army the “people’s army of national liberation” to which he retorted, “to liberate Laos from what and from whom? Oh, what irony!”¹¹⁰⁶ But Sopsaisana’s neutrality had important conditions:

Neutrality, Yes – Neutralism, No – The status of neutrality Lao had obtained by the Geneva Accords of 1962, it is an assured fact – Laos obtained recognition of its neutrality by engagement of 13 nations signatories of these Accords.

Laos in accepting the status of neutrality engages itself to adopt a policy of non-intervention, of non-aggression, of non-engagement, of non-interference, of non-alignment, of non-belligerence, of good neighborliness.

We could not be more neutral!

But we could be neutral without being neutralist.¹¹⁰⁷

To Sopsaisana, “neutralism” was itself only an attempt at neutrality that had failed. It was a tool used by the superpowers in furtherance of their Cold War aims. Yet while he criticized the neutralists, like many other rightists in this period, he was nonetheless a strong supporter of neutrality as the only future possible for the country.

Sopsaisana specified what is necessary for Lao neutrality, saying that even though it needed neutrality for its survival “it should with vigilance organize its army in order to be capable of its defense when it is attacked or the victim of aggression.”¹¹⁰⁸ He pointed to the hypocrisy of the communists who bemoaned Lao good relations with the Free World but themselves believed “to be neutral supposes to be well with the Communists and to fight the Westerners!”¹¹⁰⁹ He concluded that while Laos sought “friendly relations founded on the respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty” nonetheless it was impossible to make foreign policy without taking into account the Cold War.¹¹¹⁰ Even so he argued the destiny of Laos must not be decided only by the great powers. In his view, Lao could get control of the situation if everyone only considered national interests

¹¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 8-9.

¹¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 9.

¹¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹¹⁰ Ibid.

after which they could “propose to the great powers a national reunification...real and true.”¹¹¹¹ Yet he did not (or could not) address the fact that what constituted “national interest” was violently contested by both sides.

Latent Anti-Communism and Questions of Loyalty

The rise of neutralism could not totally displace anti-communism in the country during the neutralist years. In fact, the two forces existed side-by-side. Anti-communism remained a strong impulse in some quarters. The old CDIN continued to be active in the politics of the kingdom after 1962. Moreover the “fusion” of the political right with the “neutralists” was not simply a unidirectional process whereby the rightists were forced to accept neutralism and the leadership of Souvanna Phouma. This event brought forth the latent anti-communism of the neutralists, even more so with the escalation of war. Thus, the RLG elite continued to be caught between the twin poles of neutralism and anti-communism. Now in the shadow of neutralism, anti-communism became more diffuse yet more influential as a result; its basic tenets being absorbed by people of all political persuasions.

In the 1960s, anti-communism dug deeper into society and was exhibited in the popular culture. Newspapers continued to run stories of how horrible it would be if the communists won, exemplified by a serialized story entitled “wasteland” published in *Lao Nation* (ລາວນາຊີອນ).¹¹¹² Many other anti-communist writings appeared in daily newspapers. The most popular anti-communist story was the surrender narrative. Newspapers would run stories of ex-Pathet Lao fighters who had defected, and told of their horrible experiences living in the communist “liberated

¹¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹¹² Thanks to Saowapa Viravong for pointing this out to me.

zone,” such as ones from the *Lao Lan Xang* newspaper, or another story from *Khao phaphou* *sappada*:

Neo Lao soldiers flee, coming to join hands [with] the government side

These three persons are soldiers of the Neo Lao Hak Xat committee that fled to cooperate with the government side at Khammouane province on December 26, 1966. They gave the reason for [their] flight as: tired of war and not wanting to be a lackey [ລູກແຮງລ້ຽງ] of the Vietminh anymore.¹¹¹³

These stories remained popular throughout the war years, communicating two interrelated ideas to the reading public: first, that the government side was winning, its cause was right, and that victory was inevitable; second, that the communist side was, of course, wrong, affirming the narrative that the Lao communists were dominated by the Vietnamese. They also prompted overly-simplistic notions popular among the RLG elite that anyone in the government zone was there because they supported the government and was presumed to be anti-Pathet Lao. These stories further suggested that the country really would be enslaved if the enemy won (i.e. “lackeys” of the Vietnamese), and thus there was no other option but to fight. The appearance of the surrender narrative even in neutralist newspapers is evidence of a basic anti-communist mindset that both the rightists and neutralists shared. The story was so popular that one could find it even in Souvanna’s neutralist party paper, *Middle of the Road*.¹¹¹⁴ Behind these stories loomed the question of loyalty which arises in every war, but never more so potently than in a civil war.¹¹¹⁵

Anti-communist propaganda also grew darker and more violent in its imagery in the neutralist years. This trend was doubtlessly reinforced by the opening of a school for psychological war in Vientiane, which Souvanna Phouma’s government celebrated.¹¹¹⁶ A psychological war

¹¹¹³ *Khao Phaphou Sappada*, January 30, 1967, no. 235, p. 4.

¹¹¹⁴ *Middle of the Road*, no. 97, March 7, 1964, p. 3, 10-11.

¹¹¹⁵ The same question of loyalty arose in the late 1940s in the conflict between the Issara and loyalists. For one example of how the RLG-PL conflict was a civil war, see Oudone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p 92 where he notes during negotiations in 1961 with the Pathet Lao and Neutralists that many came to ask him about family living in the RLG zone.

¹¹¹⁶ *Khaosappada*, August 22, 1966, no. 214, p. 4.

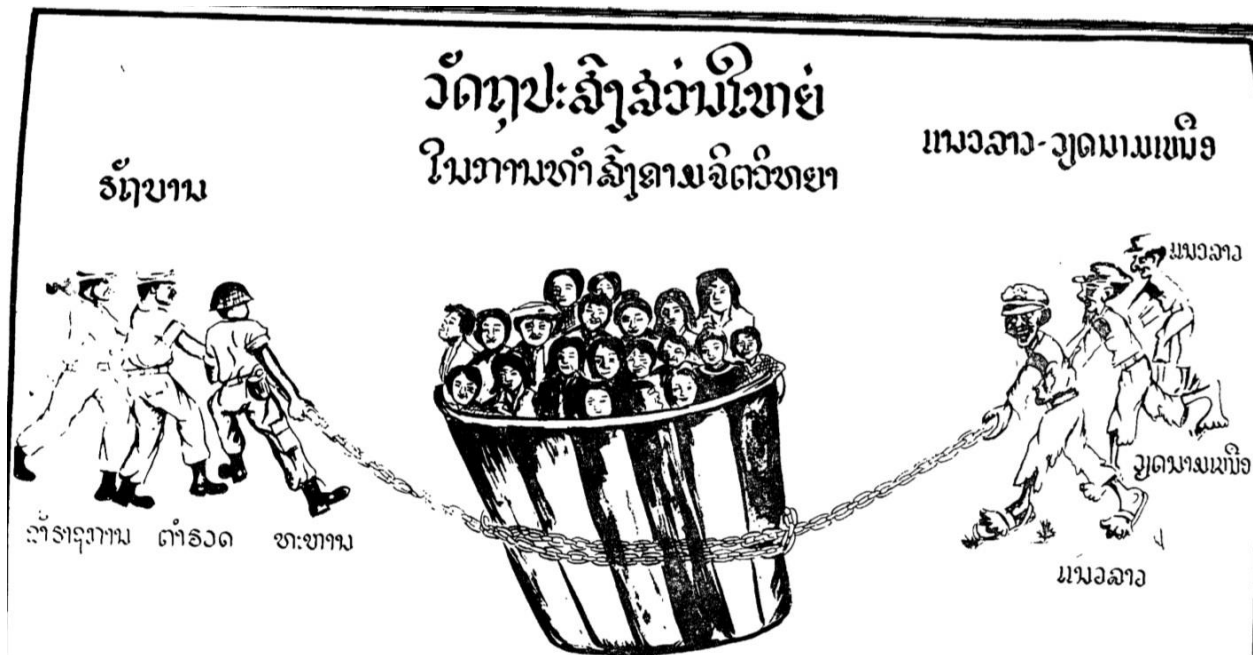
textbook from 1972 illustrated how information itself had become part of the war.¹¹¹⁷ A diagram explained how new technology could be used to wage the propaganda war more effectively.¹¹¹⁸ Yet the manual also suggested employing older, more traditional methods that had been popular since the *Lao Nyai* campaigns of World War II, which was itself the first mass popular political campaign in the country. These techniques included *mo lam*, dances, and traditional theater, which still had a use even with the advent of new technology because of their deep cultural resonance among the masses.¹¹¹⁹

Ultimately, the enemy, the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao, were becoming dehumanized in the propaganda, as the RLG leaders themselves and wider society became more brutalized and desensitized to violence during the war.

¹¹¹⁷ Psychological War Training Center, ຫຼັກກຳນົດວິຊາສົມຄາມຈິຕວິທຍາ [“Principles of Psychological War: level three”] (n.p., Army Printing house, 1972).

¹¹¹⁸ Ibid, unpaginated page following p. 84.

¹¹¹⁹ Ibid.



In anti-communist propaganda, the body of communists was distorted with grotesque features and large feet.¹¹²⁰ The Pathet Lao were portrayed as rural and unkempt in contrast to the government soldiers whose features were chiseled and heroic. The North Vietnamese soldier's face was drawn to look like Ho Chi Minh. Another cartoon juxtaposed the treatment of soldiers by the two sides, showing a Vietnamese soldier violently beating the skull of a Pathet Lao soldier with the butt of his gun as the latter cried out in pain.¹¹²¹ That is contrasted to treatment by the government of defectors, who marched in a neat line peacefully into a military camp. In another cartoon, the caption read "the enemy of the nation destroys because we are not lacking unity," adding, "unity makes the nation pass from danger."¹¹²² The cartoon was illustrated with images of fierce communist soldiers attacking an otherwise modern, happy people.

¹¹²⁰ Ibid, unpaginated page following p. 2.

¹¹²¹ Ibid.

¹¹²² Ibid.

Another cartoon showed the contrasting living standards of the government and Pathet Lao zones:¹¹²³



In this cartoon, one saw the vivid contrast between the life provided by the government compared to that living in the “liberated” zones of the communists. The people’s appearance served to indicate their level of well-being. Those closest to the Pathet Lao zones were bedraggled, wearing ragged clothes, their features looking haggard, while those nearing the government area appeared quite healthy and contented, even standing much taller. The caption listed the essentials one provided that the other did not: food, housing, clothing, medicine, education, and safety. The message was simple and direct: if you want to survive come over to the government side.

¹¹²³ Ibid.

Moreover, one can observe that the government was offering only the basic essentials of life to the peasants, pointing to the fact that in most civil wars the population remains neutral, caught between two contending sides.¹¹²⁴ These works of propaganda give some idea of examples of popular, largely non-textual, visual discourse that powerfully shaped the average person's perception of the war and the wider conflict between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Government. While they are important statements on late anti-communism, which grew more virulent and violent in rhetoric and imagery as the war progressed, one should note the "government" side is portrayed in a way that does not differentiate between political parties, marking the fusion of the right and neutrals, who were in lock-step amidst the war.

Finally, at the height of the war in 1969, the embattled Royal Lao Government portrayed itself, in the face of the combined onslaught of the communist North Vietnamese invasion and Pathet Lao rebellion, as the neutral victim of the war. At root of this propaganda was a militant neutralism posing the government as a reluctant combatant fighting for its very existence. This view appeared in a new elite magazine *National Unity* (ຊາດສັມພັນ) whose "patron" was the neutralist Minister of Interior Pheng Phongsavan.¹¹²⁵ Its second issue of April 1969 featured a

¹¹²⁴ See further Évrard, "Oral histories of livelihoods and migration," p. 80-81. He includes a biography of one Khmu man caught between the RLG and the Pathet Lao who observed "both sides treated villagers with suspicion and constantly requisitioned rice and other resources." See also Joel Halpern, "The Lao elite" p. 77: "under the present conditions it seems likely that a good proportion of the rural Lao population would remain neutral if possible." Thus an International Voluntary Services aid-worker in Laos wrote that many refugees did not flee to the RLG zone because they endorsed it, but that many fled just "to get away from the war." See T. Hunter Wilson, "An IVS Volunteer Writes from Laos," in (eds.) Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 373. Ibid, p. 372, thus Wilson includes a quote from a refugee that gives some sense of the average person's experience of the war: "The people on the ground kept on shooting each other, and the people in the air kept on dropping bombs all over the place, so we decided it was about time to move." The basic neutrality of the people in the RLG-Pathet Lao conflict existed in the 1950s as well as Christopher Goscha has described what the North Vietnamese called "two-faced" support they received from local village heads who aided RLG or Pathet Lao forces as necessary. See Goscha, "Vietnam and the world outside," p. 159.

¹¹²⁵ Pheng Phongsavan was RLG Minister of Interior before joining the Kongle coup. He returned to become a neutralist minister in the second coalition government and remained an important figure in the RLG until 1975. After the Pathet Lao seized power, Pheng was sent to a re-education camp where he died along with many other neutralists.

reported on the “national day of support to the victims of war” including a speech by the King Savang Vatthana:

In the moment where the country finds itself in a situation [feeling] friendly, sympathetic and worried toward those who are suffering, oppressed by the cruelty, the horror and the invasion perpetrated for more than 20 years. All our cities and all our villages live currently in a state of agony. The number of deaths and the quantity of destruction increasing each day and the mourning multiplies itself. We pray for the souls of those who have fallen, and we ask that Buddha keep them under his protection.... We desire by consequence that this national day should be one to witness solidarity and mutual aid among Lao, particularly in favor of those who risk their lives to defend our country.¹¹²⁶

The magazine followed this report with a photograph of an anonymous victim of North Vietnamese aggression, a child:



¹¹²⁶ King Savang Vatthana, “message de S.M. le roi à l’occasion de la journée nationale de soutien aux victimes de la guerre, le 1er mars 1969” *National Unity*, April 1969, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 35.

The accompanying caption read “An innocent victim of the North Vietnamese invasion. Yesterday he still had a house, parents, brothers and sisters; today he has become an invalid orphan.”¹¹²⁷ This was followed by a slogan in large print: “[We] should defeat the enemy with righteousness.”¹¹²⁸ A national day to commemorate the war dead was created in 1967 by Souvanna Phouma as an appeal to national solidarity, which no doubt involved the *Anousavaly*, the RLG monument to the dead. By 1972 there were 10,000 people gathered at the national stadium in Vientiane to mark the occasion.¹¹²⁹

Neutralism Goes to War: The Decision to Bomb

On January 29, 1964 Souvanna Phouma received a telegram alerting him to a “massive” attack by North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces on the previous day.¹¹³⁰ The attack came in military region three (Khammouane and Savannakhet provinces) after radio contact was lost. Not only were many RLA units lost in “encounters” with “VM elements” but also artillery fire was reported on National Route 12 east of Thakhek, a serious escalation that threatened the lowland Mekong areas.¹¹³¹ Souvanna read with horror “all friendly positions in the sector of Nakay had fallen.”¹¹³²

Just a week before the January 28, 1964 Pathet Lao-North Vietnamese thrust, Souvanna Phouma made a tour of Sam Neua at the invitation of Souphanouvong, in a trust-building exercise

¹¹²⁷ *National Unity*, April 1969, no. 2, p. 36.

¹¹²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 36.

¹¹²⁹ Khamsay Soukhavong, “Actualités Nationales” *Lao Sappada*, March 10, 1972, no. 1, p. 7.

¹¹³⁰ RLG telegram from Counselor and Director Cabinet Militaire Spécial/PC to Préconseil [Souvanna Phouma], January 29, 1964. Private Diaries of Souvanna Phouma, LOC. North Vietnamese are referred to in the telegram by the acronym “VM,” i.e. Viet-minh.

¹¹³¹ Lao sources continued to refer to North Vietnamese as “Viet Minh” well into the 1960s, recalling the Viet-Minh invasion of the country in 1953.

¹¹³² *Ibid*. Nakay or Na Kai was in Sam Neua province, not to be confused with the Na Kay of Khammouane province.

in what would be one of the last attempts to revive the foundering second coalition.¹¹³³ This tour had been discussed as early as December 31, 1963 when Souphanouvong sent a telegram to Souvanna Phouma in which he expressed his “highest pleasure” concerning the forthcoming tour and assured Souvanna that “the people of Sam Neua province will be delighted” to hear the news.¹¹³⁴ In this telegram Souphanouvong employed royal language (ຮາຊາສັບ) to address himself and Souvanna, addressing each other as Prince (ເຈົ້າ). Both leaders released declarations at the conclusion of Souvanna’s visit calling for a rebuilding of the second coalition government. This would be the last serious effort to find peace until 1972. Prince Souphanouvong in his declaration stressed the search for peace:

In the course of our conversations, we were able to note our unity of view on numerous important questions on the basis of the Geneva Accords of 1962, and the Tripartite Accords of Zurich, of the Plain of Jars and of Vientiane [agreements], notably the one of November 27, 1962, as his highness the President of the Counsel [Souvanna Phouma] comes to affirm it in his declaration today.¹¹³⁵

At this late stage, the struggle for peace was being waged by Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong, who both adhered to the policy of peace and neutrality. Events were no longer decided by the old CDIN anymore, just these two royals who had peace in their hands.

In his declaration, Souphanouvong laid out the Pathet Lao terms for peace, which began with a call for Luang Prabang to be “neutralized and demilitarized.”¹¹³⁶ Souphanouvong envisioned Luang Prabang becoming the new seat of the second coalition government, the Provisional Government of National Unity. Souphanouvong was also calling for Vientiane to be

¹¹³³ For a detailed account of this tour, see Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 578-579.

¹¹³⁴ RLG telegram from Prince Souphanouvong to Prince Souvanna Phouma, Sam Neua, December 31, 1963. Private Diaries of Souvanna Phouma. Souphanouvong’s titles are listed as “leader of the Neo Lao Hak Xat, deputy Prime Minister, Minister of economy and planning.” He had the planning portfolio in the first coalition government in 1957-1958.

¹¹³⁵ Declaration of Souphanouvong, President of the Neo Lao Hak Xat, Vice President of the Provisional Government of National Unity, Sam Neua, January 20, 1964.

¹¹³⁶ Ibid.

neutralized, but may have felt that Luang Prabang offered more security, not bordering Thailand or as near to US military bases. Souphanouvong ended his statement by professing the goals for peace:

...we are always full of good will and sincerely ready to make reasonable concessions in order to be able to give our positive contribution to the realization of all the accords of which we have subscribed to, in view of preserving the government of national union, of safeguarding the policy of peace and neutrality, of safeguarding the Geneva Accords of 1962 as well as the executed Tripartite Accords, and to make Laos a peaceful country, neutral, independent, democratic, unified, and prosperous.¹¹³⁷

In his own declaration, Souvanna Phouma down played negotiations or trust-building. He said he merely “profited” from speaking with Prince Souphanouvong on “questions which preoccupy all the Lao, notably the leaders.”¹¹³⁸ He still spoke of “settling” the national problem “as soon as possible.” He acknowledged Souphanouvong’s concern for security, which was very high after the assassination of Quinim Pholsena, and pledged to discuss the matter with Phoumi Nosavan. His message was reserved on a number of points, and was couched in terms of a visit primarily concerned with the people of Sam Neua which provided a chance to observe local efforts in “culture, agriculture, industry, etc.” Yet this may have been the last real prospect of peace before further escalations of the war.¹¹³⁹

Despite this promising interlude, the attack on January 28, 1964 convinced Souvanna that negotiations with the Pathet Lao on building a second coalition government had failed and that it was time to pursue war. Three days later he published a communique in the government newspaper

¹¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹¹³⁸ Declaration of Prince Souvanna Phouma, President of Counsel of the Provisional Government of the National Union, Sam Neua, January 20, 1964.

¹¹³⁹ The Prime Minister was not alone. In the closing session of the National Assembly on January 11, 1964, the speaker, Phoui Sananikone spoke of a last chance for peace during Souvanna’s meeting with Souphanouvong on the Plain of Jars. Phoui, the most well-regarded orator among RLG politicians, said the PGNU had every opportunity for peace since its formation, but that the fighting had never ceased, and foreign meddling continued. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 575. Ibid, Dommen himself wrote that the threat of escalation “hung over the kingdom like a dagger.”

Lao Presse, which detailed a series of attacks leading up to the January 28 assault.¹¹⁴⁰ Regarding an earlier attack of January 12, he said:

Once again, I protest in the most strenuous fashion against the violations of the ceasefire on the part of the Pathet Lao. I beg you, Mr. President [co-chairs of Geneva Accords], to please proceed to an investigation on the signal facts referred to above in the most urgent manner. It is regrettable to note that at the moment where new meetings are expected to discuss the settlement of the Lao problem, the NLHX had to display such contempt for the accords on the ceasefire. I fear strongly that such an attitude, if it was maintained, is prejudicial to future conversations between the Neutralists and the Pathet Lao. Be that as it may, I ask you, to please take note of these new manifestations of Pathet Lao forces in order to determine the responsibilities of each of the Lao parties in the event of aggravation of the present crisis.¹¹⁴¹

The communique followed by printing the full details of the attack, which Souvanna had received only a few days before. It seemed the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese were no longer interested in negotiations. As such, Souvanna Phouma appeared to be readying his people for the real prospect of an escalating war.

In the aftermath of the January 28 attack, Souvanna Phouma sent another telegram to Souphanouvong:

During my sojourn at Sam Neua, I had drawn your attention to the military situation of the region of Nakay and of Nhommarath. For some days, this situation has suddenly worsened because of attacks on our positions by troops coming from North Vietnam. Before this flagrant violation of the ceasefire and as long as the military situation will not change, it is impossible for me to open the talks in view of our next meeting at the Plain of Jars.¹¹⁴²

The communique concluded with Souvanna's "appeal to the NLHX to cease immediately all these military actions in order that the Tripartite meeting can take place."¹¹⁴³ Meanwhile, Souvanna met with the co-chairs of the Geneva Accords, Great Britain and Soviet Union, and told them of his "quasi-certitude of the tacit support [the Pathet Lao] are furnished by North Vietnam."¹¹⁴⁴ Souvanna had already sent a letter to the International Control Commission complaining of

¹¹⁴⁰ Communique, *Lao Presse*, January 31, 1964, special p. 1-2.

¹¹⁴¹ Ibid, special p. 2.

¹¹⁴² Ibid, special p. 1. See also the original official telegram from Souvanna Phouma to Souphanouvong, January 30, 1964. Private Diaries of Souvanna Phouma.

¹¹⁴³ Ibid, special p. 2.

¹¹⁴⁴ Ibid, special p. 1. He told the UK and USSR to intervene to stop the Pathet Lao-North Vietnamese operations.

renewed attacks on January 16. All to no effect. He was finding that the international agreements and international community was powerless to guarantee the peace and neutrality of his country.

Souvanna Phouma's diary contains a draft letter prepared for the thirteen signatories of the Geneva Accords of 1962. He addresses the current situation in the country as "very critical" and "explosive."¹¹⁴⁵ He explained that calls for a new conference on Laos showed that the 1962 Geneva Accords were toothless, with no enforcement, and that if its defects were not corrected any effort to hold a new conference would only repeat the failure. Furthermore, he was adamant there would be no conference without a ceasefire across the country and condemned the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese:

The Pathet Lao, who have attacked us deliberately and dislodged our positions in the Plain of Jars and other places, [must] return to their starting positions. We do not accept to be presented a fait accompli all to the advantage of the aggressors on the eve perhaps of an international conference where they could argue for so-called control over the whole of the country with adherence of the population.¹¹⁴⁶

In the wake of the recent attacks, he felt the government was losing its grip on the country. Thus, he saw the country as becoming a new Korea where each side would fight on the ground, jockeying for a better negotiating position at the conference table. He portrayed himself as being the only neutral power left and the only unifying force, saying the conference "should be able to reinforce the position of the government of nation union, notably that of the Prime Minister, whose neutrality cannot be suspected." He ended with a dismal view of the second coalition:

I hope therefore that the disappointing and bitter lesson of these two years will be salutary and that the next conference will support really in Laos peace and neutrality recognized and that the external interference... ceases definitively in the Kingdom. If these conditions are realized, we could then contemplate the future with optimism for Laos and Southeast Asia.

¹¹⁴⁵ Draft letter, Souvanna Phouma to Geneva co-chairs, May 24, 1964. Souvanna Phouma private papers.

¹¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

At the same time Souvanna still held out for peace, making visits to Beijing and Hanoi. In Hanoi, he met with Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap, where he warned of war unless North Vietnam stopped invading Lao territory and cut off aid to the Pathet Lao.¹¹⁴⁷ Finally, on April 18, he visited Souphanouvong to hold meetings on the Plain of Jars. But Souvanna was forced to question his peace and negotiation policy after he was threatened by a major coup attempt on the following day led by RLA General Kouprasit Abhay and Police General Siho Lanphouthacoul. Evidently, the rightists were still not reconciled with Souvanna's pursuit of peace and feared he was surrendering the country to the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. Souvanna was informed of a possible coup against him as early as February 16, 1964:

I request to inform Prince Prime Minister of [a matter] that is secret:

According to what I know of the matter, events might happen on the 18th or 19th of this month. [It] maybe most gravely dangerous. Now they are currently planning to unite soldiers in groupings. If the events are as [I] said, [it] might happen or not. I ask [you] keep it secret.¹¹⁴⁸

The note does not identify who "they" are, but "they" would have to be none other than Kouprasit and Siho. Siho himself was closely aligned to Phoumi Nosavan and Kouprasit was in charge of military region five which encompassed the capital, Vientiane.

The coup had major consequences for the country. The coup-makers withdrew RLA troops from the Plain of Jars, which strengthened the Pathet Lao hold on the area. The Pathet Lao left the coalition government afterward and launched major attacks in mid-May, gaining control of the

¹¹⁴⁷ Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 581-584. In China, Souvanna Phouma received promises the Chinese would support the second coalition with the possibility they might use their influence to rein in North Vietnam. Dommen further suggests, *ibid*, p. 585 that the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao "sabotage[d]" the April summit to forestall Chinese support of Souvanna which would threaten their activities. Most interesting, Dommen suggested the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese wanted a rightist coup to destroy the second coalition government and end Souvanna Phouma's diplomatic efforts. There may have been contacts between rightists and the Pathet Lao in the lead up to the April 19 coup, *ibid*, 585-586. Phoumi Nosavan was not involved in this coup, according to Dommen, *ibid*, p. 587-588.

¹¹⁴⁸ February 16, 1964. Private Diaries of Souvanna Phouma.

Plain of Jars on May 16.¹¹⁴⁹ Although the US refused to support the coup and it soon collapsed, it led to a “fusion” of rightist and neutralists, creating another important factor pressing Souvanna to pursue war.¹¹⁵⁰ As a result of the renewed communist attacks and the coup Souvanna Phouma decided to settle the “Lao problem” on the battlefield.

Souvanna Phouma undertook a major shift in policy to authorize the US aerial bombing that began on May 21, 1964.¹¹⁵¹ A US memorandum of that date specifies the new policy that Souvanna had confirmed, which was due to his “dire straits” caught between the rightists and Pathet Lao, threatening Laos’ “continued national existence”:

In response to Souvanna’s request for assistance, the United States is now authorizing limited military measures to be taken in defense against the Pathet Lao and Viet Minh. United States civilian pilots have been authorized for Laotian-marked T-28’s, which will bomb Communist objectives in the *Plaine des Jarres* area. United States reconnaissance of this area and of southern Laos has also been authorized.

This was not Souvanna’s first choice to address the worsening military situation. As early as March 19, US Ambassador Leonard Unger reported that Souvanna attempted to resolve the latest fighting by undertaking a diplomatic mission to China and North Vietnam. Yet Souvanna told Unger even then he was considering war as a final resort:

[Souvanna] said he could envisage [a] situation in which [military] actions of [the] sort contemplated would have to be taken if it [is] clear all hope of realizing [a] neutral solution of Laos is lost. At this point he would probably invite [the] U.S. to come to his country’s aid.¹¹⁵²

By May 15, Unger reported “Souvanna’s recent statements and actions [are] more hostile to Pathet Lao” and had caused him to lose his “last vestige [of] neutrality.”¹¹⁵³ Continued Pathet

¹¹⁴⁹ Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 133.

¹¹⁵⁰ Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 582 argues the Pathet Lao themselves wanted a return to war, and even goes so far as to suggest that the coup-makers, Siho and Kouprasith, wanted the same and were perhaps in contact with the Pathet Lao.

¹¹⁵¹ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 142 erroneously describes the beginning of the air war according to the US-RLG cover story (i.e. US ‘reconnaissance’ which only fires on enemy in self-defense) and does not provide any date. Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, p. 99 ascribes the renewal of war to the disintegration of the neutralist factions as a military force. Channapha and Russel on p. 289 give June 1964 as the start of the bombing.

¹¹⁵² Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, March 19, 1964. NARA.

¹¹⁵³ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, May 15, 1964. Ibid.

Lao attacks led Souvanna to finally approve the US bombing campaign on May 21, 1964, telling Unger that morning to “go ahead” with the first flights in what became a massive air war.¹¹⁵⁴

Yet US flights were still covert, using only T-28s with RLG markings.¹¹⁵⁵ They flew from Wattay airfield in Vientiane as it was easier to get clearance in Laos than in Thailand.¹¹⁵⁶ At the same time, the Royal Lao Airforce (RLAF) began their own aerial attacks which were conducted without any secrecy. While the RLAF pilots were not as competent as their USAF peers and were gradually replaced by the latter as the air war was stepped-up, they played an important, largely neglected role in the bombing campaign in Laos.¹¹⁵⁷ The area of the bombing campaign was carefully circumscribed at the beginning, focused exclusively on the Plain of Jars area.¹¹⁵⁸

Souvanna Phouma’s Influence on the Early Bombing Campaign (1964-1966)

Why did Souvanna Phouma make such a dramatic shift in policy, moving the government from the search (in vain) for peace to fully endorse war? By early 1964, the chances of avoiding war had been drastically reduced and many elite of the country from all political stripes – not only Souvanna but also conservatives like King Savang Vatthana, the old CDIN rightists and even neutralists like Kongle – supported the escalation of the war. On the face of it, it would seem to be a massive contradiction of Souvanna and the neutralists’ public professions over the years of

¹¹⁵⁴ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, May 21, 1964. Ibid.

¹¹⁵⁵ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, May 17, 1964. Ibid. A number of T-28s were given to the RLAF at the same time.

¹¹⁵⁶ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, May 17, 1964. Ibid.

¹¹⁵⁷ For one first-hand account from a member of the early RLAF see Prakiane Viravong, “Why Not Communism?” in Sumana Viravong, Prakiane Viravong and Pinkham Simmalavong (eds.) *Seri Lao: An Anthology of Lao-Australian Refugee Writings* (Liverpool NSW: Casula Powerhouse, 2007). For an account of a Hmong pilot in the RLAF see Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 189-197. See further, Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 591-592.

¹¹⁵⁸ Telegram CINCPAC to JCS, May 19, 1964. NARA.

neutralism, whether Nehru-inspired “peaceful co-existence,” the so-called “neutral solution” of 1962 or some other formula (Switzerland or Austria). How could the champion of neutralism in the 1950s lead the country into war, and even consent to bomb his own country, his own people? In part, there is a misconception of the man at the center of this question. Souvanna Phouma was far more pragmatic than he has been typically portrayed and he was never a naïve wide-eyed idealist. By mid-1964, he realized that the Second Indochina War had become inescapable. Yet his portrayal as the champion of neutrality in the late 1950s has remained stubbornly entrenched due in part to its usefulness as a mean for historians to speculate about how the country could have escaped the war.¹¹⁵⁹ This myth requires the erasure of Souvanna’s more warlike aspects, such as his reaction to the 1953 invasion by the Pathet Lao and Viet-minh when he rallied his country by calling for a fight to the death. In some sense, Souvanna’s turn to war in 1964 was a return of this earlier persona.

Souvanna did shape the bombing campaign more than has been previously realized. Timothy Castle has referred to the conflict as a “Secstate theater of war,” portraying all responsibility in the hands of the US Ambassador (Leonard Unger, William Sullivan, or McGurtie Godley), yet behind the perceived importance of the US Ambassador was Souvanna Phouma himself, who played a central role in the bombing campaign.¹¹⁶⁰ It only appears the US Ambassador was so important because of the central role of Souvanna, whom US officials dealt with through the US Ambassador.¹¹⁶¹ If, however, one acknowledges Souvanna’s centrality to the bombing campaign then there should be no mistake about motives or intentions. He was not

¹¹⁵⁹ Cambodia’s neutrality was much more firmly entrenched yet it too was drawn into the Second Indochina War.

¹¹⁶⁰ Timothy Castle, *At War in Shadow of Vietnam: United States Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955-1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). Evans repeats Castle’s claim that the US Ambassador controlled the war and the RLG role was “marginal”, *ibid*, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 147.

¹¹⁶¹ Unger, like others in his post, had to clear everything with Souvanna. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 600.

pressured into it by a neo-colonial US. He fully supported the bombing, and was instrumental to its creation. He was actively involved in the day-to-day business of managing the air campaign, maintaining a firm commitment throughout even when there were setbacks.¹¹⁶² He alone created the secrecy surrounding the war. The war was “secret” in Laos because Souvanna demanded it, even when US officials said it was impossible. Thus, one can see Souvanna Phouma truly was central to the bombing campaign, responsible for its essential aspects and continued to exercise influence over its shape throughout the war.

There has long been a US-centric view of the war that leaves no role for the RLG in the course of events. Instead RLG actors have been ignored based on the assumption that they were merely helpless victims. There is a profound need to recover the RLG role in the war, which was a significant and determinative aspect of the Second Indochina War in Laos. That is not to say the US and Souvanna always agreed. Certainly, there was tension between the allies, but there was much more happening at the time than just US-RLG friction. In the years after 1962, the RLG and US more often than not were on same page in the conduct of the war and at times it was the US that followed Souvanna’s lead.

Yet how could Souvanna ever consent to bomb his own country?¹¹⁶³ One must consider his rationale and the various justifications he made over the early phases of the bombing, which was markedly similar to US justifications. Souvanna justified the war on the basis that (1) the Pathet Lao had violated the 1962 Geneva Accords; and (2) Laos had the incontestable right to self-defense, so no one could blame the government for acting to save the country from foreign invasion

¹¹⁶² On Souvanna’s day-to-day involvement, see further Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction in Southern Laos, 1961-1968* (Washington D.C.: Center of Air Force History, 1993).

¹¹⁶³ One wonders how much Souvanna may have considered fact that he was willing to bomb predominately non-Lao areas essentially to safeguard the lowland Lao areas.

by North Vietnam. Those were the most powerful justifications by which Souvanna and other RLG officials explained what they were doing. These explanations were repeated time and time again during the war as it ground on year-after-year and the casualties mounted. Nevertheless, one must realize that the stakes in the war were always much higher for the RLG than it ever could possibly be for the US; to the latter Laos was just one outpost in the global Cold War, yet for the RLG, it was fighting for its very existence. The much-feared communist takeover of the country, so RLG officials said, would bring the end of the Lao race, who would be enslaved by the Vietnamese; the end of Lao culture and society under totalitarian communism; the extinction of Buddhism; and the overthrow of the elites in a great social upheaval that would shatter society. To Souvanna and the RLG officials, once negotiations failed there was no other course to take but to settle it once and for all on the battlefield. They would do whatever was necessary to ensure victory.

A telegram from Ambassador Sullivan from February 1965 is fairly typical of the early bombing campaign, presenting all the elements of Souvanna's war:

After having obtained Vang Pao's enthusiastic endorsement [for] these proposed air strikes (He has added two or three more targets to list), I saw Souvanna this evening. We talked over a map which showed the entire Sam Neua front as our intelligence sees it developing and I laid out precise locations as well as [the] character of [the] targets specified in our proposal.

Souvanna's unhesitating reaction was that these targets must be struck and he wished U.S. aircraft to do it as soon as possible. His only concern, as usual, was [the] matter of publicity. He stressed once again his constant formulation that nothing rpt [repeat] nothing should be said about these strikes if they are carried off without loss. If there is some loss which might bring them to public attention he pleaded that we use the same formula he always does. "Aircraft were on reconnaissance when taken under hostile fire." Under no [repeat] no circumstances should we admit [the] number or types aircraft involved.¹¹⁶⁴

Along with other RLG military leaders such as General Vang Pao (MR II) and often General Thao Ma Maha Anosith of the RLAF, Souvanna was involved with all stages of planning

¹¹⁶⁴ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, February 16, 1965. NARA. See further Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 603, which notes of Souvanna's meeting with Sullivan, "it was an open invitation to the United States to bomb military targets anywhere in Laos that it wished."

and operation of the bombing campaign, down to the level of individual targeting. Souvanna's strong support for the campaign is evident in his lack of hesitation. His only demand was that the entire effort be kept secret. In this way Souvanna himself more than any other person created the "secret war" in Laos.¹¹⁶⁵ Indeed, he created the formula for the US to use with the press: flights were only on reconnaissance missions, and would only fire on the enemy for self-defense.

The early bombing campaign underwent a number of changes as it evolved in the fog of war. US officials originally thought the bombing would only last a few weeks at most. Likewise, the RLAF under General Thao Ma had an important, although neglected role in the early bombing campaign. Some of the first bombing runs were, in fact, by T-28s piloted by the RLAF. Yet after Thao Ma was charged with leading an abortive coup in mid-1966 the RLAF then began to lose its effectiveness. The RLAF had an unmistakable role in the bombing campaign. To call it simply a "US bombing campaign" marginalizes the role of RLAF forces fighting to save their country from a threat to their very way of life. Toward the end of the war, elite Lao magazines would portray Lao RLAF pilots as "heroes."¹¹⁶⁶

At first, the bombing was conducted exclusively by T-28 airplanes, with the US only permitted to carry out "armed reconnaissance" in these older aircraft. Then, as Ambassador Unger reported, a new phase came in July 31, 1964:

In this connection, I took occasion [in] my meeting with PRIMIN Souvanna today to show him photos [of the] undestroyed bridge cited above and protecting batteries and commented in passing that various interdiction possibilities, including use of T-28's or US aircraft [were] being considered. He did not blink at [the] latter possibility.¹¹⁶⁷

¹¹⁶⁵ American fascination with the Secret War in Laos, such that it is, lies in the promise of uncovering a scandal happening in some far-away exotic location and heaping guilt and blame on the US government. It goes without saying that such a view feeds the US-centric understanding of the Second Indochina War in Laos.

¹¹⁶⁶ *Lao Sappada*, March 17, 1972, no. 2, p. 11-13.

¹¹⁶⁷ Telegram Vientiane Embassy to Secstate, July 31, 1964. NARA.

This was followed by another important evolution in the air campaign, which in the earliest stages was clearly limited to the Plain of Jars. On September 30, 1964 Ambassador Unger reported for the first time that Souvanna “concurred in principle to corridor [Ho Chi Minh Trail] air strikes.”¹¹⁶⁸ It was not easy for Souvanna to agree to expand the bombing campaign to the south. He firmly believed the bombing campaign was justified to save the country from the communist invasion of the Plain of Jars, which threatened Vientiane, Luang Prabang or both. On the other hand, North Vietnamese violation of Lao territory at Xepon circumventing the DMZ to infiltrate South Vietnam concerned him less, although this had so alarmed the CDIN in 1959 that they took emergency powers to deal with it. The previous day, Souvanna had resisted such an expansion before Unger persuaded him:

This morning I mentioned to Prime Minister Souvanna discussions we have had with General Ma and others concerning [the] program of T-28 strikes in [the] corridor [i.e. the Ho Chi Minh Trail] and told him of [the] proposal to put this program into execution.

Souvanna after several moments [of] reflection said he thought it would be better under present circumstances not to go ahead with such [a] program for the moment. He added that what was urgently required now was effective interdiction in the north and particularly cutting route 7. This obviously related to [the] conviction Souvanna expressed (ref embtel) that [the] PL/Vietminh are preparing [a] major military push, probably as early as October.

I explained to Souvanna that proposing such strikes in [the] south carried no repeat no implication that air interdiction in the north would not be pursued as before or, if he deemed it necessary, even more intensively. North Vietnam, however, has been getting away with serious violations [of] Lao territory and [the] Geneva accords and we considered it important [that] DRV learn it cannot continue this without interference; strikes in corridor would be [a] further important message.¹¹⁶⁹

Souvanna’s main concern was the survival of the government. He was very sensitive about how the bombing campaign progressed.¹¹⁷⁰ Even as it came to rely more on the USAF as the RLAF was sidelined, he always considered the political considerations. Souvanna and other government officials frequently expressed concern for how China and Russia might react to any escalation of

¹¹⁶⁸ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, September 30, 1964. Ibid.

¹¹⁶⁹ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, September 29, 1964. Ibid.

¹¹⁷⁰ See further Brett Reilly, “Cold War Transition: Europe’s Decolonization and Eisenhower’s System of Subordinate Elites” in Alfred W. McCoy, Josep M. Fradera, and Stephen Jacobson, *Endless Empire: Spain’s Retreat, Europe’s Eclipse, America’s Decline* (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Press, 2012).

the conflict. Souvanna also had to be very careful to maintain the right balance between getting what he wanted and managing US concerns. It was obvious to him that the US's greatest concern was to defend South Vietnam, but Souvanna always wanted to avoid that war spilling over into his country.

Yet Souvanna had more control of campaign than previously realized. It was necessary for US officials to secure his consent. Souvanna's agreement was not a given, as one telegram from the US State Department to Unger said: "Assume you would first wish to discuss this with Souvanna, citing voluminous evidence of DRV violations of Lao corridor territory."¹¹⁷¹ The US obviously appealed to Souvanna on the basis of issues he cared about: safeguarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of country. But the US then actually had to serve those interests or else risk being at odds with Souvanna.

RLG Escalations of the Bombing

Throughout the campaign, Souvanna displayed what US officials described as a "gung-ho" attitude toward the bombing, being "resolutely in favor" of it or otherwise "will[ing] to play ball."¹¹⁷² At the start of the bombing campaign, Unger had reservations but Souvanna urged him to press ahead due to "unabated communist pressure."¹¹⁷³ A week later, he told Unger that the "wraps are off with North Viet-Nam."¹¹⁷⁴ Later in 1964, Unger noted the high value Souvanna placed on the bombing campaign in the Plain of Jars as opposed to the south:

From Souvanna's recent comments (Embtel 524), it is clear that, far from objecting to such operations, he would heartily endorse them and that he would see in them a consistently greater

¹¹⁷¹ Telegram State Dept to Vientiane, September 25, 1964. NARA.

¹¹⁷² Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, June 22, 1965; *ibid*, December 4, 1965. *Ibid*.

¹¹⁷³ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, May 20, 1964. *Ibid*.

¹¹⁷⁴ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, May 30, 1964. *Ibid*.

contribution to RLG security than air strikes in corridor in which he has somewhat reluctantly acquiesced (Embtel 531).¹¹⁷⁵

US officials were learning that Souvanna had cast off his dovish approach to the communists in favor of firm measures. In a December 1964 meeting with the new ambassador William Sullivan, Souvanna was by then well-experienced with the campaign:

I met alone with Souvanna this afternoon and carried out [the] full sense of my instructions. Souvanna's reaction was excellent and he is prepared cooperate in full measure with our proposals. As anticipated the only complication arose in my request for his concurrence in the introduction of more candor into our public statements concerning air operations in Laos. He fully supports the US program of pressures against North Vietnam and believes they should be carried out with deliberate "Sang-Froid". He reviewed his familiar contention that actions speak louder than words and believes we should in this instance let the actions speak for themselves.

In discussing proposed armed reconnaissance against infiltration routes he specifically requested that we employ US aircraft over routes 7, 8, and 12. He demonstrated full comprehension of the meaning of "armed reconnaissance" by stipulating that if we "see anything moving on the road, either day or night, attack it." He asked that our air attache coordinate the proposed US actions with General Ma and assured me full cooperation of RLAF.¹¹⁷⁶

At various times, a key expansion of the early air war in Laos came not from the US but from Souvanna. In late 1965, Sullivan reported: "You should be aware that I am under considerable pressure from Souvanna to concur in actions which...will escalate U.S. operations in Laos."¹¹⁷⁷ This urge to expand the air war often occurred whenever government forces came under intense Pathet Lao attack. Souvanna then would call for increased bombing. In December 1965, Sullivan reported that "On his return from the Muong Soui front Souvanna got in touch with me...and requested that we mount heavy US strikes for three successive days against enemy positions on Phou Kout."¹¹⁷⁸ Sullivan then added that this "indicates degree to which Souvanna's combative instincts have been aroused by recent PL/Viet attacks."¹¹⁷⁹ Later in the month, during the

¹¹⁷⁵ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, October 1, 1964. Ibid. Unger notes in the same telegram that "Souvanna is much preoccupied with possibility of renewed PL/VM offensive in northern Laos."

¹¹⁷⁶ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, December 10, 1964. Ibid.

¹¹⁷⁷ Telegram Veitnaien to Secstate, Nov 23, 1965. Ibid.

¹¹⁷⁸ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, December 7, 1965. Ibid.

¹¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

Christmas suspension of Operation Rolling Thunder in North Vietnam, Souvanna called for more bombing in response to renewed attacks:

Second military region, which is heart of Mao country, is experiencing heavy DRV attacks which obviously timed coincide with Mao New Year (Dec 22-25). Souvanna called me in yesterday and asked that we respond to these attacks by maximum air strikes.¹¹⁸⁰

Illustrating Souvanna's enthusiasm for the early air war, in early 1966 Sullivan hoped to cheer Souvanna up about the deteriorating military situation, commenting "perhaps a few days of successful air operations will help restore his bounce."¹¹⁸¹

The most significant expansion to the early air campaign came from Souvanna when he requested the use of napalm against communist infiltration along the Ho Chi Minh Trail (HCMT). This request originated with none other than Souvanna himself. The possibility of using defoliants against the HCMT was first raised on January 11, 1965, but Sullivan noted it would upset Western allies like Great Britain and Canada.¹¹⁸² But by November things had changed. Souvanna himself had "approved use defoliants" in a meeting with Sullivan on November 14, 1965.¹¹⁸³ In discussions about a major Pathet Lao attack on Thakhek, Souvanna asked Sullivan for US bombing to halt the Pathet Lao and included a request that napalm be used:

[The] Prime Minister then said that, if [the] situation [is] stabilizing, he would assume [the] basic enemy purpose was rice gathering, and that they would soon retreat behind [the] limestone karst ridges. If, however, they continued to push, he would seek maximum assistance from [the] US in [the] form [of] air strikes, including [the] use of napalm if necessary. He asked me to keep in touch with [the RLA] general staff during his absence.¹¹⁸⁴

Souvanna had only given approval for its use on one route in particular, but Sullivan wanted to imply its use was authorized on "other trails and routes" in the south rather than asking Souvanna

¹¹⁸⁰ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, December 23, 1965. Ibid.

¹¹⁸¹ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, March 21, 1966. Ibid.

¹¹⁸² Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, January 11, 1965. Ibid.

¹¹⁸³ Telegram Vientiane to DC, November 22, 1965. Ibid.

¹¹⁸⁴ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, November 14, 1965. Ibid. See further Telegram Vientiane to Secstate April 2, 1966, Ibid: "1. It will be noted from Ref A that Souvanna personally approved use of napalm against trucks which are sighted on Ho Chi Minh Trail."

directly, thereby circumventing him to a degree. Nevertheless, Sullivan reported that General Thao Ma “also concurred in [the] use [of] defoliants.”¹¹⁸⁵ But only a week later, Sullivan reported on Souvanna’s “latest, most insistent plea” for napalm and had “specifically asked me to get a ruling from Washington on this subject.”¹¹⁸⁶ In the State Department reply the next day, Souvanna’s request for napalm was ascribed to his “gung ho attitude”:

We share your misgivings about acceding to Souvanna’s request to use napalm in Laos. As far as we know, he received no encouragement in this respect here and we can only conclude that his gung ho attitude, following his Washington visit, is due to [a] general feeling of confidence he gained during [his] visit in [the] US determination see it through in SEA.¹¹⁸⁷

The State Department then suggested limited use until March 1966 when Napalm was authorized for use by the RLAF:

I saw Souvanna this afternoon and obtained his clearance in [the] use of napalm by U.S. aircraft in [the] Steel Tiger Recc[onnaissance] area in accordance with [the] provisions stipulated Reftel.

He also concurred in principle with [the] release [of] napalm to RLAF but asked that I suspend actual delivery of this ordnance to RLAF until he personally has [a] chance to discuss with General Ma the limitations which he wishes impose on its use.

He particularly agrees with our desire to use this weapon against trucks on Ho Chi Minh Trail.¹¹⁸⁸

Finally, on June 20, 1966, Souvanna agreed to bomb food crops which could potentially be used by Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces:

3. While seeing Souvanna on other matters today, I reviewed with him in general terms [the] scope and results of our air operations in Laos during [the] period [of] May 1-June 17 and in [the] process thereof showed him map which A) delineated previous defoliant operations along segments of routes in [the] eastern panhandle and B) area of proposed crop destruction operations cited reftel. He interposed no objections and seemed fully in accord with [the] principle of denying crops to [the] enemy.¹¹⁸⁹

¹¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁸⁶ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, November 23, 1965. Ibid.

¹¹⁸⁷ Telegram State Dept to Vientiane, November 24, 1965. Ibid.

¹¹⁸⁸ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, March 25, 1966. Ibid. See further Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, March 30, 1966 Ibid, in which Sullivan explains how dangerous napalm would be saying to use “maximum effort...to prevent inadvertent strikes against villages, innocent habitations and friendly troop positions.” He added such an “error” would suspend the campaign.

¹¹⁸⁹ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, June 20, 1966. Ibid.

That Souvanna agreed to such a proposal shows how the war had begun to desensitize and brutalize its leaders by this point in the war, not least of whom was Souvanna himself. With a superficial reading of this telegram one might assume the US must have pressured Souvanna to agree to such a measure, but looking at the totality of the evidence it is difficult to sustain this interpretation.

Secrecy of the Air War

One of the most important ways that Souvanna shaped the early air war was his demand that the bombing campaign remain secret.¹¹⁹⁰ From the very start of the air campaign, US officials felt it would be impossible to keep the bombing secret, and advised they should not try to hide it:

I concur with Unger that we should give forthright answers to press inquiries re[garding] flights. However, since it [is] virtually certain that these flights will soon become known, I suggest it would be better for us to take the initiative in announcing them publicly rather than waiting to be caught and charged with violations of the Geneva agreements.¹¹⁹¹

Unger concurred saying he “consider[s] it inconceivable these low-level flights will long remain unpublicized” due to communist reports, witnesses in Vientiane and on the Plain of Jars and civilian aviators in the country among others.¹¹⁹² Over a year later in November 1965, nothing had changed dealing with the press: “we plan [to] handle such charges, in [the] event [of] press queries, in accordance with [the] standing guidance [to] not [repeat] not acknowledge or otherwise comment on US air operations in Laos beyond stating that since May 1964 US [has been] conducting air reconnaissance over Laos at [the] request [of the] RLG etc.”¹¹⁹³ But secrecy was impossible to maintain as a State Department telegram from December 1965 makes clear. It refers

¹¹⁹⁰ Souvanna also insisted on secrecy concerning the deployment of Thai PARU forces in the country. See Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 134, which includes Souvanna’s orders: “the [Thai PARU] units should be used far from Vientiane to minimize the amount of information about the operation that would be available to the diplomatic missions and foreign press in the capital.”

¹¹⁹¹ Telegram Cincpac to JCS, May 21, 1964. NARA.

¹¹⁹² Telegram Vientiane to Secstate May 22, 1964. Ibid.

¹¹⁹³ Telegram State Dept. to Vientiane, November 24, 1964. Ibid.

to “futile” attempts to “kill” a story on the bombing campaign in Laos, while restating Souvanna’s policy of secrecy he held the US to abide:

In view [of the] long-standing agreement with [the] Lao government [I] believe we must continue [the] policy of withholding official confirmation of [the] bombing activities in Laos. We propose [to] make no comment here or in Saigon and provide no backgrounding. Same holds [for] Fried story in today’s Daily News regarding defoliation of Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos.¹¹⁹⁴

Only a few days before there was an even more explicit statement of Souvanna’s demand for secrecy. In a telegram dated December 4, 1965, it was explained that Souvanna’s support for bombing in the southern “panhandle” of Laos would be forthcoming as long as it was kept secret:

Souvanna told Ambassador [Sullivan] [the] US should employ whatever resources necessary to counter infiltration but should in no event [repeat] no event publicly admit conduct of operations in Laos. We regard this as further striking confirmation of PRIMIN’s willingness to play ball with US provided we can continue to avoid publicity concerning operations in Laos. Latter is indeed crucial aspect of our relations with PRIMIN on military questions, and we regard it as of utmost importance that we continue [to] maintain absolute silence about what we are doing or plan to do.¹¹⁹⁵

Yet the clearest statement that it was Souvanna Phouma that demanded and even created the secrecy of the air war in Laos is found in a State Department memorandum from December 3, 1965 written by William P. Bundy: “Although the air activity is rather widely known to be taking place, we have abided by Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma’s stricture to refrain from any public acknowledgement of these activities.”¹¹⁹⁶ The memo acknowledged that it was Souvanna Phouma who demanded the condition of secrecy as a pre-requisite for US air operations in Laos.

Finally, it got to the point that Sullivan complained to his superiors about being forced by Souvanna to lie to those inquiring on the situation in Laos, and in fact to act like the DRV Ambassador and “deny it all”:

...no matter how far we expose ourselves, he [Souvanna Phouma] insists that we still maintain our position of flatly denying that anything is happening. In short, he has asked me to behave just like the DRV ambassador and deny it all. In the course of service to my country, I have become a fairly

¹¹⁹⁴ Telegram State Dept. to Vientiane, Saigon, December 14, 1965. Ibid.

¹¹⁹⁵ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, December 4, 1965. Ibid.

¹¹⁹⁶ William P. Bundy, Memorandum, “Escalation of US activities in Laos, Some Observations on a Developing Situation,” December 3, 1965, p. 1. Ibid.

practiced dissimulator, but I am not sure my talents in this direction extend quite so far as Souvanna.¹¹⁹⁷

Souvanna was acknowledged by US officials as a master of deception. It is worth considering why Souvanna insisted on secrecy. By keeping the air war secret Souvanna could continue to claim to maintain the neutral pose of the government, both domestically and abroad.¹¹⁹⁸ Since he was the only politician who could be trusted to form a coalition government, the rightists, who had control of the National Assembly and could have easily ousted him otherwise, had to tolerate his premiership. Internationally, Souvanna could call on world support to rally behind him against North Vietnamese violations only if he himself was respecting the Geneva Accords. In some respects, he may not have wanted to acknowledge his efforts to neutralize the country had failed.

At any rate, the secrecy in which the air war was conducted had lasting consequences for the outcome of the Second Indochina War in Laos as well as for how the conflict would be remembered. In the later years of the war, the American public belatedly became aware of the bombing in Laos and their government's role in it, which further alienated popular support for the war, hastening US withdrawal from the region.

US-RLG Relations in the Air War

There were a number of points on which Souvanna disagreed with the US in the early stages of the air war. Souvanna wanted Lao borders to be respected, and would not allow South Vietnam to conduct military operations in Laos. As one telegram from US Ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell Taylor noted, "Souvanna would prefer VNAF not conduct air strikes in

¹¹⁹⁷ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, November 23, 1965. Ibid.

¹¹⁹⁸ The Soviet Union, cochairmen with the UK under the Geneva Accords of 1962, encouraged the secrecy surrounding the war in Laos in as much as it was willing to accept virtually anything in Laos as long as it was not officially acknowledge. On this point see Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 576.

corridor...Vientiane is very reluctant to see VNAF participation [in] such strikes...”¹¹⁹⁹ Two months later in a telegram on November 6, 1964, Unger stated bluntly that Souvanna had not permitted use of Lao territory to attack North Vietnam saying: “we do not have authorization from [the] RLG for overflight [of] Lao territory in order to attack DRV military targets.”¹²⁰⁰

In another case from early 1965, it is clear that Souvanna continued to firmly deny South Vietnam use of Lao airspace to launch attacks on the DRV:

It should be pointed out that Souvanna has never concurred in VNAF overflights for any repeat any operational purpose. If such flights were undertaken in conjunction with [a] well-publicized VNAF raid on DRV targets it would seem almost inevitable that information re[garding] their flight path would leak out. This would probably result in RLG protest against GVN violations [of] Laos airspace for actions against DRV (It will be noted that in recent note to DRV, Souvanna made quite a point of argument that US planes had not repeat not attacked DRV from Laos).¹²⁰¹

Souvanna never authorized such a measure because he knew it would only lead to an escalation of the war with North Vietnam. He would likewise cede the high ground in his criticism of North Vietnam’s invasion of Lao territory. Furthermore, at the start of campaign Souvanna made clear that he would not allow spying on PRC activities in northwest Laos out of concern “to provoke CHICOMs...”¹²⁰² In this way, Souvanna was able to shape important aspects of the scope of US operations in Laos. Souvanna set obvious limits on the early campaigns, excluding (for a time) the south and northwest of the country and denying Lao soil be used to attack North Vietnam.

There were certain activities in which the US did not cooperate with Souvanna or the RLG and even tried to keep secret from them. In one case Unger approved “shallow” ground raids from

¹¹⁹⁹ Telegram Saigon to Secstate, September 19, 1964. NARA.

¹²⁰⁰ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, November 6, 1964. Ibid. See further Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 577, which notes Unger needed Souvanna’s approval for the campaign: “if he [Unger] were to consult the prime minister [Souvanna] and after learning of his disapproval proceed with the proposed measures, his relations with the PGNU and with Souvanna Phouma personally would be deeply compromised.” Dommen added that Unger wrote to Washington to warn that Souvanna might even quit his post, which would throw the government into disarray and lead to serious instability in the country.

¹²⁰¹ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, February 18, 1965. NARA.

¹²⁰² Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, May 30, 1964. Ibid. The Chinese constructed a road through northwest Laos at the time to supply aid to the Thai Communist Party.

South Vietnam into Lao territory which he said “do not in my mind require any clearance by RLG.”¹²⁰³ Sullivan likewise approved of operations without the consent of Souvanna, such as Operation Popeye which he approved saying “...they should not [repeat] not attract attention either of enemy forces or such friendly elements as [the] Lao government.” He insisted that, “we do not [repeat] not recommend discussion with Souvanna.”¹²⁰⁴

Yet Sullivan did get in trouble with Souvanna when he was caught having authorized “B-52 strikes in easternmost areas of Laos Panhandle.” He then added:

I limited knowledge of these strikes to a very few persons in this mission and did not repeat not inform the Lao. Now that the story has been spread all over the press, I am, of course, in hot water with the Lao. Just how deep or how scalding the water may be, I do not yet know.¹²⁰⁵

Sullivan’s lying to Souvanna, or his authorization of US operations on Lao territory without RLG consent risked unravelling the US-Lao alliance which had strengthened at the highest levels in the neutralist years. More deeply, the incident could be taken by the Lao elite as a sign that nothing had changed much since the days of US neo-colonial interventions in the 1950s.¹²⁰⁶ On the other hand, Sullivan’s report of the incident suggests the RLG had more power than it might seem. Sullivan expressed he was wary of getting in trouble with Souvanna. Souvanna did at times go so far as to halt the bombing campaign entirely. It was his last resort to hold on to power such that it was, to exercise control over the bombing as much as he could. As for Sullivan, he could not

¹²⁰³ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, September 13, 1965. Ibid.

¹²⁰⁴ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, December 16, 1966. Ibid. See further, Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, December 4, 1966, *ibid*: “2. For the time being, I prefer to ride this one out without notifying Souvanna. I am sure his reaction, if I approach him, will be to ask us to state that this action is in Vietnam and to deny there has been penetration of Laos.”

¹²⁰⁵ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, December 20, 1965. Ibid.

¹²⁰⁶ See further Telegram Vientiane to State, July 27, 1964, *ibid* in which Unger raised this very issue, with respect to US interest in attacking the HCMT in the south: “Our creating new military as well as international political conflict over corridor will be regarded by them as another instance of Laos being involuntarily involved in struggle among big powers on matter outside Laos’ own prime interests.”

comment on future missions until he could “find out [the] attitude of Souvanna and other officials who have not yet approached me on [the] subject of [the] press stories.”¹²⁰⁷

One serious episode in the early bombing campaign arose less than a month after it began in June 1964. The State Department had tried to run the air war in Laos from Washington without Souvanna. Conflict arose after a US reconnaissance flight was shot down in Xepon. The State Department then sought to unilaterally authorize the next reconnaissance flights be escorted by “fighter bomber aircraft...”¹²⁰⁸ These would not be the agreed upon T-28 planes with RLG markings but USAF jets. The State Department also wanted to issue a press release to explain what happened and the measures the US would take to defend its activities. Unger replied the next day saying “we have no mandate from Souvanna concerning flights over [the] corridor area.”¹²⁰⁹

Meanwhile, Averell Harriman, Ambassador-at-large for Indochina, had prepared a press release statement on US air strikes in Laos.¹²¹⁰ When Unger was made aware of the press release he replied “all our careful work of past two years may be largely vitiated.”¹²¹¹ He went on to criticize the State Department for ignoring the political considerations in favor of military imperatives. He said the pursuit of military goals would “serious[ly] endanger our carefully managed position with regard to [the] Geneva Accords, our good relations with PRIMIN...and others.”¹²¹² He continued that as a result of the downed plane:

Escorts were put on but on clear understanding with Souvanna Phouma that this would remain secret. After June 7 shooting down [the] question of press handling arose again...

Now I learn, (deptel 1151) that department and DOD have authorized [the] background identification of downed aircraft as [a] fighter escort. I am at a loss to understand why this was done. As long as our previous line was maintained we could pass off bombings and strafing's in PL area

¹²⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁰⁸ Telegram State to Vientiane, June 6, 1964. Ibid.

¹²⁰⁹ Telegram Vientiane to State, June 7, 1964. Ibid.

¹²¹⁰ Telegram State to Geneva, June 8, 1964. Ibid.

¹²¹¹ Telegram Vientiane to State, June 8, 1964. Ibid.

¹²¹² Ibid.

as work of T-28s however much [the] PL presented eye witness accounts of U.S. jet involvement. Now, however, we have virtually acknowledged that U.S. aircraft, not repeat not invited by RLG, have been bombing and strafing in Laos in direct violation of [the] Geneva Accords.¹²¹³

The bombing then was halted while Souvanna talked to Unger. The State Department acknowledged the halt saying “no further low level flights [are] contemplated at least until after you have seen Souvanna and reported his views.”¹²¹⁴ Unger wrote that it was essential to talk to Souvanna “In light of our present difficulties with Souvanna over [the] question [of] public admission of armed escorts [I] strongly concur it [is] essential to suspend flights until we can get ourselves in better shape with Souvanna.”¹²¹⁵ He cautioned against any flights until he “had [the] opportunity to discuss matter with Souvanna.”¹²¹⁶ Apparently Unger was able to come to an understanding with Souvanna over the matter and flights were resumed on June 11, 1964.¹²¹⁷

Civilian Casualties

Yet the single most serious strain on US-RLG cooperation in the bombing campaign was the issue of civilian casualties.¹²¹⁸ The problem arises in any major air war, but in Laos under Souvanna’s watch such incidents would halt the bombing in the early years of the campaign.¹²¹⁹ A US report from March 1966 warned “the number of serious incidents ... continues to rise.”¹²²⁰ Then followed a “partial list” covering the period from January 1965 to February 1966 which included thirteen incidents listed as “friendly targets” and three incidents listed as restricted

¹²¹³ Ibid.

¹²¹⁴ Telegram State to Vientiane, June 10, 1964. Ibid.

¹²¹⁵ Telegram Vientiane to State, June 10, 1964. Ibid.

¹²¹⁶ Ibid.

¹²¹⁷ Telegram Vientiane to State, June 11, 1964. Ibid.

¹²¹⁸ The National Assembly raised questions about civilian casualties as early as October 23, 1964. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 603.

¹²¹⁹ For an informative discussion of this issue see further Vatthana Pholsena, “Life under the Bombing.”

¹²²⁰ Letter from Leonard Unger to U. Alexis Johnson, March 8, 1966, “U.S. Air Strikes Against Friendly Targets in Laos.” NARA.

“enemy targets.” The latter consisted of strikes against Pathet Lao towns of Sam Neua (February 1965), Khang Khai (November 1965) and Phongsaly (February 1966), which Souvanna had ruled “off-limits.” Friendly targets consisted of RLG villages (several attacked repeatedly), civilians traveling on passenger buses, and RLA military installations.

Leonard Unger, by then Assistant Secretary of State, wrote in a letter included with the report:

Each successive incident creates ever more serious strains on US/RLG political-military relations. After each incident, Ambassador Sullivan must attempt to explain to Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma why U.S. aircraft, with the most advanced navigational systems and operating under jointly agreed (US/RLG) rules, persist in striking targets outside authorized zones. In addition to the loss of life and property damage, the morale of several Lao military units attacked by U.S. jets has been severely shaken and the loyalty of villagers undermined. (On at least two occasions, villagers in the panhandle that had recently come under government control were subjected to jet air strikes.)¹²²¹

Unger concluded by underlining the importance of the matter, noting that such events caused a halt to the bombing. Souvanna was very angry about US bombing of Sam Neua town in early February 1965, which he had said was “off-limits.”¹²²² In an earlier message from Sullivan, he said as much: “As MACV [is] aware, Sam Neua has been ruled off limits by Souvanna ever since [the] beginning [of] air operations in Laos.”¹²²³

After the bombing incident that hit Khang Khai, Souvanna began to have questions about the bombing campaign and asked Sullivan to see photos of the aftermath.¹²²⁴ Souvanna used a ruse to make certain his request was successful. He asked Sullivan if his house had been destroyed in the Khang Khai attack and the latter obliged with photos of the site:

¹²²¹ Ibid.

¹²²² Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, February 22, 1965. Ibid.

¹²²³ Telegram Vientiane to COMUMACV, February 21, 1965. Ibid.

¹²²⁴ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, November 23, 1965. Ibid. Sullivan reported that when Souvanna learned of the US bombing of Khang Khai “He took it all very calmly, and said his public position would be ‘no comment.’”

Yesterday I showed Souvanna annotated photos of bomb damage at Khang [Khai]. He studied [the] pictures carefully and was pleased to see that his house, as well as that of Souphanouvong, appeared intact.”¹²²⁵

Souvanna then went on to identify each destroyed building, but Sullivan admitted that “[the] bombing was so selective that I suspect he will find it hard to believe [the] strike was purely accidental.”¹²²⁶ Souvanna wanted to know the real effect of the bombing campaign that he had agreed to, which was gradually taken over from the RLAF by the USAF. In an earlier message, Sullivan said of the photos: “[the] overwhelming portion of ordnance was delivered on Khang Khai itself and considerable destruction was achieved.”¹²²⁷ Souvanna thus called into question US claims to “precision bombing.”

On the first anniversary of the bombing campaign in May 1965, while Souvanna was on holiday in Thailand, a major incident occurred striking a civilian village near Luang Prabang (nineteen wounded were sent to the hospital).¹²²⁸ This incident was not included in a “partial list” of “incidents” written in March 1966 that circulated in Washington, although there were two other incidents that month in Savannakhet. Sullivan wrote to the US Military’s Pacific Command (CINCPAC) to demand answers, noting he “had been busy attempting to heal wounds here.”¹²²⁹ The incident was serious enough that the bombing campaign was halted on May 22, 1965.¹²³⁰ In an initial report, Sullivan described a tense meeting with the acting (deputy) Prime Minister Leuam Insixiengmay. This was a “very uncomfortable interview,” which was more difficult because

¹²²⁵ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, November 29, 1965. Ibid.

¹²²⁶ Ibid.

¹²²⁷ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, November 22, 1965. Ibid.

¹²²⁸ Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 133 notes that Souvanna Phouma was personally close to Thai Prime Minister Thanom Kittakachorn and that Thanom “graciously offered Souvanna the use of Thai facilities and resorts for Souvanna’s brief vacations and the prince frequently accepted these invitations.”

¹²²⁹ Telegram Vientiane to CINCPAC, May 26, 1965. NARA.

¹²³⁰ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, June 5, 1965. Ibid.

Leuam had just learned of his son's death ("the pride of his life") fighting the Pathet Lao. Leuam recounted the villager's reaction to the bombing:

Above all, Leuam stressed the violent reaction among the Lao villagers, who, for no apparent reason, are suddenly subjected to devastating attack literally out of the blue. He pointed out that these people are far removed from the main stream of communication, and have no repeat no comprehension of what hit them or why. Parenthetically, Leuam said he himself found great difficulty in comprehending how these errors occurred, in broad daylight and over open terrain. He asked me what assurances I could give him that this would not repeat not happen again.¹²³¹

Sullivan did not have good answers for him. The US responded by bringing in new radar to improve navigation. Demonstration flights were arranged "with General Ma present...to witness its effectiveness."¹²³²

Yet in addressing the public the US and RLG seemed to close ranks about the incident ("they are all current with our thinking"). RLG officials cooperated by covering up the incident:

General Sourith, in Luang Prabang, has covered up [the] Muong Nga incident by telling press that damage there [was] caused by [a] Pathet Lao ground force attack. Unfortunately Pathet Lao radio has [the] Muong Phalane story on air; but their credibility is so low that we may skid by [on] this one.¹²³³

Sullivan was happy to keep it out of the press, but that would not stop people from talking about it. RLG officials were willing to lie to their own people to safeguard the US bombing campaign. While they demanded improvements they couldn't entirely abandon it. As North Vietnamese offensives grew in scale and intensity, especially on the Plain of Jars, US bombing would be the saving grace of a Lao military outmatched and stretched to the breaking point.

But even in the face of its worse consequences the bombing campaign remained vitally important to RLG leaders, including King Savang Vatthana:

¹²³¹ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, May 25, 1965. Ibid.

¹²³² Telegram Vientiane to CINCPAC, May 26, 1965. Ibid.

¹²³³ Ibid.

His majesty the King, who saw my Australian colleague in Luang Prabang yesterday, sent me word by [the] latter that, regrettable as these incidents were, he wished our programs to continue.¹²³⁴

Afterwards, General Ma worked with Sullivan to ensure improvements and corrections were made. But the RLG elite would not risk halting the bombing which was vital to hold back the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese.

This caution was re-affirmed again after a serious bombing incident that occurred on May 11, 1965 in which two civilian buses traveling on Route 9 were struck, “killing 13, mostly women and children, and wounding 41.” Sullivan was present at a ceremony with Souvanna and Savang Vatthana during which they both pledged to continue the bombing:

During ceremonies at [the] opening [of the] Nam Cadinh road today both his majesty the King and [the] Prime Minister assured me they wished U.S. aerial bombardment of Laotian targets to continue. [The] King has asked [his] government to look into possibilities of evacuating Lao civilians from [the] most exposed areas and [the] Prime Minister told me he would discuss this at later date with me. I doubt very much can really be done along these lines, but this conversation gives reassurance that high level support for our activity continues unabated.¹²³⁵

It is evident from this incident that Souvanna Phouma was not alone in his support of the bombing campaign, but others including the RLA general staff and the King did as well.

But as the war dragged on there are signs the RLG leaders were becoming desensitized to the violence in ways that affected the bombing campaign. In May 1968 Sullivan reported on a meeting with Souvanna where he urged Souvanna to “intensify our bombing throughout Laos.” Souvanna “volunteered that he knew there were many villages in the area between Paksane and Xieng Khouang, but that it was more important to get on with the job of rooting out the enemy. If some friendly villages were damaged in the process, he went on, “Tant pis! You can’t make an omelet without breaking some eggs!”¹²³⁶ Sullivan added that Souvanna “is undoubtedly feeling

¹²³⁴ Ibid.

¹²³⁵ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, May 14, 1965. Ibid.

¹²³⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Laos, vol. XXVIII*, p. 722. The date of this exchange was May 16, 1968.

pressure from the King who reportedly had adopted a “bomb them wherever they are” attitude toward the enemy.”¹²³⁷

The Neutralist General Kongle wrote in Lao newspapers to declare his support for the bombing campaign and to promote it to the public.¹²³⁸ In early 1965, Sullivan reported that the early bombing campaign had the unequivocal support of King Savang Vatthana:

According to FAR Chief of Staff Ouane [Rathikoun], who has returned from debriefing [the] King in Luang Prabang, his majesty states that he favors continued US bombing [of the] DRV, including Hanoi if necessary. He also has told Ouane that he endorses US airstrikes against Pathet Lao/Viet Minh installations within Laos.¹²³⁹

The King was actively involved in the bombing campaign, although not to the same degree as Souvanna. In a July 1964 conversation with Unger, the King noted he would refrain from intervening in politics but at the same time he would be involved in military affairs:

He [Sisavang] said he had given advice to the Lao general staff on targets to attack. He excused himself for this venture into military science on the grounds that the tense situation required his more direct involvement.

Since that time, he has on several occasions given military advice. He told Ambassador Unger after the conclusion of Operation Triangle that he was opposed to much greater military initiative against the Lao and North Vietnamese communists in Laos, on the grounds that a policy of prudence was necessary in view of the international situation. He contended that turning away from neutrality would invite the Russians to shift from their current support, however weak, of the Geneva Agreements. He has more recently recommended the seizure of Phou Kout for both its military and psychological value, attack by Lao planes on strategic targets along the Ho Chi Minh trail, and bombardment of the communist airstrip at Chavane.

In mid-January 1965, during a generals’ conference in Luang Prabang, the king counseled them to fight the enemies of Laos rather than each other. They gave only lip service to his advice, and the Phoumi-Siho rebellion broke out in early February. In January 1966, the king criticized Lao Commander in Chief General Ouan Rattikoun for not having sent troops garrisoned around Vientiane to help out Region II during the communist offensive there, and he asked Souvanna why so many troops were stationed in inactive, static positions.¹²⁴⁰

The King, Souvanna and other Lao elite (officials, politicians and generals) were by then all in the same boat. The future of the country depended on them successfully blocking the communist

¹²³⁷ Ibid.

¹²³⁸ *Lao Lan Xang*.

¹²³⁹ Telegram Vientiane to Secstate, February 19, 1965. NARA.

¹²⁴⁰ Evans, *Last Century of Lao Royalty*, p. 208-9. Citing a telegram from Ambassador Sullivan May 4, 1966.

invasion in the north on the Plain of Jars and to a lesser degree in the south around Xepon and Attapeu.

Finally, by April 1970 US antiwar activists saw Souvanna Phouma in a radically different light, going so far as to call him a “savage and voluntary Asian rightwinger.”¹²⁴¹ Douglas Dowd wrote “it remains tempting to view Souvanna Phouma as the reluctant captive of events but a man still, somehow neutralist and pacific in his impulses” but that perception ended during the interview with him on April 9, 1970.¹²⁴² The interviewers naively asked him why he chose war over peace, as if the latter was a possibility.¹²⁴³ Souvanna’s response was that Lao had fled the bombing zones and that “those bombed or killed throughout northern Laos are – not communists or Pathet Lao – but “North Vietnamese.””¹²⁴⁴ His reply referred to the fact the country was being invaded and any negotiations in such a situation were impossible. He referred to a government program to remove people from the bombing zone in February to March 1970.¹²⁴⁵ Souvanna denied any Lao were hurt saying cities and villages were avoided, only admitting “maybe a few huts” had been hit in collateral damage.¹²⁴⁶ The interviewers concluded portraying Souvanna as both a brutal warlord and an American puppet: “he is a man whose pride now comes out as cant, braggadocio, and as savage aloofness toward his people, his land. Souvanna has been sanitized, pacified – in short, Americanized.”¹²⁴⁷ But the war and its conduct was not that simple. It was not Souvanna alone, but the entire Royal Lao Army leadership that made the critical decisions

¹²⁴¹ Douglas Dowd, “The CIA’s Laotian Colony; or An Interview with Souvanna Phouma,” in Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy (eds.), *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) p. 377.

¹²⁴² Ibid.

¹²⁴³ Ibid. The interviewers did not print a verbatim account of the interview, but were free to rephrase Souvanna’s statements as they liked, which they labeled “rationalizations.”

¹²⁴⁴ Ibid, 378.

¹²⁴⁵ Ibid, 379.

¹²⁴⁶ Ibid, 378.

¹²⁴⁷ Ibid, 381.

regarding the conduct of the war. Moreover, the RLG was still a democracy, albeit at war, and Souvanna Phouma was voted in as Prime Minister and Minister of Defense in 1965, 1967 and 1972. It was not Souvanna alone then who was responsible for the conduct of the war, but there was real collective responsibility where a democracy repeatedly condoned and endorsed the war.

Conclusion: The Second Indochina War as a Lao War

A close study of early the bombing campaign (1964-1966) shows that the Royal Lao Government was not simply a helpless victim of a dominating US, but was in fact an active participant shaping the nature of the Second Indochina War in Laos. This can be seen only after accounting for the role of the RLG leadership in the conduct of the war on Lao soil, which had been heretofore missing in the literature. The elite were not puppets of the US, but willing partners, who took the lead in the war at times. They did not fight as a tool of American empire, but fought for their own vital interests. Moreover, in the earliest stages the bombing campaign itself was not only undertaken by the USAF, but the RLAFF as well, whose own role in the combat has been neglected and forgotten. The stakes were never higher than they were for the RLG, whose very future depended on the outcome. The Second Indochina War in Laos, the so-called “Secret War” to Americans, must be seen as a Lao war.

Yet what does greater recognition of Lao agency in the war mean? RLG leaders were determined to defend their independence and to halt what they saw as a communist takeover of the country. Under the neutralists, while the aims of the war shifted from a war against communists to a war to defend the country’s neutrality and sovereignty, it remained an existential war. The RLG leadership was fighting for its life while fears about conquest and colonization by China and North

Vietnam persisted. As such, there was wide support among the elite for the bombing campaign in order to save the country from massive foreign invasion.

RLG leaders demonstrated a willingness to do whatever was necessary to ensure victory. The convergence of RLG ideology and the pursuit of war-aims by any means necessary led to the horrific results of the bombing campaign.¹²⁴⁸ The RLG war chiefs were not unaware or uninvolved; quite the opposite. But they were afflicted by a growing desensitization to violence as RLG propaganda portrayed the enemy in dehumanized ways or when leaders were faced with choices to bomb food crops or civilians. The RLG leadership ultimately were willing to tolerate civilian deaths in a bid to halt the North Vietnamese invasion, seeing no other way to stem the rising tide of a mighty foe. Yet that opened the door to the enormous costs that were wreaked on the country. The country in the present day continues to face an enormous toll to the environment and the people, which is itself a painful legacy of the bombing campaign. The leadership was so focused on vanquishing the enemy they could not see (or were unable to stop) the devastation of the country as their vision became blinkered in the fog of war. Only in the later years of the war, toward the end of 1969, did any of the RLG leadership begin to see how terrible the result was and thereafter look to prospects for peace (see chapter eight).

¹²⁴⁸ See Fred Branfman, *Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life under an Air War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013) which provides a rare account of victims of the air war on the Plain of Jars in their own words. For oral accounts of the impact of the war see *ibid.*, p. 4-5, 39-136. Branfman interviewed 1,000 refugees over a period of fifteen months; see *ibid.*, p. 9-10: “villager after villager described seeing relatives and friends burned and buried alive, their livestock killed, and their homes and pagodas demolished; living in holes for months on end; and feeling intense pain at being forcibly removed from the villages of their ancestors to wind up as penniless refugees in Vientiane.” The villagers felt they were being deliberately targeted. The worst of the bombing resulted from cluster munitions, *ibid.*, p. 11. However, his assertion on p. 7 that the North Vietnamese “troops main role was clearly defensive” is seriously inaccurate (see further p. 23 “there was relatively little North Vietnamese involvement during these years [1964-1969].”). It was not the North Vietnamese in Laos, but the RLG that was fighting a defensive war. In general, he denies the RLG had any legitimacy or autonomy (see for example, p. 21). The Pathet Lao are the only forces he describes as nationalist, *ibid.* Thus on p. 23 he claims the Pathet Lao “liberated zones” constituted a “new era of nationalistic Lao rule.”

The bombing campaign began as a small operation that would (it was thought) only last a few weeks, and was strictly limited to the Plain of Jars. At this stage only T-28 aircraft piloted by Lao and Americans were permitted. The campaign gradually expanded in stages. First USAF jet aircraft were introduced, thereby shifting the burden of the campaign from the RLAF to the USAF. Then the area of the bombing campaign expanded beyond the Plain of Jars, especially south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As the brutal savagery of the war unfolded RLG war chiefs turned to more destructive weaponry, demanding devastating munitions like napalm.

The air war in Laos was in many ways Souvanna's war; as vigorously as he fought to secure peace in earlier years did he pursue the war. He determined key aspects of the bombing campaign including location, the type of aircraft involved, type of munitions, which targets were acceptable and which were not. The RLG drew up the rules of engagement with the US. If Souvanna was displeased by the conduct of the bombing, he could, and did, unilaterally halt it. The US could not carry out the bombing campaign without him; he was the essential element. Yet most importantly, Souvanna personally imposed secrecy on the air campaign for his own purposes related to domestic and international RLG politics. This had the unintended affect of portraying US involvement as a violation of the Geneva Accords when in reality the agreement was considered dead letter by all sides. Some US officials thought it would be better to operate openly but Souvanna insisted on secrecy. Finally, revelations of US involvement in Laos in 1969 became a major impetus to the American anti-war movement. Their government was lying, the war seemed to be expanding to consume not just Vietnam, but surrounding countries, and it might drag on endlessly. The "secret war" in Laos added to the growing rift between the US government and the American public, which hindered the continuation of the war. Yet the secrecy more deeply affected the memory of the Second Indochina War in Laos. The fact that US involvement was never

officially admitted not only denied the conflict as a whole the recognition it deserved but also denied official memory for many years after; only recently has information become declassified.

Ultimately the Lao conduct of the war was linked to the rise of neutralism in RLG after 1962. By 1969, all major political parties pledged to uphold the country's neutral status enshrined in the Geneva Accords. The government came to identify with the Geneva Accords of 1962 which defined the RLG as neutral. This led to the evolution of an official neutralism, that nevertheless became militant as the war escalated. Yet in the depths of the war the government consistently saw itself as a neutral victim fighting a defensive war against powerful enemies that violated Lao borders and trespassed on peace and neutrality. The neutralist character of the government unquestionably shaped the war.

CHAPTER SEVEN: LATE CULTURE AND MODERNITY

Introduction

It may seem after 1962 the country became hopelessly lost in war, but much of the intellectual activity that began in the 1950s was reaching a climax during the neutralist years. More books were likely published after 1962 than at any other period of the RLG's history.¹²⁴⁹ New academic institutions were founded including the National Library and the Royal Lao Academy, which were more independent from the state than earlier entities. New connections were formed and professional journals reappeared connecting Lao academics with the West. Several local and international conferences were held on various topics, gathering Lao and Western scholars of the period. A curriculum was created for the newly established Lao language secondary Fa Ngum schools. Important discussions occurred among intellectuals, notably between Christians and Buddhists that had happened more than a century earlier in neighboring Thailand.¹²⁵⁰ Others sought to revive Buddhism. The first mosque was opened in Vientiane in 1970.¹²⁵¹ In general, one can see that the neutralist years brought to the fore of a more cosmopolitan view of Lao culture. This was not unprecedented, but had existed in some loyalist works of the late 1940s, which spoke of a multiethnic nation.

As a young Lao artist Soukhaseum Chanthapanya said at the time "I want to learn more about the art and culture of other countries so I can help the Lao people enjoy more fully the cultural heritage of all mankind."¹²⁵² Fa Ngum school texts included lessons on Gandhi, but also

¹²⁴⁹ This assessment is based on my survey of American university libraries. While that could not yield a result that directly corresponds to actual output of Lao publications, and likely is distorted by many factors, it is nonetheless suggestive.

¹²⁵⁰ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*.

¹²⁵¹ Askew, et. al., *Vientiane*, p. 139.

¹²⁵² "Soukhaseum Chanthapanya: a Lao artist" *Friendship* 1970, no. 2, p. 33.

Socrates, William Shakespeare and Albert Einstein.¹²⁵³ Lao women rose to prominence in the neutralist years and took an active role in the country, even as they negotiated changing gender roles. One important trend was the rise of Ameri-phone Lao who shared similarities and differences to their Francophone Lao peers of the late 1940s. There were now a number of Lao Christians. Finally, there was a growing nostalgia for the early years of the RLG that appeared in a number of works, focusing on the legacy of the Issara, albeit continuing the debates among the elite on the legacy of French colonialism. Lack of consensus on these issues was itself a sign of a maturing, open society enriched by a number of contrasting viewpoints.

These achievements in the cultural domain were not matched by similar advances in modernization. With the RLG establishment of hydro-electric dams, an important segment of the modern economy was created. These large projects were hailed as leading to a new phase in the country's development, sparking the long-awaited progress and modernity. They even promised the RLG would pursue early capital accumulation. The RLG's pursuit of hydro-electric dams has cast a long shadow over the modern country, its peoples and environment. The government elite were persuaded to pursue this path of development due to their fascination with technology and their desperate need for capital to transform the country.

In the final years the government began the difficult struggle to create a self-sufficient economy, even as important revenue sources closed (opium) or were disrupted (gold-trade). Yet the greatest toll on the economy was the Second Indochina War in Laos, which dragged on for over a decade. Large parts of the country were affected. Places that had received development aid and witnessed progress were destroyed in the fighting only a few years later. Progress slipped

¹²⁵³ Phou Ratsaphone (ed.), ພາສາລາວຊັ້ນມັທຍົມປີທີ1 [“Lao language: secondary school, first year”] (Vientiane: Kingdom of Laos, 1969). For Albert Einstein, see p. 95-99. For William Shakespeare see p. 102-105. For Socrates see p. 106-107. Gandhi see p. 108-109.

through the fingers of the RLG elite. Finally, the war-torn economy manifested as orphans, widows, beggars and refugees. The failing economy, floundering under inflation after the US no longer would prop up the government, was perhaps one of the major forces propelling the social tensions which ultimately washed away the regime in a wave of revolutionary fervor.

Culture and modernization in some respects reached a high watermark in the neutralist years despite the highly destructive nature of the war. While the hyper-nationalism of the earlier years gave way to more cosmopolitan outlook in some quarters, the notion of an exclusionary “Lao race” did not disappear. Indeed the war brought simmering ethnic tensions to the fore. Further, as Lao became the language of instruction in the schools, tensions re-emerged between the Lao ethnic majority and the country’s minorities, some of whom resisted Lao cultural assimilation. Post-colonial nationalism continued to be enormously problematic, failing to unite the diverse country.

Late Modernity: Enduring Aspirations amid Total Devastation

In spite of the Second Indochina War, which reached an unprecedented intensity, the quest for modernity continued to influence the neutralist years, shaping the public mood. Sila Viravong who had done more to revive Lao culture for modern times than perhaps anyone else, was at times an unrepentant modernist even when writing about the traditional customs of the country:

In truth what the elders, the seniors said, that people of this era abandon the customs and traditions or do not observe them correctly, is right. [That is] because the customs and traditions of the ancients, some of them are not with the times, are old-fashioned or opposed to progress, [even] contrary to the truth. [One] does not benefit [from them] in any way... but there are good traditions...in this book, so [I] do not see anyone simply abandoning [them]. [I] see [they] only alter [the traditions] to promote them always...¹²⁵⁴

Sila was clearly caught up in the modernist spirit of the RLG which reached new heights

¹²⁵⁴ Sila Viravong, ຮິດສິບສອງສະບັບວິຈານ [“twelve customs: critical edition”] (n.p., Phainam publishing house, 1974), p. ໗-ຂ.

in the neutralist years. His work pointedly did not address how to actually perform any ceremony, but rather took up more esoteric questions like the origins of the traditions. He recommended his work, which he called a “critical edition” (ສະບັບວິຈານ) primarily for students. What Sila did to customs and traditions the government continued to do writ large across the country, to realize the aspirations of the people for modernity and prosperity.

Modernization efforts continued to point to the future. Government school books portrayed a happy, successful, modern society. The government never stopped planning a modern country, even as the deteriorating military situation made the prospect more and more unlikely. Government agencies designed hundreds of projects across the country in a diverse array of fields like infrastructure, education, public health, agriculture, industrial works and so on, although it is unclear how many were realized.¹²⁵⁵ These planning documents nonetheless demonstrate that the Royal Lao Government had a noticeably higher technical capacity by the 1970s than it had in the first years of independence in the 1950s. They continued to pioneer new activities like the first ever modern census of Vientiane in 1966.¹²⁵⁶ Wattay airport was expanded.¹²⁵⁷ And so the common lament among the elite went: if not for war and destruction across the country, the government could have built up its capacity, rapidly increasing in technical advances.

In the elite magazine *National Unity* one finds the modernist spirit alive and well, manifesting a desire to strive constantly for improvement, which was a key aspect of how the Lao elite perceived modernity. The magazine featured many articles concerned with unlocking new scientific advances in agriculture, such as how to best raise fish, poultry or pigs and how to plant

¹²⁵⁵ See for example, Commissariat General Au Plan, *Programme Annuel de Réalisation, 1970-1971* (Kingdom of Laos, n.d.). The Minister of Planning was in 1970 the old CDIN member Inpeng Suryadhay. This was the report of the second annual program of the five-year economic plan for 1969-1974.

¹²⁵⁶ *Friendship* 1967, no 2, p. 13.

¹²⁵⁷ *National Unity*, no. 12, p. 39.

crops like peanuts.¹²⁵⁸ The elite were not as isolated from the rural areas as has been presumed and were aware of the central role that agriculture played in the economy and lives of the majority of people in the country.¹²⁵⁹ Related to this mindset, in government reports of the late RLG era one finds qualitative and quantitative measures of each issue.

With the return of peace in 1974, the government even drew up a foreign investment code to wean the economy off foreign aid.¹²⁶⁰ It planned to modernize the country by industrial development (ການພັທນາດ້ານອຸດສາຫະກຳ) in the areas of processing agricultural products, hydroelectric power, mineral resources, and products for domestic and international market.¹²⁶¹ The latter suggested an import-substitution program was envisioned. Admitting the need for foreign capital, the government expected that foreign investment would lead to job creation and new training opportunities for the people. However, these plans would be washed away in the revolutionary tide of 1975 when the economy underwent dramatic change.¹²⁶²

Modernizing Economy: Hydroelectric Dams

The centerpiece of late modernization efforts was the construction of hydro-electric dams. The unveiling of new dams was always treated as a major event in the neutralist years, widely covered in the press. The biggest project, the Nam Ngum dam, was celebrated on February 23,

¹²⁵⁸ See for example *National Unity* no. 10 which had the following articles: “ຄວາມຈຳເປັນໃນການລ້ຽງປາ” “ການບູກຖົວດິນ” “ການລ້ຽງໄກ່ກະທົງ” “ວິທີລ້ຽງປານົນ”. Fully one third of the issue was concerned with agricultural matters.

¹²⁵⁹ Although they might not have fully realized the some new agricultural techniques were unrealistic. Thanks to Ian Baird for this point. Moreover, villagers were not necessarily supportive of the elite’s modernizing projects, even in the heart of RLG territory. See “Vientiane Plain Inhibitions to Acceptance of Modern Farming Methods,” William W. Sage Collection On Laos, archived at: <http://hdl.handle.net/2286/R.A.166942>.

¹²⁶⁰ Commissariat General Au Plan, *Code des investissements* (Kingdom of Laos, 1974).

¹²⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. ໗.

¹²⁶² For the post-revolution period, see especially Grant Evans, *Lao Peasants Under Socialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

1970 when the first stone was laid.¹²⁶³ King Savang Vatthana himself was present at the ceremony. The secretary of the Economic Commission for the Far East, U Nyun said of the project that it had “witness[ed] the will and the determination of the government and people of Laos...to not accept any delay to achieve this grand national construction project.”¹²⁶⁴ The dam itself he called “a modern temple” and “a monument realizing their [Lao] hopes and their aspirations.” Souvanna Phouma also spoke on this occasion stating the dam would “ameliorate the conditions of life” for the people in the area supplying them with electricity and water for irrigation and domestic needs. He was confident that “the valley of the Nam Ngum would become a center of economic and social development, which would not lack to contribute to the balance and prosperity off this part of the world.”¹²⁶⁵

After these speeches, King Savang Vatthana, accompanied by Buddhist monks chanting, laid the first stone personally, which was engraved with his signature in gold. In one later update on the construction work of the Nam Ngum dam, it was reported that the people of Vientiane “discussed [it] almost daily” and it was sure to have “many benefits” as the officials had explained many times.¹²⁶⁶ These press reports did not mention environmental concerns or address the resettlement of peoples from the future dam-area.

Indeed, since its creation, the government had always promoted itself using Buddhism. For one, Buddhism remained the official religion of the country, per the constitution. In various modernization projects led by the government monks were called on for blessings. Government

¹²⁶³ This had been a long-awaited moment and one finds press about the dam as early as 1963. *Khaosappada*, February 13, 1967, no. 237.

¹²⁶⁴ “His Majesty the King Presides the ceremony of the laying of the first stone of the Nam Ngum Dam” *National Unity*, no. 10, p. 44.

¹²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶⁶ “News brief,” *Vientiane Society*, August 1971, no. 10, p. 18.

newspapers would print large photographs of monks blessing a new road so that it was “auspicious” (ສີ່ນິມຸງຄຸນ).¹²⁶⁷ The government supported Buddhism in a variety of ways, which obviously reflected well on it. But more deeply, the government held official functions and state ceremonies in a Buddhist milieu because that was the only one it deemed suitable. There were Buddhist state funerals for important persons like Khamphan Panya, the inveterate Issara leader.¹²⁶⁸ The King and Queen attended, as did nobles, along with ministers and other government officials, who all formed a procession down Lan Xang avenue to the That Luang where a cremation ceremony was held. For another example, on October 22, 1965 the government daily *Lao Presse* reported on a government flight which brought the Lao Buddhist Patriarch Dhammayana Maha Thera to Vientiane for a *kathin* ceremony, which was patronized by the people of Vientiane and the Royal Lao Army.¹²⁶⁹ Monks were even photographed “sprinkling with lustral water” recent graduates of state schools for “good luck.”¹²⁷⁰ Even when the Crown Prince Vong Savang toured the country he was blessed by monks wherever he went on official state visits, which were widely publicized in the country’s press.¹²⁷¹

There were more ceremonies like one marking the opening of a dam in Luang Prabang on May 18, 1971. In an article entitled “electricity for prosperity” the elite not only celebrated their achievement with a photo spread, but charted a course for a new modern economy that would lift the country out of poverty to reach long-awaited prosperity.¹²⁷² This would come from the recent dams at in Xedon and one planned for Luang Prabang. More importantly, the next dam would not

¹²⁶⁷ “Donation Ceremony of things built in the Lao southern development area” *Khaosappada*, February 6, 1967, no. 236, p. 2-3.

¹²⁶⁸ See press coverage of the funeral in *Khaosappada*, August 22, 1966, no. 214, p. 2-3.

¹²⁶⁹ *Lao Presse*, October 22, 1965, p. A-1.

¹²⁷⁰ *Khaosappada*, August 22, 1966, no. 214, p. 4.

¹²⁷¹ *Khaosappada*, February 20, 1967, no. 238, p 1-3.

¹²⁷² ພັງໄພຜ້າເພື່ອຄວາມຈະເຣີນ [“Electricity for Prosperity,”] *Vientiane Society*, July 1971, no. 9, p. 17-20.

just be paid for with loans, but with Lao capital reinvested from existing dams. The dams themselves were thus already generating the single most important facet to any successful modernization program: capital. The government could therefore say the latest developments were “an important event in the development of our nation whose actual results were clearly foreseen.”¹²⁷³ These dams were “important resources of the Lao, built by Lao for the progress of the Lao people.” Even today, the Nam Ngum dam is an enduring testament to how the Royal Lao Government laid the foundation for the modern economy of the country.¹²⁷⁴

Modernizing Schools: Fa Ngum Schools

In the education sphere, the creation of Fa Ngum secondary schools was the realization of the expansion of Lao language instruction to secondary schools, which had been a goal of the elite since the neo-colonial years.¹²⁷⁵ It was an important advancement of education in the country during the neutralist years. The expansion of Lao language instruction was seen as both a step to modernize education and a matter of nationalism. Primary schools had been using Lao as the language of instruction since 1950 when France devolved powers to the Royal Lao Government, yet secondary education continued to be taught in French.¹²⁷⁶ The Royal Lao Government lacked sufficient teachers and funds as well as curriculum and teaching materials, while France offered to provide instructors if the language of instruction remained French.¹²⁷⁷ Viliam Phraxayavong has noted that this allowed the French to maintain cultural influence in the country with a

¹²⁷³ Ibid, p. 17.

¹²⁷⁴ The Japanese Overseas Development Agency provided funding for the dam.

¹²⁷⁵ For a critical view of Fa Ngum schools see Bruce Lockhart, “Education in Laos in Historical Perspective,” unpublished manuscript, 2001.

¹²⁷⁶ French was taught as a second language beginning in fourth grade in the primary schools. Due to the low level of French, many students had to take an intensive course in French before starting secondary school.

¹²⁷⁷ Askew et. al., *Vientiane*, p. 144 notes that there were 200 French instructors at the *Lycée Pavie* and eighteen percent of French aid in the early 1960s paid for the salaries of secondary school teachers.

comparatively small investment.¹²⁷⁸ Yet since the CDIN came to power, the Lao government had been seeking to remove French language instruction as a lingering vestige of the country's colonial past. In 1962, the National Assembly, dominated by the Social Democrats, passed the Lao Education Reform Act. Yet this reform plan of "laocisation" was only realized to some degree in the neutralist years, with the support of the US. By some measures the program was never fully realized.¹²⁷⁹

The worst problem of the education system was that Lao pupils trained in the primary schools where Lao was the primary language of instruction often could not develop the necessary ability in French to continue to the secondary schools where the language of instruction was French. This created a huge bottleneck in the education system as very few who completed primary school could continue on in the education system. The Fa Ngum schools were designed to address this fundamental problem in the education system.

The US played an important role in creating Fa Ngum secondary schools. One US report on the program noted that the Lao Ministry of Education requested American assistance to open Lao language secondary schools in 1965 to realize the "laocisation" plan of the 1962 reforms.¹²⁸⁰ The University of Hawai'i was involved in the project to provide technical advice on setting up the new schools.¹²⁸¹ By 1973, there were five Fa Ngum schools in Vientiane, Phone Hong, Savannakhet, Luang Prabang, and Pakse, although only the Vientiane school taught up to grade

¹²⁷⁸ Viliam Phraxayavong, *History of Aid to Laos*.

¹²⁷⁹ Leuam Insixiengmay, ວາຍງານກິຈການຂອງກະຊວງສຶກສາທິການແລະສິລປາກອນຕໍ່ສະພາແຫ່ງຊາດສົກປີ1972 ["Activities Report of the Department of National Education and Fine Arts to the National Assembly, 1972] (n.p., n.d.), p. 56 notes out of 142 secondary school instructors, 120 were French and only 12 were Lao. Nevertheless, efforts were made to teach all courses in Lao.

¹²⁸⁰ "Fact Sheet for Visit by Five Senators" USAID, December 28, 1972, William W. Sage Collection On Laos, archived at: <http://hdl.handle.net/2286/R.A.166287>.

¹²⁸¹ Ibid, p. 5 provides a list of 17 University of Hawai'i staff working on the project at the end of 1972.

12.¹²⁸² The Vientiane school was the largest with eleven buildings, and was being further expanded. There were 611 students and “all staff members are Lao except for a few teachers of foreign languages.”¹²⁸³ The Lao American Association (LAA) magazine *Friendship* celebrated the opening of the very first Fa Ngum school in 1967:

Fa Ngum School, located in Sok Paluang, opened on October 12, 1967. It is the first Lao secondary school which uses our national language as the medium of instruction. The students, representing all of the provinces, were selected on the basis of a national examination, administered by the Ministry of Education.¹²⁸⁴

Fa Ngum schools were a vehicle for nationalism to spread via the educational system. As the report noted “The day begins with the singing of the national anthem.”¹²⁸⁵

In another story appearing in *Friendship*, Souvanna Phouma was present with Ambassador William Sullivan “in the Fa Ngum school’s new auditorium.”¹²⁸⁶ Souvanna spoke on the occasion of the election of a new board of the LAA, saying: “cultural exchanges between the United States and Laos are very important to us...because we are a small country completely lost in the middle of the continent.”¹²⁸⁷ The Fa Ngum school was thus not just a site for the dissemination of Lao nationalism but it was also a nexus for Lao-America power elites. As such some students of the Fa Ngum schools were members of the LAA. Sullivan himself spoke of Americans who speak “not just a little bit of Lao” and was optimistic about US officials rising fluency. He observed “very gratifying, very pleasing steps forward in the association of Americans with the desires and

¹²⁸² Ibid, p. 2. USAID paid for the construction of each school, including equipment and paid for the cost of developing a curriculum. The RLG provided the land and paid for utilities, staff and operating expenses.

¹²⁸³ Ibid, p. 3.

¹²⁸⁴ *Friendship*, 1968, no. 3, p. 30. English in the original.

¹²⁸⁵ Ibid. There was an enduring tendency of the US to promote Lao nationalism in cultural domains while undermining it in others.

¹²⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁸⁷ *Friendship*, 1969, no. 2, p. 25.

ambitions of the Lao people and with the thrust of Lao culture and Lao nationhood,” pointing to the Fa Ngum School as an example.¹²⁸⁸

The creation of these new schools led to the emergence of a new curriculum for secondary education during the neutralist years. In general, the curriculum consisted of core subjects in Lao language, Social Studies, Mathematics, and Science, a foreign language (either French or English), and a practical area including agriculture, business, home economics and industrial arts. There was also weekly physical education and fine arts instruction.¹²⁸⁹

In 1960 the primary school syllabuses were revised for the first time since 1938. Particular attention was given to revising the curriculum for civics, history and geography as well as Lao and French.¹²⁹⁰ The new history and geography courses focused on Laos and its neighbors, albeit still taught in French. In secondary schools, civics and ethics courses were created, taught by Lao instructors.¹²⁹¹ Religious classes “especially teaching about the life of the Buddha” were also added.¹²⁹² The Ministry of Education underwent a major reorganization in 1962. The 1962 reforms of Lao education sought to transform the schools to remake them “in the service of the country’s economic and social development.”¹²⁹³ Part of the reforms made students “responsible for maintaining cleanliness” in the classroom.¹²⁹⁴ Students were required to undertake work “of public utility” in their villages.¹²⁹⁵ But the new primary school syllabuses sought to localize the

¹²⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁸⁹ “Fact Sheet”, p. 4.

¹²⁹⁰ Unesco, *International Yearbook of Education*, vol. XXII (Geneva: International Bureau of Education, 1961), p. 255. These reports were filed by the RLG Ministry of Education.

¹²⁹¹ Unesco, *International Yearbook of Education*, vol. XXVI (Geneva: International Bureau of Education, 1965), p. 196.

¹²⁹² Ibid.

¹²⁹³ Unesco, *International Yearbook of Education*, vol. XXV (Geneva: International Bureau of Education, 1964), p. 222.

¹²⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁹⁵ Ibid.

curriculum: “the aim is to explain to the child the world in which he lives, and to teach him to watch and understand what is going on around him.”¹²⁹⁶ They also sought to instill in pupils “knowledge directed towards action.”¹²⁹⁷ Finally the reforms of 1962 created the first youth movements organized in the schools where “the spirit of civic responsibility is encouraged and developed...the pupils elect their own chairman and take turns at filing various offices.”¹²⁹⁸ By 1967 youth movements were active at all levels and scouting and sports clubs were “widespread.”¹²⁹⁹ However, these reforms proceeded slowly encountering “strong passive resistance” among the teachers.¹³⁰⁰

Phou Rasaphon, the director of secondary education for the government, wrote about the creation of the new curriculum. In the preface of one Fa Ngum school language text he observed:

This textbook is the result of the committee of professors and teachers at the Fa Ngum ‘mixed’ secondary school who researched and compiled various lessons to use for teaching and then revised and combined [them] in order to [make] this textbook.

...It is the first time that secondary education has had a textbook with many subjects in the Lao language, counting as one step forward in our Lao education.¹³⁰¹

Phou brought attention to the new tasks taken up by Lao educators in this effort. He also could boast about the Lao language curriculum. In another text he added:

This result shows the concern of professors and teachers for the improvement and progress of the tools of instruction to continuously make them better.

...even though this text book is used temporarily anyway I believe firmly that it will be one foundation and basis leading to a correction and improvement, to be an education standard [which is] sound and permanent, as well as preserved in the history of the tools of instruction and education of the Lao.

¹²⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 223.

¹²⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁹⁸ Unesco, *International Yearbook of Education*, vol. XXVI, p. 197.

¹²⁹⁹ Unesco, *International Yearbook of Education*, vol. XXIX (Geneva: International Bureau of Education, 1968), p. 256.

¹³⁰⁰ Unesco, *International Yearbook of Education*, vol. XXVII (Geneva: International Bureau of Education, 1966), p. 214.

¹³⁰¹ Phou Rasaphon, ອໍາາຖຸແລລງ [“Announcement”] in Sibouey Chumpadit, ພາສາລາວ ຊັ້ນມັທຢົມປີທີ່ 1 [“Lao language: secondary school year one”] (Vientiane: Government Printing house, 1969), p. i.

Therefore, it really counts as one step forward in the plan that our Kingdom of Laos will have textbooks in the Lao language in all subjects at every level.¹³⁰²

The new curriculum and textbooks being made for the Fa Ngum schools were a major advance for Lao pedagogy.

Other Fa Ngum school texts established new subjects as a subject of study in their own right, such as Lao literature. The preparation of literature texts in the Lao language was itself a sign of the progress of the program to institute Lao as the language of instruction. As one who had already corrected and composed many works of literature and history, Sila Viravong was especially helpful in this regard. Because of its importance, the Ministry of Education incorporated literature into the national curriculum, but there were many texts not yet “investigated and purified.”¹³⁰³ This was necessary to “establish Lao language as the language of instruction in every level of the national education.”¹³⁰⁴ These developments were linked to advancing Lao nationalism in the schools: “Literature is a virtuous historical art that is priceless for a nation because it is a symbol of the national essence itself. In view of that, it is good fortune for the Lao nation, which is a small nation, but still has many diverse books of literature. This is a symbol of the prosperity of the nation since ancient times. Moreover this is the priceless heritage for the future of the nation.”¹³⁰⁵ Phou Rasaphon concluded that these works were “beneficial for education generally because besides being beneficial to education in the class room these works give knowledge and

¹³⁰² Phou Rasaphon, ຄຳຖາວອນ [“Announcement”] in Kidaeng Phonekasuemsouk ພາສາລາວ(ວັນນະຄະດີ)ສຳລັບ ຊັ້ນມັທອົມປີທີ 3 [“Lao language (literature): for secondary school year three”] (Vientiane: government printing house, 1970)

¹³⁰³ Phou Rasaphon, ຄຳນຳ [“Forward”] in Sila Viravong, ນິທານສຸພາສິດເໝາະສົມສມັຍ [“folk tales and proverbs suitable to the age”] (Vientiane: government publishing house, 1973), p. i.

¹³⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁰⁵ Ibid.

beauty of Lao society and culture. This will cause the Lao to have faith in the virtuous historical arts of the Lao and patriotism also... which shows the oneness of our nation.”¹³⁰⁶

Yet even as the RLG worked to make Lao the language of instruction in the secondary schools, non-Lao ethnic minorities were chaffing under cultural assimilation policies which required the language of instruction be Lao. Tensions boiled over in May 1972 when it was announced the government had approved the printing of 20,000 copies of a Hmong language textbook, but only because the Hmong language was rendered into Lao script.¹³⁰⁷ Yet the president of the *Comité Littéraire Hmong* wrote a letter of protest against the RLG’s efforts to replace Lao script for the romanized one used by many Hmong already. The government wanted Hmong students to learn to read the Lao script, thereby continuing its cultural assimilation policy, which it pursued to the end. In its dissent the Hmong literature committee argued that the roman script had been in use since 1953 and was already well known among educated Hmong. Moreover, the committee, which was created in 1961, complained that the government had not consulted with it prior to changing its policy, saying the latest language book “is prepared and put into print without AGREEMENT of the 3000 Hmong who still use the script in Roman letters! Of course, we do not agree to use it!”¹³⁰⁸ One can observe then that at the very moment the Lao sought to break away from French educational system, the door was opened for non-ethnic Lao minorities like the Hmong to make the same claim to break away from Lao cultural dominance.

More than any other period in Royal Lao Government history, the quest for modernity in the neutralist years was compromised. The war had devoured and destroyed all the meager

¹³⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁰⁷ For an excerpt of the government’s notice and the Hmong letter of protest as they appeared in *Vientiane News*, see Jacques Lemoine, “Les écritures du hmong” *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, 1972, no. 7-8, p. 162.

¹³⁰⁸ Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

resources of the country, leaving a devastating toll from which even an advanced country would struggle to recover. RLG budget deficits increased after 1968 when the country's gold market was disrupted.¹³⁰⁹ The government outlawed opium, ending another important revenue source.¹³¹⁰ As a result the currency was devalued in 1971, which was followed by inflation, increasing the government's dependence on aid. The collapse of the economy amid spiraling inflation was one of the major impetus to the revolution which swept away the government in 1975. The US reduction of its commitments in Southeast Asia hit the country particularly hard as it remained enormously dependent on foreign aid, the majority of which contributed by the US.¹³¹¹ Even before this crisis, one finds the elite had discussed a variety of problems facing society concerning health care and education with stories such running in the press such as "Our doctors, are they sufficient?" and "Why do parents send their kids to private schools?"¹³¹² Yet there were also more ominous discussions about the rise of beggars in Vientiane.¹³¹³

Decline of RLG Modernity

The greatest obstacle to modernizing the country remained the Second Indochina War. There were, in fact, stories in the news every day about not just the latest campaign or offensive, but the bombing as well.¹³¹⁴ Refugees and orphans were two symptoms of the grave toll the war

¹³⁰⁹ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 165-6.

¹³¹⁰ Before 1964 the exchange rate for kip to dollars was 80 to 1, but after it was devalued in that year it was 240 to 1 US dollars. Before 1958 the exchange rate was even higher at 35 kip to 1 US dollars. On the government's move to outlaw opium see "Anti-narcotics law," William W. Sage Collection On Laos, archived at: <http://hdl.handle.net/2286/R.A.173798>. Law no. 71/5 was promulgated as Royal Ordinance no. 394 on September 23, 1971. The government banned the "production, processing, movement, sale, purchase and use of opium and opium derivatives." There were various exceptions including for traditional cultivators and for strictly medical purposes. Those caught illegally producing or selling it could be punished from five to twenty years hard-labor.

¹³¹¹ Viliam, *History of Aid to Laos*.

¹³¹² *Vientiane Society*, October 1971, no. 12, p. 9. Ibid, January 1972, no. 14, p. 20.

¹³¹³ *Vientiane Society*, October 1971, no. 12, p. 14.

¹³¹⁴ See newspapers such as *Sieng Seri*, *Lao Lan Xang*, *Lao Presse*, or *Xat Lao*.

was exacting on the country in the neutralist years.¹³¹⁵ The government was clearly overwhelmed by the scale of the problem, as many as seven hundred thousand refugees arrived in government areas, roughly one-quarter of the country's population.¹³¹⁶ US aid was vital to address the problem. Yet the elite had also talked of relocating people out of the bombing zones. Fred Branfman makes vague references to such an effort in which some 30,000 refugees were "brought from the north."¹³¹⁷

Besides appealing for financial aid, the elite sought to address the crisis of war refugees and orphans created by the war to the extent possible with the limited means at hand. Sisouk Na Champassak made visits to the refugee camps seeking to reassure the afflicted that help was on the way.¹³¹⁸ The elite sought to lead morally on the issue by organizing charity events. By these means, they were able to establish an orphanage in Vientiane. The press reports on the project referred to the refugees as "people who migrate in the Kingdom of Lao" and estimated they numbered about 220,000 people.¹³¹⁹ While the report said these people had "fled their homes to request to depend on the government," it did not specify what they fled, although that was not necessary as many papers reported daily on the war.

The report also noted that "fighting for many years" had created an additional problem, which was a large increase in orphans in the country. The Rotary Club of Vientiane helped the Ministry of Social Welfare to build an orphanage. In other subsequent reports in the Lao-American

¹³¹⁵ See further Martin Barber, "Migrants and Modernisation – A Study of Change in Lao Society" (Ph.D. diss., University of Hull, 1979), p. 369-385.

¹³¹⁶ Benson, "Indochina War Refugee Movements in Laos," p. 26, 47.

¹³¹⁷ Fred Branfman, *Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life under an Air War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), p. 10. On the conditions of the refugees see further T. Hunter Wilson, "An IVS Volunteer Writes from Laos," in (eds.) Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 373.

¹³¹⁸ *Khaosappada*, June 20, 1966, no. 205, p. 2-3.

¹³¹⁹ "Orphanage at That Khao, Vientiane" *Khaosappada*, August 22, 1966, no. 214, p. 1.

journal *Friendship* it was noted that “the Rotary Club of Vientiane presented the orphanage with a check for 1,000,000 kip.”¹³²⁰ The accompanying photos also highlighted USAID head Joseph Mendenhall who “presented gifts to the Orthopedic Center.”¹³²¹ Photos included Lao officials examining wooden legs, and visiting patients in wheelchairs and on crutches, some being rehabilitated, learning to walk again.¹³²² The elite did what they could to recognize the suffering of the victims of war, but such efforts could not disguise the fact that the war had destroyed the government’s plans for the country. The war was the end of the Royal Lao Government’s quest for modernity.

Return of Cosmopolitanism

The return of cosmopolitanism can be discerned in bilingual Lao-French dictionaries, which began to appear in the neutralist years. Of course, such dictionaries already existed, but in the neutralist years, the first such works written by Lao elite intellectuals appeared. Published in 1969, Pierre Nginn’s bilingual dictionary was itself a correction of an earlier Literature Committee dictionary of 1962. Before Nginn’s efforts were completed there was an earlier bilingual dictionary by Lt. Colonel Phong Keo which appeared in 1964. For the first time, the intellectual elite was demonstrating its mastery over the French language, and not vice-versa. While one may point to the old loyalist’s enduring cultural affinity and fascination with France, the effort to create a Lao-French dictionary was also, to a degree, an act of textually subordinating the former master.

¹³²⁰ “Photo Section” *Friendship*, 1967, no. 3, p. 18.

¹³²¹ *Ibid.*

¹³²² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

The first French-Lao dictionary was written by Lt. Colonel Pheng Keo and a certain Commandant Gailliez, published by the French military mission in 1964.¹³²³ The cover featured the newly constructed Royalist monument to war veterans, the *Anousavaly*, which was modeled on the French Arc de Triomphe (although victory arches had precolonial roots in Laos). The dictionary was organized with the French speaker in mind, intended primarily for use by French military personnel serving in the country. The authors said in the forward that it was produced as a “fruit of French-Lao collaboration.”¹³²⁴ But it was not really a work of scholarship, which the authors admitted as much themselves. They borrowed from an earlier work by Commandant Meyer, and said the result was “incomplete”, “imperfect” and should only be seen as a “tool.”¹³²⁵ It was more crude than refined, even leaving space for one to make their own corrections on blank pages.

Pierre Somchine Nginn’s roughly 13,000-word French-Lao dictionary was a markedly different work. There was an earlier French-Lao dictionary that was published in December 1962 by the Literature Committee at the same time as Sila’s monolingual dictionary was in its second printing, but that it was riddled with errors and the print run was limited.¹³²⁶ Nginn set out to correct the dictionary but ended up producing his own original work. The result was one of true erudition, on par with Sila’s own Lao dictionary, but still oriented differently. Rather than preserve and defend the Lao language from the foreign tide as Sila’s sought to do, Nginn’s dictionary strove to embrace foreign contacts, holding to the properly cosmopolitan ideal of the old loyalists:

¹³²³ Pheng Keo and Gailliez, *Lexique Franco-Lao* (n.p., Mission Militaire Française d’instruction pres le gouvernement royal Lao, 1964).

¹³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. i.

¹³²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³²⁶ Somchine P. Nginn, *Dictionnaire française -lao par Somchine P. Nginn* (Bangkok: Rung Ruang Ratna, 1969). See also Pierre-Marie Gagneux, “P.S. Nginn: Dictionnaire français-lao,” *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extreme-Orient*. 57, 1970, which complains about the poor quality of the Literature Committee’s first French-Lao dictionary of 1962, intimating it was then under Sila’s “influence” p. 237.

Your humble servant thus did compile and publish a new dictionary which includes idiomatic examples and has a sufficient amount of words for the person who wants to study the Lao or French languages, in order to research higher vocabulary [and] in order to be able to hold a conversation and translate sentences well.¹³²⁷

Nginn's dictionary was intended not just for the foreigner who wanted access to the Lao, but also for the Lao who wanted access to a foreign language themselves. It thus held to the cosmopolitan ideal, for "persons interested in two languages."¹³²⁸ His work was a serious investigation of Lao and French languages. It sought equivalences yet took in all the nuance and complexity of both languages. His work was all the more astounding given that he did it in his spare time, when he was not attending his duties as the head of the Literature Committee, or as a teacher at various colleges and institutes around Vientiane. Leuam Insixiengmay, then Education Minister, applauded Nginn for his incredible effort, but no support from the state was provided for Nginn's work. The Ministry of Education did publish it, but only after a third printing of Sila's dictionary. The government nevertheless determined to use Nginn's dictionary for all official purposes.

In the neutralist years, the Literature Committee continued its work of translating French and English vocabulary. While the objective remained to defend the Lao language in the face of the growing onslaught of foreign words, nonetheless the influence of foreign terminology only grew. For that reason, several works focused on "technical terms" (ສັບເຕັກນິກ). Thus, in a forward to a 1966 bilingual dictionary, Leuam Insixiengmay, Minister of Education, Arts, Youth and Sports, needed to explain that the objective of publishing a French-Lao dictionary of technical terms was the realization of article six of the RLG constitution which stated that "Lao language is the official language."¹³²⁹ Much of the terminology in this work was concerned with the names of

¹³²⁷ Somchine, *Dictionnaire française-lao*, p. iii.

¹³²⁸ *Ibid*, p. iii.

¹³²⁹ Literature Committee, *Appellation des Services Administratifs et du Personnel-Terms adoptés par le Comité-littéraire* (Vientiane: Editions du Comité littéraire, Royal Lao Government, 1966), p. i. The printer is listed as Imp. Vientiane-Phanith.

various offices and positions in the government, the first Western-style Lao government in history. An accurate and consistent fixing of each term was essential to ensure government work was carried out efficiently, respecting the hierarchy. The correct terminology was debated and approved in a meeting held by the Literature Committee. Although Leuam did not offer insight into that process, he did give his endorsement by saying it was “correct in all respects.”¹³³⁰ At this time, the Literature Committee enjoyed the support of the Ministry of Education, which was not always the case in earlier years.

Somchine Nginn, who had a prominent role in the preparation of the 1966 technical dictionary, explained more about the process of translation.¹³³¹ He visited each department and ministry to find what terms were then in use before the committee finalized and fixed the proper terms. From Somchine’s account it is clear that the Literature Committee still had the mandate to standardize the language and French translations thereof.¹³³² As with the neo-colonial years, the Literature Committee seemed to deprioritize matters concerning French to focus its limited time and resources on Lao monolingual issues – yet the work went on. Somchine was left to take charge of issues concerning French language issues largely by himself. Another technical dictionary appeared in 1972 which was similar in form except that it now included English translations for technical terms.¹³³³ Yet even then Somchine remained dissatisfied with the work complaining “the

¹³³⁰ Ibid.

¹³³¹ Ibid, p. ii.

¹³³² Somchine referred to some departments that did not comply with his request for word-lists. He also found that other committee members, who were all government officials, had no time to attend meetings, busy with other government duties. Thus, Somchine himself took charge and compiled what words were already settled and approved, and looking at others saw that they had already been addressed in previous work of the committee. But he does admit that there were some remaining words he was left to translate on his own.

¹³³³ *Royal Lao Academy, ປະມວນຄຳເຕັກນິກ* (1972)

translations still have many mistakes; therefore, I am unable to consider the translation as absolutely correct, only experimental...¹³³⁴

On February 23, 1970, the Literature Committee was transformed into the Royal Lao Academy (ຮາຊບັນທິດສະພາລາວ) by royal order of Savang Vatthana. This new institute would continue the dual programs of “laocisation” and standardization of the language.¹³³⁵ As its first president, Nginn wrote about the new cultural institution in the *Bulletin des amis du Royaume Lao*.¹³³⁶ He began by taking stock of the achievements of the now defunct Literature Committee, pointing to its journal *Literature*, its grammars which were used in the schools, Sila’s Lao dictionary, his French-Lao dictionary, and the technical dictionaries.¹³³⁷ He recalled the many classical works of Lao literature that the Literature Committee published in a modern form bringing them into the modern age.¹³³⁸ Nginn wrote of his own personal sacrifices for the Literature Committee as he worked on a voluntary basis while translating documents for government ministries. According to Nginn, the idea of the Royal Lao Academy was to “elevate” the work of the Literature Committee. He wrote there was “an unanimous wish...expressed by the Literature Committee in the course of its meetings” for the creation of the Royal Lao Academy “to encourage more the efforts expended and recorded.”¹³³⁹ He added the academy was created “to promote and to defend the national character of the arts and letters.”¹³⁴⁰ Nginn also noted that the new institution “is an organization sovereign in artistic, literary, and linguistic matters” suggesting the new

¹³³⁴ Ibid, p. 1. Forward by Somchine Nginn

¹³³⁵ Leuam Insixiengmay, *Activities Report*, p. 66.

¹³³⁶ Somchine Nginn, “L’Académie Royale Lao” *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, 1971, April-May-June, no. 4-5, p. 1-4.

¹³³⁷ Ibid, p. 2.

¹³³⁸ Ibid, p. 3.

¹³³⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁴⁰ Ibid.

institution's academic freedom was bolstered.¹³⁴¹ It also would be able to accept “donations and legacies” which would further increase its independence from the government.¹³⁴² Nginn summarized what the institution was all about, saying:

This new institution will reunite men of good culture, of good spirit, of good reputation, men of letters, thinkers, scientists..., to encourage them, to facilitate their studies, to point at them a ray of glory in order to perpetuate ancestral traditions which had always honored the work of the mind.¹³⁴³

The new organization devoted to the elite of the country that now took on a more regal, less bureaucratic mien. It was oriented to the elders of society and thus was conservative, seeking to preserve Lao culture. It was also a nationalist entity, and its members' service to it “manifest their good will to work for the good of the country.”¹³⁴⁴ It was an important new organization for the intellectual culture of the country in the neutralist years.

In a forward to a 1972 technical dictionary, Soulang Desavongsa, secretary of the Royal Lao Academy, explained more about its early years.¹³⁴⁵ He noted that foreign experts helped to establish the new institution, suggesting it was not merely a matter of changing the stationary and continuing on with business as usual. However, some of the old problems that plagued the Literature Committee remained in the new academy, such as the slow progress of work due to the fact that all its members were still government officials, busy with other matters and hampered by the lack of even basic supplies like paper and ink. The Royal Lao Academy had only a limited budget from the Ministry of Education. Therefore, it requested aid from the Asia Foundation, which, in Soulang's words, then joined the Royal Lao Academy's efforts in the linguistics field in the period of August to December 1972, supporting both the translation of technical terms and the

¹³⁴¹ Ibid, p. 4.

¹³⁴² Ibid.

¹³⁴³ Ibid.

¹³⁴⁴ “News of the last hour” *ibid*, unpaginated p. ii.

¹³⁴⁵ Soulang Desavong, ສຳລັບເລື່ອງ [“Forward”] in Royal Lao Academy, ປະມວນສຳເລັດຕັກນິກ [“Technical dictionary”] (n.p., 1972), p. 2-3.

study of the language itself. It supplied the Royal Lao Academy with Lao and French typewriters, paper, ink, and a publishing subvention. At this point, the Lao elite were bringing back foreigner “experts” into their cultural works after neo-colonial years where the elite undertook cultural work more on their own with less foreign involvement.

The National Library was founded in 1968 by the Royal Lao Government as a new educational institution. It was active in its first years as it reissued major works and managed to publish thirty works in total.¹³⁴⁶ It undertook the reissuing of several important works that had gone out of print, such as excellent studies by Khamman Vongkotrattana. In contrast to the symbol of the Literature Committee showing the tradition-modernity dichotomy (the shining candle that guided the people was a favor symbol of the elite), the National Library’s own seal consisted solely of a stack of modern books with a shining candle. The library’s work was profoundly modernist as it claimed it had a “duty to centralize, amass and preserve various books and documents, to be a heritage for all our future Lao generations.”¹³⁴⁷ The National Library preserved palm-leaf manuscripts in a designated reading room.¹³⁴⁸ The library also was a place to disseminate various forms of knowledge, a place of study and learning (“training in knowledge”), a “repository” (ຄັງ).¹³⁴⁹ It sought to reach all segments of society, every class and at every age, with reading rooms for children and adults. Thus, it followed a democratic model of education inherent to the library as a modern public institution.

¹³⁴⁶ Ministry of Education, ສັງເຂບເຮືອງໜັງສືລາວທີ່ພິມອອກ [“Summary of Lao language publications”] (Vientiane: National Library, 1972).

¹³⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 1.

¹³⁴⁸ Leuam Insixiengmay, *Activities Report*, p. 64. See further Peter Koret, “Lao Perceptions of Traditional Literature: Both Past and Present,” in *New Laos: New Challenges*, Jacqueline Butler-Diaz (ed.) (Tempe: Arizona State University, 1998).

¹³⁴⁹ Ministry of Education, ສັງເຂບເຮືອງໜັງສືລາວທີ່ພິມອອກ [“Summary of Lao language publications”] (Vientiane: National Library, 1972), p. 1.

By its role in preserving knowledge for future generations, the National Library of Laos also functioned as the archive of the RLG. There had never been either a Western library or archive in the country, but the RLG introduced them both, housed under one roof in the institution of the National Library. But the RLG elite saw an even greater role for the library. This was its role in cultural preservation, which they claimed would “build the stability and unity of society into the future.”¹³⁵⁰ Yet as modern an institution as it was, the RLG elite claimed that the first true library in the country was in fact built by Chao Anou (r. 1804-1828), locating the library’s origin in the age of kings nearly a century before the arrival of the French, and giving it a firmly indigenous source.¹³⁵¹ They cited as precedent the *ho tai* (ຫໍໄຕ) built by Chao Anou, which stored palm leaf manuscripts that were amassed by him at Vat Sisaket and Vat Phakaeo. The French period was totally elided in this discussion of the origins of the library even though the building itself dated to the colonial era.

There was a high level of academic activity in the period. For the first time, conferences on language and history were held bringing together scholars from across the country. There were many who made sophisticated analyses of their society while completing doctoral theses in France. There was even an international conference bringing together foreign and Lao academics.¹³⁵² Finally, there was also a revival of the old French-Lao journal, now called *Bulletin des amis du Royaume Lao*. While the new journal clearly referred to its predecessor of the 1930s, its title differed in one respect: the addition of *Royaume* reflected the new sovereignty Lao enjoyed since independence from France. Its first issue was published in April 1970 and the editor was none

¹³⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹³⁵¹ Ibid, p. 2.

¹³⁵² Martin Barber and Amphay Doré (ed.), *Colloque des chercheurs en sciences Humaines à Luang Prabang, Avril 1973 et Avril 1974* (Vientiane: Pakpasack Press, 1974). Contributions were in Lao, French and English.

other than P.S. Nginn, then President of the Lao Academy. It featured reprints of major cultural studies by the Lao elite (e.g. Souvanna on the restoration of Ho Pha Kaeo), and also included new works in the same vein on epigraphy, poetry, history, law, music, literature, Buddhism, and ethnography. Whereas Lao scholars had only a marginal role in the French-run journal of the 1930s now they clearly dominated the new journal, not least because the editor and staff were Lao. Yet the active involvement of the Lao elite in a French-language scholarly journal ensured French language continued to be important to Lao academics.

The Minister of Education, Leuam Insixiengmay wrote a forward to the first issue of the revived journal. In his comment he suggested the modernist, positivist view of Lao culture still reigned among the elite. Lao culture was to them fully knowable:

The bulletin of friends of the Kingdom of Lao represents, in effect a great sum of work of the compilation of research, leading toward an elevated goal: the one to make known the Lao people across its history, its civilization, its culture, its means and customs, its language and its literature, in a word all that could help one to know its true personality and its true soul.¹³⁵³

By using modern scholarship and bringing an array of specialist disciplines to bear on it, the Lao elite could unlock its secrets. But Leuam also spoke of extending its reach, its audience, and thereby its influence. He went on to speak of the “bygone” “grandeurs” of the Lao kingdom since lost to the vicissitudes of history and “effacing it almost totally.”¹³⁵⁴ The goal of the journal as Leuam saw it then was “to rekindle the witnesses of the past and to divulge, relying on authentic documents, the knowledge on the Lao kingdom and Lao people, in order that they could be more known and better understood.”¹³⁵⁵ The fact that the journal was in French indicates that its audience was to an extent international, Western and not just the Francophone Lao elite alone. The journal

¹³⁵³ Leuam Insixiengmay, “Préface,” *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, 1971, April-May-June, no. 4-5, unpaginated p. i.

¹³⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵⁵ Ibid.

also included works of important French scholarship on the country, promoting Western works among the elite. Thus, the nature of the journal was inherently intercultural and even the cosmopolitan outlook the old loyalists represented was returning after the exclusionist hyper-nationalist view that dominated the neo-colonial years. But by the beginning of 1973 the journal ran into trouble, telling readers that “it is not for lack of material that we had been obliged to delay the appearance of the Bulletin, but inextricable difficulties of publishing and finances.”¹³⁵⁶

Debating the Issara, French Legacies

There was a growing nostalgia for the early years of the Royal Lao Government. It was common-place in the late 1960s and early 1970s to refer to a period of “over twenty years” since the Royal Lao Government was founded. As the years passed historical works turned from a focus on ancient kings to more contemporary events. The elite began to reflect on the Royal Lao Government, writing histories of its early years, and biographies of prominent and lesser known government figures. The elite magazine *National Union* featured biographies in each issue focusing on lesser known but long serving government officials (ສັດບຸຣຸຕ ຮາຊການບົກຄອງ) and other second grade officials (ຂ້າຮາຊການຊັ້ນໂທ).¹³⁵⁷ The third edition of Oukham’s popular *Origins of the Lao* was extended to address the French colonial period and briefly addressed the Issara and loyalists.¹³⁵⁸ Furthermore he included appendices on the various aspects of the Royal Lao Government since 1945, listing all cabinets since 1945 beginning starting with the Issara before addressing the first loyalist government.¹³⁵⁹ This was not a seamless transition as he

¹³⁵⁶ “Préface,” *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, 1973, January-February-March, no. 9, p. i.

¹³⁵⁷ *National Unity*.

¹³⁵⁸ For constitutional revisions see Oukham, *Origins of the Lao*, p. 357-360.

¹³⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 293-323.

prefaced the Issara government by saying it began when Laos “ruled itself as an independent nation having a constitution to govern the nation.”¹³⁶⁰ As for the loyalist governments that followed the Issara Oukham addressed them as follows: “The French returned to rule Lao again, the Lao Issara emigrated to Thailand, [and] within the nation was established a temporary government to govern the nation according to democracy with Prince Souvannarath as prime minister...”¹³⁶¹ With this comment Oukham managed to fashion a very subtle synthesis of recent history portraying the Issara and the loyalists as both working for the good of the country, each in their own way, one within the country, the other from outside of it.

Oukham also listed all revisions to constitution before reprinting the full document which to his mind was the realization of modern political values for the Lao people as much as it was the embodiment of the modern Lao state.¹³⁶² Oukham listed every deputy from every province for every session of the national assembly since 1947 up to the fifth session of the National Assembly (1965-1967).¹³⁶³ He also listed every Privy Council, the composition of which changed for each new session of the National Assembly.¹³⁶⁴ Oukham included detailed information about the early Royal Lao Government that would have been otherwise lost. More broadly, he was historicizing the early years of the RLG, transforming what had been contemporary order of the day into recorded history in its most basic form.

There was also a renewed interest in the legacy of the Issara.¹³⁶⁵ Sila concluded in his Fa Ngum school history text, the first Lao language secondary school history book published in 1973,

¹³⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 293.

¹³⁶¹ Ibid, p. 294.

¹³⁶² Ibid, p. 361-362.

¹³⁶³ Ibid, p. 324-341.

¹³⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 342-347.

¹³⁶⁵ A relative of Katay, Issara Sasorith was named to commemorate the movement.

with the observation that the Issara had realized the ends of modern Lao history by securing the country's independence and unity:

Then [after August 1945] the French will return [to Laos], to have power to govern Lao again as before. At that time there was a group of courageous Lao patriots, Prince Phetsarath the leader, truly [they] together established an independent Lao government on October 12 and did declare the unity of Lao territory on the left bank of the Mekong that France had ruled as two regions to make them as one. But independence and unity that the Lao independence committee declared, was not long established, only until 24 April 1946; [then] the French army invaded and seized Vientiane. The Lao independence committee really broke and fled to Thailand and made struggle opposing French rule all over [the country] until 1947 when the French did agree to make a treaty to give to Lao independence within the French Union. Therefore, until 1949 the Lao independence government was established in Bangkok. [It] really did declare itself finished and returned to join with the Lao government that France had given since 1947 and established an independent country that had a government of self-rule since July 19, 1949...¹³⁶⁶

While this history of the Issara remained in a condensed form, it nonetheless vindicated the Issara version of history as the only correct and legitimate one. The Issara's return in 1949 restored independent rule to the country. Moreover, the loyalist "Kingdom of Laos" founded in 1947 by the French was created under pressure from the Issara, but nonetheless was not true self-rule – only a screen behind which French power continued to influence events.

Students in the Fa Ngum schools learned that it was only the Issara that finally ended the long history of foreign domination under the Thai and French: "In 1949 the French really did consent to give the areas of Laos under its control independence, rights and freedoms in united self-rule."¹³⁶⁷ Thus, the Issara were given pride of place in Sila's history, as the only antidote to the "lost independence" period, who restored "unity and independence" to the country by setting it on the right path after centuries of foreign domination. Sila thus endorsed the Issara's own self-perception of itself as the movement for national salvation, to save the country. Sila's text is included with a picture of Sisavang Vong signing the General Conventions of July 19, 1949. But

¹³⁶⁶ Sila Viravong, ຜົງສາວະດານຊາດລາວ ["History of the Lao Nation"] (Vientiane: Department of Secondary Education, Ministry of Education, 1973), p. 178.

¹³⁶⁷ Ibid.

Sila does not assign him a role in the liberation. The king was merely formalizing what the Issara had already achieved. Finally in the last days of the RLG Sila published a detailed account of the Issara in 1975.¹³⁶⁸

What were the elite really saying by validating the struggle of the Issara against the French in the neutralist years? In short, they felt that the Issara's form of revolution was acceptable in contrast to that of the Pathet Lao. Unlike the Pathet Lao, the Issara never lost control of the movement to a foreign power (although they were close to Pridi Banomyong and the Seri Thai). The Issara may have taken refuge in Thailand, and even been influenced by the Thai in certain ways, but they never ceded control of the movement to anyone. The Issara never became directly or indirectly a Thai movement as the Pathet Lao had in their relations with the North Vietnamese and Chinese. Moreover, as radical as the Issara were, they nonetheless had moderate elements that saved them from unleashing destructive forces that would only harm the overall society. They did not seek to overthrow the social order or wreck the country in wanton destruction. They did not even want to destroy Lao culture by importing a foreign ideology; although the loyalists may have seen the Issara's call for democracy in this light to some degree in the late 1940s. To the RLG elite then, their fascination with the Issara legacy was because in hindsight they could see it was relatively free from foreign control and was able to moderate its more radical aspects. In this regard, celebration of the Issara was at least an implicit condemnation of the Pathet Lao.

But why did the RLG elite only celebrate the Issara so late? Its delayed appearance was due partly to a manifest desire to address sensitive contemporary history only in the secondary school level curriculum, which itself was delayed in the struggle to win control of secondary

¹³⁶⁸ Sila Viravong, ບັດສາດວັນທີ12ຕຸລາ1945 ["October 12, 1945"] (Vientiane: 1975).

education from France. On the other hand, recent events in which active participants were still alive, with reputations that could be harmed, were sensitive. Yet its delay was also due to the presence of many former loyalists in government who were not so quick to hail the Issara as liberators.

This celebration of the Issara legacy contrasts with other contemporary works. Phoui Sananikone, an old loyalist who sided with the CDIN for a time, wrote a memoir of his life providing a fascinating account that also pointed to a number of positive aspects about colonialism.¹³⁶⁹ For the neutralist years, his was an almost entirely unique voice, yet before Sila's history textbook was published in 1973, the Ministry of Education republished a colonial-era history textbook that was written to inculcate a pro-French attitude by dedicating almost half the text to a portrayal of the French as the saviors of the Lao from Thai domination.¹³⁷⁰ In its forward, the Ministry of Education apologized by noting the new curriculum was not ready and no new history textbooks were available. Yet it nonetheless insisted that the colonial era text was “appropriate to inform students of the origins of the Lao.”¹³⁷¹ The biased account was not problematic enough to prevent the textbook's use until the new curriculum was ready.

The French legacy continued to be debated among the elite. Not all of the Lao elite held such a positive view of the French. In fact, Khamchan Pradith, who was a close supporter of

¹³⁶⁹ Phoui Sananikone, ບັນທຶກຄວາມຈິຈໍາຂອງພຍາຫົວຂອງ(ຜຸຍຸນະນິກອນ)ຫລັ້ມ1 [“Memoirs of Phaya Huakhong (Phoui Sananikone), volume one”] (n.p., 1967).

¹³⁷⁰ Souphan Balangsa De La Brousse, ບັດສາດພາກ2ພົງສາວະດານລາວຊັ້ນປະຖົມປີທີ4-5-6 [“History part two: Chronicle of the Lao, primary level grades 4-5-6”] (Bangkok: 1972 [1934]), p. 53-80. For evidence of the pro-French bias of the text see especially p. 66 which claims that the French took over Laos in 1893 “with the approval of the [Lao] people.” The section dealing with the arrival of the French is entitled “France comes to help Laos.” Later revolts against the French are portrayed as anomalies, implying everyone was happy under French rule. The text then focused on the fruits of modernity the French brought to the country including modern medicine and education. There is a disturbing similarity in the text between the French removing disease and rebels. King Sakkalin helped the country by signing treaties with the French and so on...

¹³⁷¹ Ibid, “forward” by scientific unit (ກອງວິທຍາການ) of the Ministry of Education.

Souvanna Phouma wrote a history that closely followed the narrative of Khamman Vongkottrattana's own history.¹³⁷² Yet when Khamchan addressed the French colonization of the country in 1893 he questioned the French “conquest of heart” myth again, which revived the old Issara controversy concerning the legacy of Auguste Pavie, who by then had become a symbol of French colonization:

In the year 1885, in the era that Tonkin and Annam were French colonies already, then France was interested with the Lao country. Therefore, Mr. Auguste Pavie thus came to be deputy counsel at Luang Prabang. In the year 1887 out of desire to make Laichau, Dienbienphu, Sonla...to be possessions of Tonkin, *France provoked and incited lord Dèovantri* to lead the Tai-Lai together with 600 bandits to come attack Luang Prabang; because the land of Sipsong Chutai was a dependent of Luang Prabang.

Therefore, the French really sent a negotiation party to Tonkin in order to discuss with the Tai-lai, which was composed of General Pennequin, deputy Cupet and Nicolon, Mr. Garanger, Vacle and Dr. Macey. Therefore, the discussions achieved a result already, [and] France gave all the lands of Sipsong Chutai to the black river to Tonkin entirely in the year 1888. It is because [the French] were not able to receive permission from Chao Ounkham at all in the year 1889 the King was forced off the throne by raising Chao Khamsouk to succeed [him] with the reign title Prachao Sakkarin. Since then, the [former] King [Ounkham] was very ill and died in 1895 after the Lao lands of the left bank of the Mekong became a possession of France [for] only two years.¹³⁷³

While Khamchan's account of the “conquest of hearts” myth closely paralleled the earlier Issara account, it was a novel interpretation in some important ways. Most accounts say that Ounkham was forced off the throne by the Thai immediately after Luang Prabang was sacked, suggesting that this was because he let the city be sacked by the Ho. Yet Khamchan suggested the French were responsible for Ounkham's removal from the throne and that they wanted him out of power because he was resisting their takeover of neighboring Sipsongchutai. In Khamchan's account even Ounkham's illness and eventual death seemed to be caused by the French. With his death, Ounkham seemed unable to tolerate living in a French colony. Like the Issara, Khamchan wrote of Auguste Pavie not as saving the Lao who had requested French protection, but instead as

¹³⁷² Khamman himself wrote about the Ho sacking of Luang Prabang in a study of Phongsali province, including what may have been primary sources from the Luang Prabang archives.

¹³⁷³ Khamchan Pradith, ປະຫວັດສາດການທູດລາວ [“History of Lao diplomacy”] (1971), p. 19-20. Emphasis added.

a scheming colonist who engineered the French takeover of the country by inciting the destruction of the most powerful remaining independent Muang in the country, Luang Prabang. More broadly, Khamchan and other Lao elite seem to have been fascinated with the legacy of Auguste Pavie as it came to serve as a metaphor for French colonization itself. If the French were not in fact benevolent protectors of the Lao but instead violent conquerors then the entirety of French colonial project in the country was illegitimate. The Lao would owe nothing to the French for their “protection.” Rather it would be the French who owed a debt for the wrongs they had done the Lao. In Khamchan’s account the anti-colonist voice of the Issara echoed strongly.

Khamchan was not the only one of the Lao elite to write a critical account of French colonialism. Sila, Khamman Vongkotrattana and others wrote about the French period more in the neutralist years than ever previously. Nyun Orphom wrote a modern history of the country that expanded on the history of foreign domination popularized by Sila and others from Thai domination to the more recent French colonial period.¹³⁷⁴ The text was also notable for discussing Lao who remained under Siamese control after 1893, not conforming to usual nation-bound histories. On the other hand, Khamman, who was related to Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong, wrote his own family’s illustrious history, including his famous grandfather, the viceory Bounkhong, who was thrown in jail for opposing the French conquest in 1893. Khamman contextualized his discussion of the arrival of the French in ways that further eroded the French mythic “conquest of hearts.” For instance, Khamman told of “French armies” marching in 1893 to seize the left bank of the Mekong.¹³⁷⁵ Bounkhong naturally reacted by rallying his troops and

¹³⁷⁴ Nyun Orphom, ພົງສາວະດານລາວ ສມັຍເປັນຫົວເມືອງຂຶ້ນຂອງປະເທດສາມແລະປະເທດຝຣັ່ງ [“Chronicle of the Lao: colony of Siam and France”] (n.p., 1971)

¹³⁷⁵ Khamman Vongkotrattana, ມະຮາຊປະວັດີວົງຄົວໜ້າຮາຊຕະກຸລຈຳອຸປຮາຊອຸນແກ້ວ [“History of the Front Palace, princely family of viceory Ounkaeo”] (National Library, 1971) p. 35.

arming them. His position of viceory traditionally took charge of military matters in Luang Prabang and he himself was battle-hardened from fighting Ho bandits for twenty years. He also protested against the French invasion to the French deputy counsel posted to Luang Prabang—all to no avail. He warned the French that Luang Prabang would fight (ວ່າພະອົງຄໍ້າງເຄື່ອງສາຕຸງ ວຸທຈະຮົບຝັ່ງເສສ).¹³⁷⁶ After Bounkhong was jailed, the French vice-counsel asked him if he would fight the French. He replied:

If the Thai command your humble servant to fight the French, your humble servant will fight the French. If your humble servant is under French control already and the French command your humble servant to fight the Thai, then your humble servant will fight [them].¹³⁷⁷

The truth was that Bounkhong's loyalty was for neither one nor the other. Both the Thai and the French were foreign powers seeking one thing alone: to dominate the Lao. Thus, Khamman put the following comment in the mouth of the French agents: “he [Bounkhong] loves his country and religion and is true to the village of his birth, the country where he sleeps, to the utmost.”¹³⁷⁸ This kind of account reappeared in the neutralist years as Lao elite continued to grapple with the legacy of French colonization. In a way, the fact that the Lao elite could not entirely resolve the question of the legacy of the French showed the intellectual maturity they reached in the neutralist years, showing that there was room for disagreement, a hallmark of any open, free society.

¹³⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 36.

¹³⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁷⁸ Ibid. ບ້ານເກີດເມືອງນອນ is an idiomatic expression often glossed simply as “country”. Its full expression points to one's own natal soil, and a place of one's long-term residence, which is clear enough in a more literal English translation. Khamman's family history was reprinted by the National Library in 1971 due to its high level of scholarship and the importance of the material concerned.

Late Popular Anti-Communism

Anti-communism grew during the war years to become more brutal. It also became more strongly anti-Vietnamese. Whereas in the late 1950s anti-communism had a strong anti-Chinese bent, now it exhibited more distinctly anti-Vietnamese feeling as the war dragged on and fighting became too intense to keep such sentiment under wraps. North Vietnam became, along with the Pathet Lao, the enemy (ສັດ) of the Royal Lao Government. The noted Lao historians Mayouri and Phouiphan Ngaosrivathana have observed that certain anti-Vietnamese RLG works which appeared in this period were in their words “racist.”¹³⁷⁹ Since the escalation of war in 1964, government rhetoric against North Vietnam had been growing as magazines printed highly charged accounts of the violence, blaming North Vietnam.¹³⁸⁰

The anti-Vietnamese cast of anti-communism appeared in a variety of sources. Beginning in 1969, the Lao American Association’s bilingual Lao-English magazine *Friendship* included a history of the kings of Laos, starting with the fourteenth-century ruler Fa Ngum. There was often a blatant presentist concern among these short histories as well as militarist slant. For example, in the history of Fa Ngum at his coronation in Vientiane he was said to give a speech “on the threat of foreign invasion” and added “all Lao, rich and poor, were expected to serve the nation.”¹³⁸¹ Fa Ngum was also credited with “establishing...the concept and precedent for Lao nationhood.”¹³⁸²

¹³⁷⁹ Mayoury and Pheupiphan Ngaosrivathana, *Paths to Conflagration: Fifty Years of Diplomacy and Warfare in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, 1778-1828* (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP, 1998), p. 30 footnote 71: “By making this statement, the booklet strove to generate an anti-Vietnamese racism that had not previously existed per se in Lao history.”

¹³⁸⁰ See for example, *National Unity*.

¹³⁸¹ “Kings of Laos: Fa Ngum 1316-1373” *Friendship*, 1969 no. 2, p. 10. English in the original. Fa Ngum was claimed to have said “If enemies from abroad form evil designs against us, as soon as these things come to your knowledge, give warning and do not keep such grave news to yourself.”

¹³⁸² *Ibid*, p. 12.

In the history on Samsenthai, the narrative focused almost exclusively on his purported development of the military, concluding: “Samsenthai’s demonstration that a powerful, disciplined army could protect the nation from its aggressive neighbors is also a useful example for modern Laos.”¹³⁸³ The next king included in the series was Souvanna Banglong, not well known in Lao history, but included nevertheless because he fought the Vietnamese in a massive war in the late fifteenth-century.¹³⁸⁴ Thus, the story began: “the powerful emperor of Vietnam was preparing to invade Laos.”¹³⁸⁵ In the fighting the Vietnamese soldiers were described as “hordes” while the Lao “fought stubbornly, defending their city in house-to-house combat.”¹³⁸⁶ The brief history ended with Souvanna Banglong rallying the Lao to cast out the invading Vietnamese, and “only 400 returned alive to Vietnam.”¹³⁸⁷ The cartoons accompanying this history were particularly violent. The history of Sourinyavongsa included the fallacious claim that he, having just negotiated a border treaty with Vietnam, “maintained garrisons of Lao troops at the borders and mountain passes to guard against invasion.”¹³⁸⁸

¹³⁸³ “Kings of Laos: Samsenthai, 1356-1416” *Friendship*, 1969, no. 3, p. 8. English in the original.

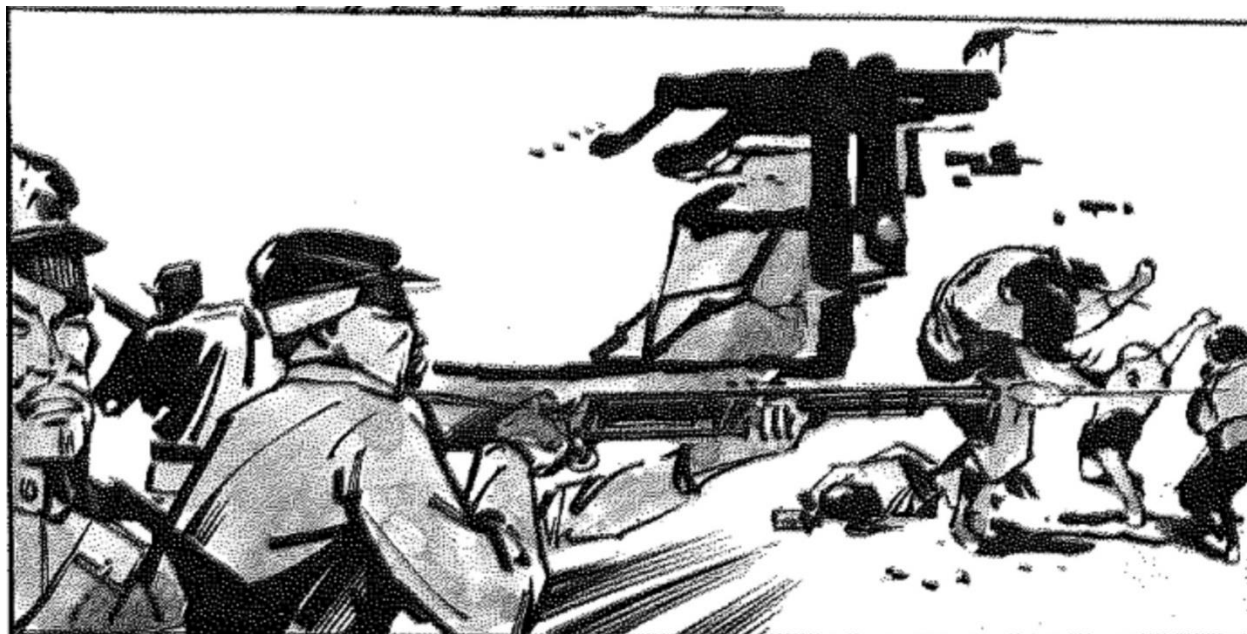
¹³⁸⁴ His reign is often omitted even in the original chronicle accounts.

¹³⁸⁵ “Kings of Laos: Souvanna Banglong, 1479-1486” *Friendship*, 1969, no. 4, p. 4. English in the original.

¹³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6. The Lao language version does not include such a loaded word as “horde,” but given the fact that the magazine’s audience was Lao students of English, the message still could get across to a Lao reader.

¹³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸⁸ “Kings of Laos: Souvanna Vongsa, 1637-1690” *Friendship*, 1969, no. 6, p. 4.



(anti-Vietnamese cartoon, featured in the comic ພຣະມະຫາກະສັດ ອົງສ່ຳຄັນຂອງລາວ *Important Kings of Laos*.)

These stories which appeared in the journal *Friendship* later were collected and published as a comic that had a very large print-run for a Lao text.¹³⁸⁹ The comic expanded on the section dealing with Souvanna Banglang, saying:

Today North Vietnam invaders menacing our country, they know well that the Lao people do not think ill of North Vietnam and vow [we] may live in peace and happiness.

The North Vietnamese should know well that if they continue to invade Lao, they will experience the same defeat and loss and will suffer defeat again the same as King Thaen Kham [Souvanna Banglang who] had attacked previously. Please let North Vietnam remember this lesson here.¹³⁹⁰

The comic was not an isolated case suggesting wider currency of anti-Vietnamese sentiment among the elite. King Savang Vatthana himself was not above the new anti-Vietnamese feeling, which seemed to be shared by other top officials in the government. As early as 1961, the

¹³⁸⁹ Volker Grabowsky and Oliver Tappe “Important Kings of Laos,” *Journal of Lao Studies*, v. 2 no. 1, (2011).

¹³⁹⁰ ພຣະມະຫາກະສັດ ອົງສ່ຳຄັນຂອງລາວ [“Important Kings of Laos”] (Vientiane 1970), (unpaginated) p. 12-13. The forward was written by Souvanna Phouma himself, thereby signaling his personal endorsement of the work.

King told US official Winthrop Brown as the royal capital Luang Prabang was under threat that “no Lao would attack Luang Prabang; only the Viet Minh would do so.”¹³⁹¹ The King later told Averell Harriman that letting the Pathet Lao participate in the government “was tantamount to asking the Vietnamese to participate in running Lao internal affairs.”¹³⁹² Savang Vatthana, like Souvanna Phouma and others saw the Pathet Lao as nothing more than a front for North Vietnam’s invasion of the country. Yet for the King, the Lao-Vietnam conflict went much deeper than recent events, as he saw that “Lao and Thai are one race, whereas the Vietnamese and Chinese are of another. He [Savang Vatthana] realizes that Chinese and North Vietnamese designs on Laos pre-date communism.”¹³⁹³ The King thus saw the war as a clash of civilizations, a struggle between a Sino-Viet race and a Lao-Thai race. Such anti-Vietnamese sentiments were fueled by hyper-nationalist notions of a Lao race.

Race and extinction were consistent themes in the King’s speeches during the war years. Take for instance his speech opening the National Assembly on May 11, 1964: “the future of Laos depends on the operation of this [coalition] government. Success will be attributed to Lao wisdom and patience. Failure...implies enfeeblement and perhaps the end of the country... Let us proceed hand in hand even through the most terrible trials toward a peaceful future for an old race and an historic people.”¹³⁹⁴ As late as May 1968 his views had not changed. Amid the rising brutality of the Second Indochina War in Laos the King continued to speak of the war in terms of a struggle of survival for the Lao race, telling the people in a speech “We Lao do not think of ‘liberating’ our

¹³⁹¹ Evans, *Last Century of Lao Royalty*, p. 209. Excerpt from a report by Sullivan dated May 4, 1966.

¹³⁹² Ibid.

¹³⁹³ Ibid.

¹³⁹⁴ Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 589.

country, we think of caring for our country and carrying out our duty to protect our blood and tradition from disappearing.”¹³⁹⁵

There was a continuing study of essential Lao culture. An instructor of philology and mathematics in the Ministry of Education could still talk confidently “referring to the social proof that Lao society is different than Western society.” Related to this was a discernible new taste for authoritative original sources for Lao culture, such as the “original” version of the ancient chronicle the *Nithan Khoun Boulom* and with it the “original laws of Khun Bulom.” Buddhism was not exempt from this trend. The Royal Lao Academy published the first Lao versions of the *Tripitaka* and the *Dhammapada*. Yet even then one can still find latent regionalist feeling, tempering nationalism. For example, in a 1971 text (titled: “ຶ ຄຸວະ ຶ”), Khamchan Pradith wrote on the proper usage of homophonic Lao vowels. His work was primarily directed at southerners who he blamed for misuse of the vowels.

Many people write Mai-mouan and Mai-mai incorrectly-correctly not to say government publications or private publications. Therefore your humble servant desires to please explain the usage and meaning of the vowels ຶ and ຶ clearly in order that the writer can use [it] correctly, truly. Especially, those Lao compatriots in the central and south who write the vowels ຶ and ຶ totally mixed up because [they] read [it] all aloud as vowel ຶ. Thus [they] understand that [one] may write vowel ຶ or ຶ interchangeably, [it is] not important.¹³⁹⁶

Reflecting differences in regional dialects, in the north the distinction between the two vowels is voiced, whereas in the south it is not, which led Khamchan to blame the misuse of the vowels on southerners, even though Lao spelling in general was not standardized. Khamchan, who was born in Phongsali, made visible a certain arrogance by northerners against other parts of the country whom they viewed as less refined as themselves. On the other hand, a deputy from Sedone, Khamtoun Sackda: “declared to a journalist of *Lao Presse*...that he no longer desires to hear talk

¹³⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 834.

¹³⁹⁶ Khamchan Pradith, ຶ ຄຸວະ ຶ [Ai and ai] (Vientiane, Pak-pasak press, 1971), p. 1.

of LAO NEUA (Lao of the north) [or] LAO TAY (Lao of the south) because although they are of the north or the south they are all Lao.”¹³⁹⁷

Ameri-phone Lao

In the neutralist years, a new publication appeared called *Friendship* (ມິຕູພາບ), which was similar in some respects to the earlier colonial-era journal *Bulletin Amis du Lao*. As a quarterly magazine created by the Lao American Association it was “dedicated to the promotion of mutual understanding,” while also inevitably spreading American cultural influence primarily through English language learning. But it also evidenced cultural change among Lao who became highly Americanized from learning English and closely associating with Americans in the country. Some visited or lived for extended periods abroad in the US.

One of the first publications of the LAA was a Lao-English dictionary which appeared in 1962.¹³⁹⁸ Toward that end, each edition of the journal was bilingual, with Lao text on one page and English on the other. In his forward to the first issue, Prince Souvanna Phouma wrote:

The Lao American Association has been helping to cement the friendly relations between my countrymen and the Americans living in Laos for several years. They only lacked an organ which would allow them to make themselves understood outside of their normal activities. This is now a reality and I congratulate those who have brought it about.¹³⁹⁹

It even featured Francophone Lao like Somchine Nginn who wrote an article on “the Laotian people as they were and are.”¹⁴⁰⁰ In this work Nginn turned from a discussion of traditional merit-making to French racial bias which still haunted the Lao:

¹³⁹⁷ Kossadary Phimmasone, “Revue de Presse Lao” *Lao Sappada*, March 24, 1972, no. 3, p. 8

¹³⁹⁸ Boon Thom Boonyavong, with John De Noia and G. Edward Roffe, *English-Lao Dictionary* (Vientiane: Lao-American Association, 1962).

¹³⁹⁹ *Friendship*, January 1965, v. 1, no. 1. English in the original.

¹⁴⁰⁰ Somchine Nginn, “The Laotian People as they were and are” *Friendship*, Jan 1965, v.1, no.1. Moreover, Thao Kéne also had an article appear in a later issue, “Origin of the Lao language” *Friendship*, 1969, no. 6, p. 33-35

Among foreigners the Laotians have had and still have the reputation of being lazy and indolent. People often say that the Laotien is “su-su”, a Lao word whose meaning is well known to most Europeans [Westerners]. This term is an indication of the placid character of the Lao people who make little effort to do more than satisfy their very limited daily needs. They live and let live, happy with what they have and with little thought for the future.

The expression “su-su” has various meanings. It may mean carefree, spectacle, upright, free, to stay still, uninvolved, or not to make enemies. They are “su-su” who don’t lie, nor deceive others, who don’t hurt anybody, who aren’t always seeking to better themselves, but are content with their situation. This expression is sometimes used with a verb as in “you su-su” – to do nothing; “hay su-su”, to give away, or “pay thieo su-su” to wander about without any particular end in view.¹⁴⁰¹

By writing this Nginn hoped to disabuse the Americans of this racial stereotype created by the French. After analyzing the “su-su” (ສຸສຸ) stereotype, he then juxtaposed it with many actual meanings of the word, pointing to the gap between stereotype and the reality. Nginn concluded by claiming that the Royal Lao Government had ended the scourge of “su-su” such that it ever existed by “inform[ing] the people of their obligations to modern civilization.”¹⁴⁰² He added those concerned “finally have been shaken out of their legendary inertia.”¹⁴⁰³ Thus, it no longer existed to any great extent in the country, having been eradicated by the government. Or as Nginn put it, “nowadays the description “su-su” doesn’t apply to Laotians.”¹⁴⁰⁴ Now the people “have put away their hitherto inseparable “khenes” for the plough, and have come to prefer the joys of work and the pleasures of industrial creation to their traditional songs and dances.”¹⁴⁰⁵ However, Nginn’s primary audience was not the French, but the Americans who had adopted French racial biases about the Lao. Whether the Americans in Laos read Nginn’s writing or not, he concluded “it is no longer correct *nor permissible* to say of Laotians that they are “su-su.”¹⁴⁰⁶

¹⁴⁰¹ Ibid, p. 6. English in the original.

¹⁴⁰² Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁴⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰⁶ Ibid. Emphasis added.

The Lao American Association was created in 1956, yet its activities were limited until the 1960s, when it boasted of having 1,300 students.¹⁴⁰⁷ It taught English not just in Vientiane, but in Pakse, Vang Vieng, Savannakhet and Luang Prabang “to help students break the language barrier.”¹⁴⁰⁸ The LAA also taught English to government officials. Other activities of the LAA included hosting dances and film nights which spread American culture among the Lao. The rise of the LAA corresponded to the new power of English since the neo-colonial years. Or as one LAA student put it: “I hope to learn English forever because it is my favorite language and it is also most important.”¹⁴⁰⁹ Another student remarked “English is very useful in these present days.”¹⁴¹⁰ Yet even as late as December 1965 the LAA was still trying “to attract Lao citizens to attend and lend their influence in making the organization a truly Lao-American effort.”¹⁴¹¹ Eventually, the LAA membership included prominent people such as Tay Keoulouangkhot (a founding member of the LAA, and Director General of the Ministry of Information), Somphou Oudomvilay, (Inspector General of the Ministry of Education and a *Mittasone* member), Oute Khamvongsa (Lao director of the Lao-German Technical School), Pinkham Simmalavong (head of English Section, Dong Dok), and Mrs. Oudone Sananikone (President, Lao Women’s Association).¹⁴¹²

The US cultural influence noticeably deepened during the neutralist years. For the first time, some Lao became fluent in English, spent extended periods of time in the US, and were otherwise highly influenced by American culture to the point that one might refer to them as Ameri-phone Lao, comparable to the Francophone Lao of the late 1940s. Many of them appeared

¹⁴⁰⁷ “Fall and Winter Terms at LAA,” *Friendship*, December 1965, v. 1, no.4, p. 69.

¹⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰⁹ *Friendship*, 1968, no 8, p. 21.

¹⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁴¹¹ “Fall and Winter Terms at LAA,” *Friendship*, December 1965, v. 1, no.4, p. 69.

¹⁴¹² *Friendship*, 1968 no. 9, p. 2-4.

in the pages of *Friendship* or were English language teachers at the LAA or the English Section at Dong Dok. Saly Chittavoravong, a teacher at LAA, wrote an article about how to address gaps between English and Lao languages reminiscent of similar views among Francophone Lao in the semi-colonial years. He noted that English had a greeting “hi, hello” whereas Lao traditionally would greet by saying “where are you going?” (ໄປໃສ).¹⁴¹³ He noted the influence the English language was having on Lao, observing that a new phrase (ສບາງດີ) appeared recently to approximate the English greeting: “Lao have a form of this (sabaaj dii) and this has become popular because it is an adaption of western culture.”¹⁴¹⁴

Saly went on to observe the different ways the two languages addressed simple requests:

Cultural differences are also pointed up in responses to the question “Do you have any water?” An English speaker would answer “Yes.” To the same question in his own language, a Lao would answer, “Have.” Other examples of Lao responses to Lao questions are, “Will you come?” “Come.” “Have you eaten breakfast?” “Eaten.” This is no “yes” in these responses. The negative answer to “Do you have any water?” is, “No have.”¹⁴¹⁵

He provided further examples on the different ways the two languages addressed how to ask a person to do simple tasks:

For example, in Lao the request, “Close the car, please” is correct. In English he must say, “Close the door, please.” Or in Lao a speaker says, “Close the glass, please” but in English it’s “Close the window please”¹⁴¹⁶

Saly then listed the many grammar forms found in English that are not found in Lao. He explained that this made it much more challenging for Lao to learn English correctly. Saly was writing about the difficulties his Lao students encountered in learning English, but more broadly he was making assessments of the broader cultural gaps between Lao and English which underlay difficulties in learning languages. Similar cultural gaps were discussed by Francophone Lao in the semi-colonial

¹⁴¹³ Saly Chittavoravong, “Some Problems Encountered by Lao Students of English” *Friendship*, 1970, no. 4, p. 16.

¹⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

era when discussing learning French, although Saly's discussion of it was more superficial, not written for an elite audience.

Nimnouane Taysavang, a teacher at the American school, wrote about her interactions with American students. She began by asking the reader if they've ever befriended "someone who does not speak your language or believe in your religion?"¹⁴¹⁷ While not the same as friendships among those of "the same nation" she wrote that "you cannot make this fact a barrier" supporting a cosmopolitan outlook in the classroom.¹⁴¹⁸ She went on to describe her relations with her American students as "a story about the relationship between people of different races."¹⁴¹⁹

Nimnouane described her students as "curious," not shy to speak Lao even if they spoke the language incorrectly:

American students are very curious. They always ask questions about new things they have seen or heard. Sometimes, some students ask so often that even their friends get bored. But their questions are generally in search of new knowledge or ideas for themselves as well as for myself. Therefore, they always become more interested...

My students do not hesitate to talk to anyone in Lao, if they know the words... Sometimes, a person understands a foreign language but he never speaks it because he is too shy or afraid of making mistakes...

Why keep quiet when you can talk? Some Lao people think that to speak a foreign language frequently is to show-off; but if they would really think about it, they would understand why they should practice when they study a language.

...if [students] don't talk, teachers will think they do not understand. Speaking shows the pupil has learned his lessons well.¹⁴²⁰

Nimnouane wrote of how American students were willing to be wrong to learn, whereas Lao were not. Her exposure to foreigners provided her with some critical distance to look at her own culture and suggest ways that Lao could benefit from proximity to Americans.

¹⁴¹⁷ Nimnouane Taisavang, "The relationship between a Lao teacher and American students," *Friendship*, 1968, no. 1, p. 30.

¹⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

On the other hand, another teacher Don Phommachak wrote that he had trouble teaching Americans to learn his language because “To all Lao, an American learning the Lao language sounds strange and funny.”¹⁴²¹ He provided in the Lao language version of the text numerous examples of Americans’ misspoken phrases which often had humorous results. There was at times an irreducible cultural distance disguised by the humor. Even so he felt it was an important task to teach Americans the Lao language:

I teach Lao to foreigners not just in order to make more money for myself. By teaching Lao, I feel that I am aiding in the development of my country and the betterment of the people. Foreigners learn Lao so that they can understand us better, speak to us directly and help us solve our problems. I feel that my job is important and I will do everything I can to help my students learn better and quicker.¹⁴²²

There were several young Lao pupils who spent long periods in the US to attend secondary and tertiary schools. Somsai Sipraseuth wrote about his stay in Texas.¹⁴²³ Like others before him he noted similarities with other Asian countries. He referred to Bangkok as “this Buddhist city.” He then laconically described his friend almost missing a connecting flight “wandering around a camera shop” which he described as “the typical answer of the tourist.”¹⁴²⁴ On his arrival in the US he made a stop-over at Stanford University, where he put on a display of his “traditional” Lao culture, organizing a *lamvong* dance accompanied with Lao songs and playing “his Meo khene.”¹⁴²⁵ Thereafter he went to live with a US family for two years in El Paso Texas, separated from any other Lao. His American family served him a “Chinese dinner” the first night, as they had no idea whatsoever about his country or its culture.

¹⁴²¹ Don Phommachak, “Voices from the Lao language class” *Friendship*, 1968, no. 3.

¹⁴²² *Ibid.*, p. 34

¹⁴²³ Somsai Sipraseuth, “A Letter from a reader in Texas” *Friendship*, May 1966, v.2, no.1, p. 32-35.

¹⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*

Others had different experiences. In letters, an anonymous “Lao boy” described how he had gained two things he would never forget: “affection and an understanding of your [American] customs and way of life.”¹⁴²⁶ The way in which he discussed his home-stay mother is revealing of the close cultural contact:

At home, my American mother, – or Mom – treats me as her own child and does practically everything for me – except going out on a date with a girl. She calls me in the morning, helps me pack my suitcase when I have to go away for a short time, orders me to go to bed early when I have a cold, explains the points that I have difficulty in comprehending in the textbooks, consoles me when I am disappointed, and as every mother does, scolds me when I do something in my own way without telling her first. ... These acts are all familiar to me now, and I just feel that this is my own family.¹⁴²⁷

He closely identified with his American family, especially the mother. That fact that he undertook a longer home-stays in the US, living for years at a time rather than only a few months seemed to have made a much deeper, stronger impression on him than others who travelled abroad in earlier years. Moreover, many Lao were studying in full degree programs at US educational institutions rather than just studying the language, leading more Lao become acculturated to American values via the educational system. Yet the anonymous “Lao boy” said that even though he felt he understood the country well, he felt what he knew of it was small, saying it is “like the six blind men looking at the elephant and seeing only a small part of it.”¹⁴²⁸ No matter how vast he felt the country was he expressed his desire to describe “the elephant that I’ve seen to the people in my country when I return home.”¹⁴²⁹

¹⁴²⁶ “American Field Service” *Friendship*, January 1967, v. 2, n. 1, p. 26.

¹⁴²⁷ Anonymous, “American Field Service” *Friendship*, January 1967, vol 2 no. 1, p. 27.

¹⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*

New Gender Relations

Lao elite women were highly active in the society of the neutralist years participating in public life to an unprecedented degree.¹⁴³⁰ For this purpose, they established a Lao Women's Association (LWA).¹⁴³¹ This organization worked to outlaw polygamy and ban prostitution, thereby seeking improvement of the lot of women in the country.¹⁴³² It might be fairly considered the first modern feminist organization in Lao history. The LWA sought to improve society as it provided disaster relief, public education programs (on topics like hygiene) and rural extension programs. Yet it is no coincidence that King Savang Vatthana was the first Lao king in modern history to have only one wife. His father, Sisavang Vong had many wives. Yet “almost all” top officials of the government also had only one wife.¹⁴³³ These are strong signs that gender relations were changing rapidly in the RLG era.

There was an economic basis for the changing gender relations. After independence, new opportunities for social mobility opened to women as many entered the professions for the first time. This trend reached a high point in the RLG period during the 1960s and early 1970s. For example, many women became teachers in the expanding government schools. By 1967 there were over 1,000 female teachers, making up almost a third of all government instructors.¹⁴³⁴ Some rose to become school principals gaining status and prestige. In the medical field, Lao nurses increased four-fold by 1973 and female nurses rose from 23 percent in 1950 to 70 percent in 1973.¹⁴³⁵ Other

¹⁴³⁰ For an excellent general survey on gender in Laos see Mayoury Ngaosyvathn, *Lao Women, Yesterday and Today* (Vientiane: State Printing Enterprise, 1995).

¹⁴³¹ Joel Halpern, “The Lao elite,” p. 69 noted that many members were the wives of the elite.

¹⁴³² Ibid.

¹⁴³³ Ibid, p. 68.

¹⁴³⁴ Kingdom of Laos, *Primary School Statistics: School Year 1965-1966* [ສະຖິຕິປະຖົມສຶກສາ ປີການສຶກສາ 1965-1966] (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, n.d.), p. 29.

¹⁴³⁵ Kathryn Sweet, “Limited Doses: Health and Development in Laos, 1893-2000” (Ph.D. diss., National University of Singapore, 2015), p. 136. Ibid, p. 142 notes that in regards to assistant doctor training in-country “Of note, the gender distribution in 1959 was reported to be equal.”

highly successful women represented the government on the world stage at international conferences or became deputies in the National Assembly. Undergirding this progress was a major expansion of access to education for girls.

The LWA opened the first journal devoted to women entitled “Lao women” (ຜູ້ຍິງລາວ). It was a venue and forum for women writers that they did not find elsewhere. The magazine described some of the LWA activities such as a fund-raiser led by the head of the LWA Khamla Khammao who was also the head of the Lao Red Cross, and the Lao Girl Scouts.¹⁴³⁶ The funds were being raised for the activities of the Lao Women’s Association, especially to fund the building of an education center for the organization, an unrealized goal for the last decade. But now the Lao Women’s Association had land in Luang Prabang and old facilities that just needed improvement, to which the funds raised would be put. It had a nursery, and a store which sold art and textiles made by women.

Bonsu Sananikone ran a home-economics school and advocated for it as a place of leadership for women.¹⁴³⁷ She taught cooking, sanitation, child care and textiles. About textiles she noted “...also involved in the teaching of weaving is the preservation of an art that has been an integral part of the Lao culture and tradition” in which Lao women played a prominent role.¹⁴³⁸ Those trained at Bonsu’s school then went to teach women in rural areas “actively participating in the continual development and improvement of their country.”¹⁴³⁹ Finally, one finds in the pages of *Lao Woman* that writers began to question what exactly a modern women should be, writing stories about conflicts with their husbands, or about the difficulties of being born a female. In

¹⁴³⁶ S. Manivong, ການເຄື່ອນໄຫວຂອງສະມາຄົມຍິງລາວທົ່ວພະຣາຊາອານາຈັກ--ຫລວງພະບາງບຸນ [“Movement of the Lao Women’s Association across the Kingdom: Luang Prabang festival”], *Lao Women*, v. 1, no. 4, p. 11.

¹⁴³⁷ *Friendship*, 1969, no. 1, p.38.

¹⁴³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 40.

¹⁴³⁹ *Ibid*.

considering their female-ness, they were reacting against the highly militarized, hyper-masculine society of the RLG era.¹⁴⁴⁰

New notions of gender did not arise in isolation, but were influenced by the West, especially America. There were many articles in *Friendship* on the subject of women, not just Lao but American women as well.¹⁴⁴¹ Marjorie Blaufarb was big influence on the early magazine and doubtlessly influenced Lao women. Thus, cultural exchanges did not merely concern men and military matters, but also concerned Lao women and new ideas concerning gender, morality, and sexual mores. One prime example was that the *Friendship* journal published a version of the Cinderella story importing typical American values and ideals surrounding women exhibited in that modernized fable.¹⁴⁴²

One Lao elite woman, Bonsu Sananikone, then President of the Lao Women's Association and the only female founding member of the Royal Lao Academy, wrote an article entitled "May I Speak about Lao Women."¹⁴⁴³ The editor wrote about this feature that included articles by Bonsu and her American counterpart Vivian Pennington, that each "explain the role and importance of women in their societies and express many ideas which we have always known but have not thought much about."¹⁴⁴⁴ For her part, Bonsu wrote about the contradictions Lao women faced in modern society. Though men and women were equal before the law and the constitution, she still felt most Lao women were tied to patriarchal traditions, stating bluntly:

¹⁴⁴⁰ On Lao masculinity and the military see Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

¹⁴⁴¹ See for example, Marjorie Blaufarb, "The World of Women in America" *Friendship* July 1965 v.1 no.3, p. 10-13 and the Lao translation ໂລກຜູ້ຍິງ - ຢ້ຽມຢ່າງອະເມຣິກັນ *ibid*, p. 3-9. See further, Blaufarb's study of weaving which gives prominent attention to Lao women.

¹⁴⁴² Marjorie Blaufarb, "Once upon a time – Cinderella" *Friendship*, July 1965, v1 no3, p.52-54. Lao translation ອ້າງນຶ່ງໃນປາງຫລັງ - ຊິນເດີເຊນລາ *ibid*, p. 45-51.

¹⁴⁴³ Bonsu Sananikone, "May I Speak about Lao Women?" *Friendship*, 1968, p19, 39, 41.

¹⁴⁴⁴ Same issue, "To our readers" p. 3

“although in her heart remains the conviction that the man is the superior being.”¹⁴⁴⁵ Besides those high-minded ideals of equality, Bounsu noted the continued practices of patriarchy: “the Lao woman must remain subject to the strict laws applied by the men and the old society” which she said “appear to have kept the Lao woman away from the ordinary process of evolution.”¹⁴⁴⁶

Bounsu included many positive, idealistic images of women, saying since ancient times “the Lao woman was renowned for her courage, a model mother of a big family, a fertile and robust wife, a queen of the rice and corn fields, and of the mulberry groves.”¹⁴⁴⁷ Bounsu described Lao women as “a poet and a warrior, she raised the stature of the home by fighting against wild animals and the enemy at the side of our ancestors.”¹⁴⁴⁸ The Lao woman was the sustainer: “devoted to the basic needs of life and of the community...for the temples, for friends and acquaintances, and for the elders, wherever they may be found.”¹⁴⁴⁹ Thus, Bounsu constructed a positive view of women projected back into history that could serve as a precedent to navigate the equal status Lao women had only recently won from the government. In contemporary times she suggested that women had power over men because men “make several important decisions but only after consultation with his wife.”¹⁴⁵⁰ Thus Bounsu perpetuated the notion that Lao women could not be excluded from important affairs by men. Yet the family-role of women still loomed large in Bounsu’s discussion as she spoke of good Lao women being defined as “a dutiful daughter” and “a good mother and wife.”¹⁴⁵¹ She ended her article with a profoundly positive image: “A Lao woman is many things: the first teacher to her child, the lifelong companion to her

¹⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 39.

¹⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 19

¹⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 39.

¹⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

husband, the queen of her home, a respected person of her community and an important and useful person to her country.”¹⁴⁵²

Yet she noted problems persist which she described as ignorance and illiteracy among women (for lack of education) and wider societal “superstitions and prejudices which are very much a part of Lao customs and mores.”¹⁴⁵³ For education, girls were excluded:

In the past, as I have already mentioned, the education of young girls began in the home, at the temple and in society. Before the existence of schools as we know them today, the classes were situated in the vat (pagoda), in the homes of great mandarins and in the palaces.

...The ancient bonzes, who were the principle teachers of the community, taught during special grand sessions to the young boys who desired to learn. The young girls looked after their little sisters and brothers, tended the animals, did the household chores and learned to read and write as much as they could, but always outside the pagoda. The parents often said of their young girls that “it is good that they do not know how to write, that they remain within the bounds of womanhood, and are not tempted to write to a young man.”¹⁴⁵⁴

Women may have been excluded from education until recently yet Bounsu made a point of listing women’s knowledge of textiles, pottery, “the rudiments of economic sciences.”¹⁴⁵⁵ For women who had until recently been denied education when schools were in the temple, she and others like her had a particular prominence, not just in the new education system but also in new civic organizations unique to the era. The medium of paper and typewriter was likewise not closed off to women like her as the traditional palm leaf manuscripts had been. In general, more women were working in new professions, especially as teachers, than ever before. Some women represented the RLG abroad on the international stage, while others became school principals, which was one of the highest positions attained at the time.¹⁴⁵⁶

¹⁴⁵² Ibid.

¹⁴⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 41.

¹⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵⁶ Joel Halpern, “The Lao elite,” p. 69.

Yet while the RLG granted women the right to vote in 1956, many patriarchal values clearly remained.¹⁴⁵⁷ The fact that for the first decade of Lao democracy women were denied the right to vote speaks volumes about RLG society. Nginn himself wrote a novel about “the model women” in 1967, indicating elite like him, who were predominantly male, felt compelled to discuss proper behavior and characteristics of women in a prescriptive, objectifying fashion. Her “manner and behavior was polite, [she was] only a little intelligent...[she] showed respect to good persons of every class that had the opportunity to associate with her.”¹⁴⁵⁸ To Nginn, the ideal woman received only limited education. She was sent to school to learn to read Lao and French, but she was older and so had difficulty learning, and so did not remember lessons easily. She went to school for less than five months before quitting “because she is worried of the affairs at home.”¹⁴⁵⁹ Elite male conceptions of women were at odds with women’s own views in the neutralist years.

Phouvong Phimmasone, a member of the Royal Lao Academy, wrote a study on the role of women in legal, political and social institutions, which appeared in 1974. He claimed modern women were “emancipated of certain obligations to the husband and the family.”¹⁴⁶⁰ He added that they “possessed currently all the civil, civic and political rights the same as man.”¹⁴⁶¹ To Phouvong modern history witnessed not only the liberation of the country but women as well. Women were “modern,” “the equal of men,” and could work any job in government or any career in commerce and industry.¹⁴⁶² He did note the exception that women could not be ministers in government. Yet he admitted that polygamy existed “by mutual consent” in both ancient times and the present

¹⁴⁵⁷ While RLG women criticized patriarchal values in society, nonetheless the society remained matrilineal.

¹⁴⁵⁸ P.S. Nginn, ນາງພາວະດີແມ່ຍິງລາວຕົວຢ່າງ [“Nang Phavady: the model Lao woman”] (Vientiane, Editions du Comité Littéraire, 1967), p. 1.

¹⁴⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 11.

¹⁴⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 972.

¹⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶² Ibid, p. 977.

day.¹⁴⁶³ In his discussion of modern women, he pointed to the influence of Western civilization which had caused women in the country “to search to free themselves of certain family responsibilities.”¹⁴⁶⁴ The modern women “is in reaction against” being restricted to the domestic sphere, which he ascribed to new social obligations “in the modern life.”¹⁴⁶⁵ He even spoke of women having “a revolutionary spirit against certain rules of customary law... which she considers as retrograde and contrary to the civilization of humane society.”¹⁴⁶⁶ For example, he noted women who criticized the practice of polygamy which he called a “right,” but which he nonetheless called “a form of social discrimination.”¹⁴⁶⁷ He talked about a government program to help women “to space the birth of their children” which he said was welcomed by women.¹⁴⁶⁸ In government he said women had government jobs more than other countries and pointed to the fact that a woman ran the government social services.

Yet women faced continuing problems. Magazines featured extended discussions about how women lagged behind men in literacy.¹⁴⁶⁹ This was represented vividly by tables of education statistics. In primary school, female students made up only half the number of male students. The ratio only worsened higher in the educational system, which the author Arouny said was not due to a lack of ability among female students who scored well in primary education but due to “a lack of stimulant, of a goal.”¹⁴⁷⁰ As a result in Vientiane 48 percent of women were illiterate compared to 20 percent of men. Women were less fully employed than men as well, which Arouny said was

¹⁴⁶³ Ibid, p. 973.

¹⁴⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 976.

¹⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶⁷ Ibid. He added that the practice came from India at the same time as Buddhism and he claimed it brought new responsibilities for men to care for minor wives and their children.

¹⁴⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 977.

¹⁴⁶⁹ Arouny, “La présence féminine dans la formation culturelle et professionnelle au Laos et à Vientiane” *Lao Sappda*, March 17, 1972, no. 2, p. 14-16.

¹⁴⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 15.

due to the husbands, and their “traditional opinions” on women. Those who were employed were paid less than their male peers. Education outcomes were poor because expectations for women were to be a good housewife, cook, wife and mother. Women who worked outside the home were rare, since many Lao still viewed education and employment for women as a luxury. While Arouny presented a grim picture it was framed as problem, one which the author clearly advocated to be resolved. However, even Arouny felt that women who worked and left their children in the care of others were “a little inhuman.”¹⁴⁷¹ Yet Arouny pointed to the recent election of women to the National Assembly as one sign of progress: “the recent election of two women deputies upsets somewhat the conception of the traditional role of the women in Lao society.”¹⁴⁷²

Yet even these early deputies faced limits to how far they could go to change the role of women in society. A newspaper interview with Madame Nokham Bilavarn, one of the first Lao women deputies to the National Assembly representing Luang Prabang “stated that she had not thought for a moment to defend the right of Lao women [who were] victims of polygamy, because the current situation of the country seems even to indicate that a man may have several wives...”¹⁴⁷³

Lao Christians

Since the arrival of the Americans there was an intense period of contact between Christianity and Buddhism which gave rise to debates among elites not seen since the nineteenth century in neighboring Thailand.¹⁴⁷⁴ Under the French, Christian missionary activities were limited

¹⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷² Ibid.

¹⁴⁷³ Kossadary Phimmasone, “Revue de Presse Lao” *Lao Sappada*, no. 3, March 24, 1972, p. 8.

¹⁴⁷⁴ On debates between Thai elite and Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1993).

so as not to upset the indirect rule which sustained the tiny French colonial administration, although more freedom to missionize was given in the south, which was a colony. Protestantism had a different history in the country. The first such missions appeared in southern Laos founded by the Swiss Brethren in 1902.¹⁴⁷⁵ It was only in 1929 that the Christian and Missionary Alliance under G. Edward Roffe expanded to the north at Luang Prabang, and later to Xieng Khouang.¹⁴⁷⁶ While the Gospel of John was translated around 1903, the Bible was not translated into Lao until 1932, forcing missionaries to use Thai versions.¹⁴⁷⁷ Yet the elite themselves took little notice, as the new religion was most attractive to those who were marginalized in Lao society, including Kmhmu servants of royals, people accused of being possessed by malevolent spirits, Hmong, Vietnamese and others.¹⁴⁷⁸ Saly Kounthapanya an ordained minister established the Gospel Church of Laos in 1957.¹⁴⁷⁹ Roffe himself had assisted the first Lao-English bilingual dictionary produced by the LAA in 1962. A Catholic missionary Allen Kerr produced another Lao-English dictionary in 1972.

The LAA provided a unique moment of unprecedented elite contact between Christianity and Buddhism. The LAA's journal *Friendship* produced a "special supplement" which called on the elite to make a showcase of Buddhism next to one by a Christian missionary.¹⁴⁸⁰ There had never been such an open public forum to address the two religions directed at both Lao and foreigners in which the elite participated. In a preface to the magazine, its editors noted that "the articles were prepared at the express request of the Board of Directors of the Lao-American

¹⁴⁷⁵ David Andrianoff, "(63) Churches Together in God's Mission – Laos Ecumenism and the arrival and survival of Protestantism." Eds. Hope Antone, Wati Longchar, Hyunju Bae, Huang Po Ho and Dietrich Werner, *Asia Handbook for Theological Education and Ecumenism* () p. 550

¹⁴⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 552, notes Roffe was granted permission to missionize by Sisavang Vong in 1930. Roffe had his first conversion in 1932 who was a Vietnamese opium broker who recently went bankrupt by a chance in French policy.

¹⁴⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 552.

¹⁴⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 550.

¹⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 551-553.

¹⁴⁸⁰ "Buddhism and Christianity," *Friendship*, special supplement, 1972.

Association,” which included both Lao and Americans. The editors took the opportunity first to note the entirely different ways religion was conceived by Lao and Americans saying, “there are those who prefer to call Buddhism an ethnical system, or way of life, rather than a religion.”¹⁴⁸¹ The editors acknowledged the contradiction in terms that Buddhism did “not entirely fit Mr. Roffe’s definition of religion as he states it.” But ultimately they found common ground for comparison of the two by defining them both as soteriological systems:

Yet both Christianity and Buddhism offer paths of salvation from the ultimate results of evil-doing. Christianity considers each sin singly and provides for its expiation by confession, repentance and atonement through the mediation of Christ. Buddhism considers whether good or evil deeds are preponderant in one’s lifetime, for Nirvana is not attained as the result of one lifetime but of a long cycle of rebirths in which the soul becomes increasingly capable of following the noble eightfold path.¹⁴⁸²

While the editors thus found common ground to frame the discussion, they also compared the two as “codes of interpersonal behavior.”¹⁴⁸³ In presenting in summary form the two religions side-by-side for the purpose of comparison reductive forms were presented. For ethics, the Buddhist eightfold path and six sets of social relationships were contrasted to the ten commandments, mosaic law, and so on.

The discussion of the religions themselves was in fact a conversation between the elite Maha Kham Champakeomany and Edward Roffe, a Canadian missionary in the country since 1929. It is significant how the elite portrayed their religion in these circumstances. Maha Kham Champakeomany began to discuss Buddhism by noting its great antiquity, older than Christianity. He was led in various areas in his writing to make numerous comparisons of the two religions. He sought to find equivalencies by saying “like Christianity...Buddhism is a large religion.”¹⁴⁸⁴ He

¹⁴⁸¹ Ibid, p. i.

¹⁴⁸² Ibid.

¹⁴⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸⁴ Kham Champakeomany, “Buddhism,” *Friendship*, 1972, special supplement, p. 1.

pointed to the fact the two had particular geographical distributions with Christianity prominent in Europe and North America whereas Buddhism “is the primary religion of Asian people from Ceylon to Japan.”¹⁴⁸⁵ Kham presented the missionaries with a standard textual distillation saying: “The Buddha’s teaching can be summed up in three directives; avoid evil, do good, and purify your mind. Even more briefly, it is included in the full meaning of right mindfulness.”¹⁴⁸⁶ Ultimately, he was led to say that Buddhism was “one of the great religions of the modern world.”¹⁴⁸⁷ It was no longer universal, but was now one religion among many, which nevertheless deserved to take its place alongside Christianity to gain international recognition. This was a new way for the elite to think about Buddhism that arose uniquely in a period of heightened Christian activities in the country.

Roffe for his part was somewhat combative, arguing Christianity was superior due to divine revelation: “True religion is not the fruit of philosophical reasoning or speculation”¹⁴⁸⁸ The Old Testament contained “truths that man could not have discovered by reason or speculation.”¹⁴⁸⁹ He insisted “an outside agency is necessary to relieve man of his sin”¹⁴⁹⁰ Roffe defined Christianity in contrast to Buddhism: “The end is not the extinction of personality, but its enrichment through the power of an imparted divine dynamic. The believer’s ethical life rests, not on withdraw from the world, but on the development of that life as a member of a fellowship called the Church...”¹⁴⁹¹ By participating in the debate, Roffe’s views were given a wider audience, being translated into Lao.

¹⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 4. Dr. Hansen notes this passage is from a well-known verse in the *Dhammapada* used by modernists.

¹⁴⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 1.

¹⁴⁸⁸ Edward Roffe, “Christianity,” *Friendship*, special supplement, 1972, p. 1.

¹⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 5.

¹⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

The expansion of Christianity gave rise to Lao-Christians. One Lao-Christian, Vorachith Vongthongthip, wrote an article in the LAA magazine *Friendship* titled: “How to be happy, a young Lao’s ideals.”¹⁴⁹² He was a Second Lieutenant in the police. Without explicitly mentioning his new religion he wrote that one cannot find happiness by money, rank, or external things. He wrote of “pleasure-seekers” who “having no inward happiness” were disappointed, failing to find happiness “in outward things.”¹⁴⁹³ He observed money did not bring happiness as “the rich are sometimes unhappy and some poor men sing.”¹⁴⁹⁴ While Vorachith did commend good health and wholesome pastimes, his last advice on finding true happiness made clear his Christian faith:

Happiness depends not so much on circumstances as on ourselves. The kingdom of happiness, like the kingdom of heaven, is within us. A poor man may be happy in a hut and a millionaire unhappy in a palace. In unselfishness, kindness to others, humility, clean mindedness, clear conscience and an upright life lies the secret to happiness.¹⁴⁹⁵

Vorachith concluded by recommending to readers the values typical of North American Protestantism, making him the epitome of the Ameri-phone Lao. Further, Lao Christians seem to have been most prominent in the neutralist years, perhaps more common than even the semi-colonial years, bringing Lao cross-cultural contact with the West to new heights.

Conclusion: The Ends of RLG Culture

The revolution of 1975 was one of the youth rising against their elders (see chapter eight), yet it can also be read as a rejection of the hyper-nationalist exclusionary idea of a Lao race in favor of a more inclusive, tolerant, cosmopolitan multiethnic form of nationalism first promoted by loyalists in the late 1940s, but only returning to the Kingdom of Laos in its last years. It was

¹⁴⁹² “How to be happy, a young Lao’s ideals” *Friendship*, 1968, no. 3, p. 38, 40.

¹⁴⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 38. English in the original.

¹⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 40.

after all the Pathet Lao who first proclaimed the equality of all ethnic groups as a key plank of their political and social programs.¹⁴⁹⁶ This stance was a result of their bases in the remote Lao-Viet borderlands that were populated by ethnic minorities predominantly, but it led them to formulate a multiethnic nationalism better suited to the realities of the most ethnically diverse country in Southeast Asia. In this respect, the Pathet Lao victory over the RLG can be regarded as ethnic minorities seizure of the lowland Lao cities and settlements along the Mekong.¹⁴⁹⁷ More broadly, the return of cosmopolitanism suggests to a degree a desire among some RLG elite for the Pathet Lao program of ethnic equality.

The revolution of 1975 was a victory for ethnic minorities. It also promoted neutrality, which finally vanquished anti-communism. The result stands in marked contrast to the RLG ideology formulated by the elite which consisted of a belief in a Lao race and anti-communism. While democracy survived the revolution of 1975, it mutated from a Western liberal parliamentary form to a Democratic Centralism version (see chapter nine).

There were signs of a growing cosmopolitan outlook widespread in the country where contact with foreigners was celebrated in some quarters. This entailed a new interest in and seeking out of contact with foreign-ness that manifested in variety of ways, but exemplified in renewed interest in bilingual dictionaries that provided access to the foreign. Academic endeavors opened up to the West in distinctly new ways. Amid increasing cultural influence from America, and continued French influences, cross-cultural contacts began to touch on deeply important social

¹⁴⁹⁶ On multiethnic nationalist after 1975 see Vatthana Pholsena, *Post-War Laos: The Politics of Culture, History and Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹⁴⁹⁷ Bounsang Khamkeo, *I Little Slave* describes the ethnic difference of the Pathet Lao from the lowland Lao of Vientiane. See further, Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 177 which notes Vientiane residents referred to the Pathet Lao soldiers that entered the city in 1975 as “forest people” (ຊົນບ້າ), which had “all the connotations of ignorant country hicks.”

issues such as gender or religion. New identities appeared such as Ameri-phone Lao or Lao Christians that were more prominent in the neutralist years than at any time before or since in the country. Conversion to a foreign religion was perhaps the ultimate act of opening up to foreign influences. There appears as a result an emerging diversity in late RLG culture. The country had more foreigners than before 1954 and was more globally connected. Those who travelled abroad, especially to the US, went for longer periods of time and described more profound experiences.

Lao women took a more prominent role in society, enjoying unprecedented opportunities to participate in the public, civic life of the late RLG era. The first feminist organization appeared that worked to improve the lot of women in the country bringing together elite women and commoners in unprecedented ways. Others fought against outdated social conventions, inspired by examples of gender relations abroad. Many fought to escape the home to become government workers (especially teachers), as some rose to become the country's first elected politicians, deputies in the National Assembly. Yet biases and prejudices remained stubbornly entrenched in a society caught between tradition and modernity.

Culture was reaching a maturity in the later years of the RLG. There was a high level of academic activity in conferences and publications that promoted a higher level of intellectual culture, especially among the elite. Civil society was growing in numerous organizations, movements and publications. At the same time new state institutions were founded that had notably greater independence from the state. Intellectuals continued to debate major issues without forming a clear consensus even as there was a growing nostalgia for the early years of the RLG. The "laocisation" of secondary schools was a major effort.

How did these trends influence the revolution of 1975? Why did the revolution find such wide support among some segments of RLG society? Besides the powerful desire for peace, a

greater tolerance, or more cosmopolitan mindset may have made new relations with China and North Vietnam appear more palatable. Especially among the youth there was yearning for “Asian brotherhood.” Moreover, many may have felt Pathet Lao proposals that advocated tolerance for ethnic minorities instead of assimilation to the dominant Lao culture were more progressive and better suited to the country. There was a greater intellectual spirit which was unwilling to simply settle for the established order of things, but wished to experiment and evaluate different options hereto denied in RLG society.

These forces powerfully influenced the support for neutrality and peace in the last years of the RLG from those within RLG society. Yet they involved a displacement, an abandonment or even a toppling of RLG ideology, which was nonetheless critical for fighting the communist threat.

CHAPTER EIGHT: DEMOCRACY'S RETURN AND DEMISE

Introduction

There was a restoration of democracy, which was witnessed by a gradual return of elections beginning in 1965. The Lao elite continued to debate and discuss the state of their democracy. By 1974, a social science survey revealed the Lao elite were as a group committed to the fundamental principles of democracy while recognizing the problems and acknowledging the limits of it, especially amid the grim realities of a brutal, long war. Yet as neighboring democracies were toppled and dictators rose in their place, some among the elite began to perceive their uniqueness in the region as a relatively stable democracy. Democracy itself spread in society, especially in RLG schools, amid an enormous expansion of education. There was even an expansion of civil and political rights, foundational to any modern democracy. Thus, even as the RLG faced real prospects of defeat on the fields of war, democracy remained the signal cause for the country and the only way to possibly justify the enormous sacrifices seen in the Second Indochina War. Yet it would be promises from the Pathet Lao for a more robust democracy in light of the RLG's failings that swayed many in 1975.

In the final years of the RLG, Neutralism and Buddhism noticeably strengthened, as war exhaustion set in. Many had grown tired of the killing, death and destruction, amid the destruction and ruination of the country. All the promise and hope of the early 1950s had been drained, sucked away by the merciless, grinding war. Calls for peace morphed to full throated support of strict neutralism as the US backed away, the economy came under pressure and anti-American sentiments rose. A number of new political parties emerged each with its own vision of true neutrality as peace drew near.

In these later years (especially 1969-1975), there was a flourishing of debate on these and other related matters. A close examination of the final years is vitally important to form a full understanding of the social and intellectual currents that toppled the Royal Lao Government. While Pathet Lao agents influenced events by proposing other forms of government, economy, and neutrality it was the discontented youth that took center stage in the revolution, deciding the fate of the Royal Lao Government.

Restoration of Democracy (1965-1972)

With the collapse of the second coalition government in April 1963 and the escalation of the Second Indochina War the Royal Lao Government was thrown into turmoil. General Phoumi Nosavan had tried and failed to establish a dictatorship.¹⁴⁹⁸ In the absence of that, King Savang Vatthana turned to restore democracy in the Kingdom.¹⁴⁹⁹ The National Assembly elected in 1960 was reaching the end of its five-year mandate in 1965. As a result, limited elections were held in 1965, with full elections returning in 1967 and 1972. One strong impetus for the restoration of democracy was the rightwing challenge to Souvanna Phouma's leadership. Maintaining democracy during a massive war was challenging, yet democracy had by then become so deeply ingrained in the political culture of the Lao elite and masses alike that a determined effort was made to revive it at the very moment when other democracies in the region were faltering.

¹⁴⁹⁸ This topic deserves further study, but key aspects of Phoumi's failure to become a dictator must include his battlefield defeats and his loss of US support after the Geneva Accords of 1962. Other leaders of the RLA like General Kouprasith Abhay also failed to become dictators. See *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Laos, vol. XXVIII*, p. 544.

¹⁴⁹⁹ In a "return to constitutional forms" the King convened a joint session of the National Assembly and the King's Council to amend the constitution to permit him to extend the mandate of the National Assembly as elections were delayed due to war. This was a remarkable display of commitments to constitutional principles in the regional at the time, not to mention that it appeared amid the fiercest war in the country's modern times. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 610. The restoration of democracy in 1965 was foreshadowed by Phoui Sananikone's election to speak of the National Assembly in May 1963. See *ibid*, p. 500.

Myanmar, South Vietnam, South Korea, Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia had already fallen under military dictatorships and by 1972 the Philippines would join them. Nevertheless, it is true that the Second Indochina War placed limitations on the restored democracy, as the provinces were ruled by military governors until 1971.

Yet in a larger sense democracy was what the war in Laos was all about. The Royal Lao Government was fighting to safeguard democracy in the country, and repeatedly accused the Pathet Lao of wanting to overthrow the democratic order as well as the constitutional monarchy. Even the CDIN acted to suspend the National Assembly only as an emergency to face the communist threat believing this to be a necessary measure to protect the democratic system. The neutralists were no less concerned. As Souvanna wrote in a telegram at the beginning of 1969, which was printed in a government magazine: “The Neo Lao Hak Xat have the objective of wanting to overthrow our democratic regime and build a dictatorship in the style of socialist North Vietnam, replacing [ours].”¹⁵⁰⁰ Thus, it is not inconsequential that one finds in the neutralist years the Lao elite had become concerned to transmit the values of democracy to the next generation via the educational system and continued to investigate their democracy over remainder of life of the Royal Lao Government, even in the midst of the most violent war the country had ever seen.

Yet given Souvanna Phouma’s long service as prime minister (1951-1954, 1956-1958, 1960, and 1962-1975), and the fusion of the right with the neutralists in 1964, was it possible that the restoration of democracy was in fact nothing but an illusion, mere window-dressing? Was Souvanna himself nothing more than a dictator disguised by the trappings of democracy? Certainly, he won his seat in free and fair elections, but was he able to amass power in the National

¹⁵⁰⁰ “Flash News,” *National Unity*, March 1969, no. 1, p. 22.

Assembly to the extent that no one could challenge him? It is true that after 1962 Souvanna was the only acceptable choice for prime minister since he was seen as the “essential element” to neutrality. Moreover, by 1965 Souvanna was perhaps the most experienced politician in the country, rivaled only by Savang Vatthana for influence, who was restricted from active involvement in politics by the constitution. Souvanna had, furthermore, gotten used to controlling different political factions to build coalitions. Thus, Souvanna knew how to make others do what he wanted. He also coordinated candidate lists with the regional military commanders. Nonetheless, he faced strong challenges by a number of political forces beyond his control. While he may have been unchallenged in his post as prime minister, he could not impose his will on the domestic political scene unilaterally.

The July 18, 1965 elections were the nadir of democracy in the Royal Lao Government era. There were the usual “threats and bribery” among politicians.¹⁵⁰¹ Unlike in previous elections where all adults were eligible to vote, the electorate for the July 1965 elections was severely limited to “about 20,000 military officers, government functionaries, and teachers.”¹⁵⁰² The term-in-office for elected deputies was only for two-years rather than the normal five-year term. Moreover, major political parties were in flux. The Rally for the Lao People Party, the Social Democrats Party and the Santhiphap Party were by then all dissolved or defunct.¹⁵⁰³ Even so, a US report observed the new Assembly was “generally younger and more energetic and capable than its predecessor and one that is likely to seek a more active role in the government.”¹⁵⁰⁴ The Neutralist Party of

¹⁵⁰¹ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Laos, Vol. XXVIII*, p. 381.

¹⁵⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰³ On the collapse of the earlier parties see Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 448: “With the stresses imposed by the war, the nationalist political parties had fallen apart.”

¹⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.* “A number of relatively young civil servants and junior cabinet officers have recently come into prominence, of whom the most important is Sisouk Na Champassak. By Lao standards they are a hard-working and generally honest group. A few have already been accused of lining their pockets, however, and we cannot be confident that increased authority or frustration will not incline them toward the corrupt ways of their elders.”

Souvanna Phouma was the only formal political party, which had won support from many lower level government functionaries.¹⁵⁰⁵ The King himself was a supporter of the Neutralist Party and even read its program to the National Assembly in 1966. In the same elections, the old CDIN rightists re-appeared divided among the Group of Thirty-Three led by Leuam Insixiengmay, the deputy prime minister, and the Youth Movement led by Sisouk Na Champassak, the finance minister and *defacto* defense minister.¹⁵⁰⁶ Together they outnumbered Souvanna Phouma's Neutralist party which only had 25 seats in the National Assembly, which itself was short of an absolute majority.

While some sources suggest Souvanna Phouma and some of the former CDIN worked together in this period there were in fact major confrontations in the “rubber stamp” National Assembly.¹⁵⁰⁷ Moreover, important constitutional prerogatives were restored to the National Assembly.¹⁵⁰⁸ The Group of Thirty-Three and the Youth Movement joined together to block Souvanna Phouma's budget in the fall of 1966, leading to early elections in 1967.¹⁵⁰⁹ On September 16, 1966 a majority of the deputies in the National Assembly opposed Souvanna Phouma's proposed budget, which plunged the government into chaos. For the next ten days there was a flurry of activity in which a compromise solution was sought “without, however, resorting

¹⁵⁰⁵ T.D. Roberts, et. al., *Area Handbook for Laos*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), p. 171.

¹⁵⁰⁶ Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Washington D.C.: Office of Chief of Military History, 1978), p. 164. Oudone notes that Sisouk was given the role of *chargé de mission* in the Ministry of Defense. Sisouk's political group is also known as the “Young Nationalists” in some sources.

¹⁵⁰⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Laos, Vol. XXVIII*, p. 381 notes that Souvanna Phouma “has been promoting the cause of Sisouk in a way that indicates he sees him as a possible successor to the premiership.”

¹⁵⁰⁸ The National Assembly's powers to approve the formation of any new government and the passage of legislation was restored by constitution amendment. Prior to that, the National Assembly's powers in this regard had been reduced in service of forming the second coalition government. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 610.

¹⁵⁰⁹ See further Lewis M. Stern and Joseph J. Zasloff, “Laos” in Haruhiro Fukui (ed.) *Political Parties of Asia and the Pacific* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 679-699.

to violence.”¹⁵¹⁰ The Royal Lao Army remained on the side-lines in this conflict.¹⁵¹¹ In this political fracas one can see the revival of democracy was complete. By its very dysfunction, the budget fight was proof that democracy was functioning. The next elections in 1967 restored the universal electorate as eight-hundred thousand voted at 1,330 polling places across the country (including parts of Phongsaly and Sam Neua).¹⁵¹²

At this point the Group of Thirty-Three and the Youth Movement formed a new party, the Lao Development Association. The elder statesman Phoui Sananikone was the speaker of the National Assembly and led the opposition to Souvanna. Oun Sananikone and others remained active as did Leuam Insixiengmay and Sisouk Na Champassak, while Boun Oum faded from politics. Souvanna himself usually tried to remain above the fray of parties seeking to “let the parties play their game out with a minimum of interference” from him.¹⁵¹³

Thus, while Souvanna’s leadership was indispensable he was not in any sense a dictator and kept his role as prime minister only because other parties found it politically expedient in respect to maintaining the country’s neutral status as well as the support of international backers whom were vital to the economy and the war.¹⁵¹⁴ Souvanna’s own Neutralist Party disintegrated after the 1967 elections, and Souvanna himself railed against the very idea of political parties which he felt sacrificed national interests for their own narrow party interests (echoing the CDIN in 1958). Former CDIN members would remain a force even after 1964. They founded a number

¹⁵¹⁰ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Laos, vol. XXVIII*, p. 498. Souvanna was supported in the crisis by the King, the Privy Council and the Army.

¹⁵¹¹ *Ibid.* “the army as an organizational entity did not intervene to influence the Assembly directly in favor of the government and Souvanna did not seek this. Its overall political role was more passive than in previous crises and it worked to control its own rebellious elements, the perennial angry colonels of the Fifth Military Zones.”

¹⁵¹² The turn-out was 80 percent for the January 1967 election. See Great Britain, *Laos* (London: British Information Services, 1967), p. 42. For figures related to this election, see Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 610.

¹⁵¹³ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Laos, vol. XXVIII*, p. 498.

¹⁵¹⁴ Moreover the “anti-Souvanna Phouma” faction failed to find a leader to unite behind. See further *ibid.*, p. 486.

of new newspapers such as “Free Voice” and “Future.” Conflict with Souvanna would periodically explode into the open such as when Oun Sananikone called on Souvanna to cast off neutrality after war had escalated and formally dissolve the second coalition government. To him, the continued existence of the second coalition government undermined the existence of an independent Royal Lao Government.

While the Royal Lao Army remained on the side-lines during the budget crisis of late 1966 their influence over the country’s politics remained. This was inevitable as long as the country was engulfed in a massive war. It had been a fundamental problem for RLG democracy since the 1960 general elections. In the campaigning for the 1967 elections RLA commanders in Military Regions I (Ouane Rathikoun), II (Vang Pao), and IV (Phasouk Somly) presented Souvanna Phouma with list of candidates.¹⁵¹⁵ While this arrangement did not apply in Military Regions III and V where “the election fight is more wide open” the elections were marked by deal-making among the power-brokers:

With these shaky agreements and understandings to provide the props, Souvanna’s compromise list of candidates, largely the selections of regional commanders, will probably prevail and a substantial majority in the Assembly will consist of those who have made some sort of a deal with Souvanna; *but the new Assembly and elected candidates will have merely formed the framework in which the political struggle in government-controlled Laos will be slugged out.*¹⁵¹⁶

Those who were elected in this way were not really beholden to anyone and the conflict among competing interests fundamental to any democracy remained. Moreover, they operated with *de jure* freedoms that were conditioned by *de facto* vested interests that influence any democracy. All political power could not be concentrated into one movement or party; deputies changed parties amid shifting alliances providing essential tensions and voices of dissent. As much as Souvanna

¹⁵¹⁵ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Laos, vol. XXVIII*, p. 542. There was more competition in military region III between Souvanna Phouma and Leuam Insixiangmay, who rose to replace Phoumi Nosavan as deputy prime minister after the latter had fled the country into exile.

¹⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

tried to engineer the National Assembly in his favor “there remains the raw material and sentiment in the Assembly to develop a bloc of political opposition” to him.¹⁵¹⁷ Souvanna’s leadership was essential, but opposition to him remained. Precisely because he was without a strong base of support a powerful opposition in the National Assembly returned, which aided the revival of democracy in the Kingdom. There was a real contest among supporters and opponents of Souvanna’s premiership, but he remained the key figure holding together the overall political system.¹⁵¹⁸

In the neutralist years, there were signs that democracy was filtering down to wider society through civil society organizations as varied as Literature Committee (later the Royal Lao Academy), the Lao Women’s Association, *Mittasone* and the Lao American Association – which all held elections to select a leader from among their membership. Even a small organization like the Student Teachers Training Association (L’Amicale des Elèves Normaliens, ສະມາຄົມນັກຮຽນ ອົບຮົມຄຊູ) held elections for its officers in March 1965.¹⁵¹⁹ There were four candidates who each had twenty minutes to speak, after which they had to answer questions. Following dinner, an

¹⁵¹⁷ Ibid. “The regional leaders have compromised with local interests and have in several key cases wittingly incorporated anti-Souvanna deputies with leadership potential in their lists, even over Souvanna’s protests. Souvanna has, however, succeeded in eliminating several offensive deputies...” The latter comment refers to a French supported neutralist faction in Luang Prabang.

¹⁵¹⁸ See for example, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol. XXVIII, Laos*, p. 533: “There remains, however, considerable dissatisfaction among Laos elite, particularly younger men, that they are still “saddled” both with Souvanna, whom they respect but for whom they feel no warmth, and with vestiges of “tripartitism” which to them symbolizes foreign intervention in Lao internal affairs and continuing restraint on their freedom of political action. Fortunately the wiser among the Lao elite accept this situation philosophically (Phoui and Ngon Sananikone, Tay Keoluangkhot, Sisouk na Champassak, Inpeng Suryadhay, Outhong Souvannavone, Sisoung Sisaleumsak, among others); and Souvanna continues to be supported and “tripartitism” tolerated by key military leaders, including Generals Ouan, Kouprasith, and Phasouk. King Savang, despite his cultivated remoteness, is also exercising an increasingly constructive influence over government affairs, and in a crisis, such as finding a successor to Souvanna with none in sight, he would play a truly critical role. But forces working for change, especially discontent of young Lao with status quo increasingly strong and as last few months have proven can follow unpredictable courses.”

¹⁵¹⁹ “Presidential Election of the E.S.P.,” *Bulletin de l’Amicale des Elèves Normaliens*, March 31, 1965, p. 7.

election was held “in a very calm atmosphere,” with nearly twelve hundred fifty votes cast.¹⁵²⁰ The bulletin report concluded poignantly: “We hope that the president will lead us in good will and that he does all that is possible for the success of our association.”¹⁵²¹ For his part the newly elected president wrote about the officer election in this fashion:

Note of the President of the A.E.N.

The presidential election took place on March 4, 1965. I am happy to receive the testimony of your sympathy and your confidence. I want to thank all my friends who had entrusted me with this delicate mission. In the accomplishment of the work which you have charged me, I assure you that I will work conforming to the statutes of our association and to the needs of you all.¹⁵²²

The new president Somnûk Phongsouvanh went on to thank and address all the stakeholders of the organization. He was aware the position was one of trust and owed obligations to the association’s membership. Even university students training to be teachers preferred to organize their society in a democratic fashion, showing how widely the value of democracy had spread in society by the mid-1960s.

Democratic Revolution in Education

There was a basic understanding that universal education was vital to fostering a truly democratic society. In 1967 the Minister of Education Leuam Insixiengmay reported that “judging the country as a whole, there is a spectacular development of education.”¹⁵²³ He could point to the vast increase in school enrollment figures that surpassed 230,000 students by 1972. A key thrust of the expanding education system was a new adult literacy program to “defeat” illiteracy,

¹⁵²⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵²¹ Ibid.

¹⁵²² Somnuk Phongsouvanh, ຖ້ວນວຽກງານຂອງປະທານ [“Note of the President”] *Bulletin de l’Amicale des Elèves Normaliens*, March 31, 1965, vol. 2, no. 1, p. 3.

¹⁵²³ Unesco, *International Yearbook of Education: vol. XXIX - 1967* (Geneva: International Bureau of Education, 1968), p. 203.

especially in rural areas.¹⁵²⁴ Basic educators were sent to all areas of the county to improve literacy in the population, resulting in a major increase to thirty-five percent.¹⁵²⁵ The Ministry of Education according to Leuam consistently prioritized increasing enrollments. This involved the transformation of the education system from one mainly designed to train a select few as administrators in the colonial era to one that provided universal education.¹⁵²⁶ Thus Leuam said before the National Assembly in 1972 “the concept of political democracy had engendered democracy in other domains, including education.”¹⁵²⁷ The 1962 education reforms were made in part to meet “the growing aspiration of the population for education.”¹⁵²⁸ More broadly these reforms sought to change what constituted a “good citizen.” This was not only a sentiment of government officials, but also was widely diffuse in society. Thus, Leuam reported that “all classes of the population are very anxious to learn.”¹⁵²⁹ Wherever the government lacked funds to build schools “the villagers often managed to build their schools themselves, with their own materials.”¹⁵³⁰ Indeed the demand for education outpaced even such rapid expansions of government schools.

¹⁵²⁴ Ibid, p. 208.

¹⁵²⁵ Ibid, p. 208. In 1950 literacy rates were estimated at between fifteen and twenty percent. This program later ran into problems and was restarted as a “functional literacy” campaign in 1972. Nevertheless, the RLG efforts to increase literacy were important to later LPDR successes in this area. See “Functional Literacy Project for Vientiane Plain Farmers,” William W. Sage Collection On Laos, archived at <http://hdl.handle.net/2286/R.A.166492>.

¹⁵²⁶ Leuam Insixiengmay, ວາຍງານກິຈການຂອງກະຊວງສຶກສາທິການແລະສິລປາກອນຕໍ່ສະພາແຫ່ງຊາດສົກປີ1972 [“Activities Report of the Department of National Education and Fine Arts to the National Assembly, 1972] (n.p., n.d.), p. 49-50.

¹⁵²⁷ Ibid, p. 51. Yet in other places in his speech Leuam expressed negative views of the people: “the “rush” of the masses toward education, like all movements of the masses, is often irrational.”

¹⁵²⁸ Ibid, p. 50.

¹⁵²⁹ Unesco, *International Yearbook of Education: vol. XXIX – 1967* (Geneva: International Bureau of Education, 1968) p. 208.

¹⁵³⁰ Unesco, *International Yearbook of Education: vol. XXVI – 1964* (Geneva: International Bureau of Education, 1965), p. 195. This was especially true of rural schools. Urban schools were not as easy to build by the local community, but there was an increase in private schools to meet the demand there.

Democracy was able to influence the wider society as it became part of the school curriculum of the Kingdom. Teacher manuals told instructors struggling with how to teach their students all there was to know that they should abandon that doomed effort and instead teach them how to find the truth.¹⁵³¹ Yet most interesting was the primary education curriculum. A third-grade language text instilled values of the elite to the students in the classroom, the foremost of which included an understanding of and devotion to democracy. This text was approved by the Ministry of Education earning the approval of the governing elite, transmitting their values to the next generation. In the very first lesson of the textbook, the student would read: “according to a free democracy, the government is of the people and acts for the benefit of the people because the people are the ones who elect the governing party.”¹⁵³² The next lesson concerned “the form of government.” Yet before discussing democracy explicitly, the lesson first clarified the different forms of government in the world:

Of the forms of government of various countries in the world there are many customs and traditions which we might separate out to be two great groups: that is free democracy and socialism. For example, of countries that observe the free democratic form there are France, England, the United States of America and of all the countries that observe socialism there are the Soviet Union-Russia and the People’s Republic of China. These two great groupings we like to call the free world and the communist world.¹⁵³³

The Cold War intruded on the primary school class room in the neutralist years. The teacher could not discuss the country’s government without discussing its mortal enemy, communism, presenting an embattled view of the government even to young pupils. The text then explains Lao democracy: “In this age, our Lao country observes the free democratic form [of government] which has a king as the leader and has a constitution that is the supreme law of the nation.”¹⁵³⁴

¹⁵³¹ Vaeovan Hormsombat, ການວາງຕົວຂອງຄຣູແລະອາຈານ [“Teacher conduct”] (n.p.: Ministry of Education, 1973), p. i: “ເຮົາຈະຕ້ອງສອນວິທີຮຽນເອົາຄວາມຮູ້ໃຫ້ນັກຮຽນສາມາດເຂົ້າໃຈ...”

¹⁵³² ດູແບຮຽນພາສາລາວຊັ້ນປະຖົມປີທີ6 [“Learn Lao language: grade six”] (Ministry of Education, n.d.), p. 3.

¹⁵³³ Ibid, p. 5.

¹⁵³⁴ Ibid, p. 6.

The textbook continued by specifying the three branches of the Lao government – the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. The executive’s power was explained briefly while the legislature and the judiciary were explained in greater detail, including a description of their powers and their role in government. The description of the legislature was the most lengthy:

The dissemination of rules and laws is the duty of the Assembly of the People’s Representatives, who are responsible [for making law]. When this institution has discussed and considered documents, then [it] really does send [the law] on to the Privy Council in order to consider [it] once further. And when this Council views [it] is good and right then [they] lead it to offer to the King, lord of life [in order] to promulgate a royal decree, enforced as the law of the nation.¹⁵³⁵

Even though the constitution specified sovereign power was derived from the people, to a young pupil the legislature nevertheless would appear somewhat subordinate to the King. To make a law, the legislature had to send it to the Privy Council and then if it passed, on to the King, as an offering to him. The King would appear to have had some control over the legislature, yet the legislature was nonetheless essential to government. The lesson concluded by noting that the form of government “is a matter the most important to the life...of all humanity. Therefore, before choosing any form of government citizens of every country must discuss and consider [the issue] completely.”¹⁵³⁶

Students were provided with a vocabulary of new terms with the reading, given that it was a language lesson. They were also provided with “major points of summary,” including “the democratic form of our country.”¹⁵³⁷ They also had a list of questions such as “what is a form of government? How is the democratic form? How is the socialist form? What form of government does our country observe? ...How similar are democratic countries’ form of government to our own?...”¹⁵³⁸ and so on.

¹⁵³⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵³⁶ Ibid, p. 7.

¹⁵³⁷ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁵³⁸ Ibid.

Finally, after explaining what a government was, the textbook stated that government has great responsibilities “because the fate and the happiness of all the people must depend on the government itself.”¹⁵³⁹ The text went on to tell the student that whenever the government is strong the people are happy and whenever its weak, the people suffer:

Whenever the government surely is strong and robust and has power, the people are then happy and the country is prosperous, [its] name famous around the world. Whenever the government certainly is weak and feeble in the administration, the citizens then suffer trouble, the country is only dark and sad, rising and falling or also potentially [it] is ruined.¹⁵⁴⁰

Throughout its history, the country had had its share of trouble especially since the division of kingdom in 1707 and the subsequent period of foreign domination. While the elite felt obligated to warn the youth about the country’s past, they also turned this lesson to their advantage by telling their young pupils that the only way to avoid danger was to have the elite lead the country:

The government will be permanent when the leaders are good. The “leaders” means the group of people who unite to form the governing party, having a prime minister at the head. The good leader is a person that has extensive knowledge in all areas, meaning [they are] brave, determined, intelligent, honest, sincere, upright and [who] knows to sacrifice one’s own interest for the interests of all.¹⁵⁴¹

The textbook then offered to young pupils a metaphor of the nation as a boat floating down a dangerous river. It was up to the steersmen and the oarsmen to guide the boat safely to its destination. To “pass from various dangers, [and] calamities,” the government had to be led by leaders with the right qualities.¹⁵⁴² The student was also told they themselves must have good qualities too. They must study hard, be “industrious,” “honest and truthful,” “respect the order of the country and submit to sacrifice in all matters for the nation in a time of necessity...”¹⁵⁴³

¹⁵³⁹ Ibid, p. 1.

¹⁵⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 1-2.

¹⁵⁴¹ Ibid, p. 2.

¹⁵⁴² Ibid.

¹⁵⁴³ Ibid.

Elite Views on Late Democracy

The political revolution of the Royal Lao Government was to realize for the first time democracy and participatory government, where all people had equal rights, were governed according to the rule of law, and so joined the modern world in the age of popular sovereignty. It was in fact a culmination of Issara democracy. This was articulated at various points in the neutralist years. One good example is an April 1971 article that appeared in an elite magazine *Vientiane Society* (ສະມາຄົມວຽງຈັນ).¹⁵⁴⁴ The author Somboun Thoranin began by describing the RLG political system: “government of the country in a democracy means the establishment by the people of self-government for the benefit of the people.”¹⁵⁴⁵ Recalling a classic democratic formula, he looked back on Royal Lao Government democracy, noting it had lasted for more than twenty years since May 11, 1947.¹⁵⁴⁶ Somboun was thereby endorsing the notion that the loyalists were the first democrats, which was a contentious statement. Yet he obviously had great pride in RLG democracy, saying:

The democratic government is the governance of the country through taking the voice of the majority of the people to be supreme; meaning that the Lao people, every person, man and woman, has a duty to assemble in order to confer in the governance of the nation, viz. the people govern themselves.¹⁵⁴⁷

This is an indication of how far democracy had taken root by the end of the Royal Lao Government era. There was clear progress from the late 1940s when the loyalist had discussed democracy solely in terms of one’s duties owed to the state. Here the duty of the people was to raise their voices and be heard by their government. Somboun described a state where power was derived completely from the people, meeting any definition of a modern democracy. It advanced further when the

¹⁵⁴⁴ Somboun Thoranin, ການປົກຄອງໃນລະບອບປະຊາທິປະໄຕ [“Government in a democratic system”] *Vientiane Society*, April 1971, no. 6, p. 16-17.

¹⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁵⁴⁶ He erroneously gives the date as 1948.

¹⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

government amended the constitution in 1956 to give women the right to vote, granting one half the adult population a voice in the political process.¹⁵⁴⁸ Yet Somboun still referred to “the people” most often as “subjects of the king” (ຮາສດອນ) in his writing rather than “citizens” (ພົນເມືອງ) and his discussion did not consider the role of the monarchy, focusing instead on the people and their representatives in parliament.

Somboun went on to list the matters that people deliberated on in a democracy such as determining laws, the composition of the government, the budget, and so on. But his main purpose was to explain the Lao democracy, which was not a direct democracy but a representative one. He began by noting it would be logistically impossible to have a direct democracy:

But to let the people assemble, every person [in the country] for activities like this is not possible, due to there being many kinds of factors that prevent this. For example, there is no meeting place sufficient enough for all the people [to meet], and the people would [need] to accept difficulties making a livelihood.

Therefore, you give the people the right to choose their representative in order [for him or her] to enter the assembly in the National Assembly... the “representative of the people” is the person the people elected in order to go represent them in the aforementioned assembly...¹⁵⁴⁹

Somboun educated the next generation on their responsibilities by explaining the fundamentals of democracy to ensure all people were certain as to how it actually functioned, what their rights were, and what a representative actually did in the National Assembly. This popular Western liberal parliamentary democratic culture was unknown in the “liberated” zones. As such, Somboun may well have written to counter Pathet Lao propaganda that misconstrued the government. Somboun continued by listing the duties of a representative in the parliament such as

¹⁵⁴⁸ This change to the electoral law also lengthened the period of campaigning. It was related to ongoing RLG-Pathet Lao negotiations. See Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 330.

¹⁵⁴⁹ Ibid.

passing laws, appointing the government, administering it “according to the law” (ຕາມຮະບຽບກົດໝາຍ) and other actions “concerning the happiness and unhappiness of the people”¹⁵⁵⁰

The most important message that Somboun had for readers was that they should not just sit back and leave everything up to their representatives. He told them it was a matter of personal responsibility, up to people themselves to ensure their representative worked for them:

This is the duty of the representative, [she or he] must represent us. But if the representative does not act according to the above then [she or he] is a representative who is acting according to his own interests. This is wrong on our part to choose a bad person to be our representative.¹⁵⁵¹

Somboun’s advice fundamentally reaffirmed the democracy, calling on the people to take charge of their government. He reminded people of their rights in a democracy, saying “every Lao citizen should think that he or she has a role as the owner of the nation...”¹⁵⁵² This was a truly revolutionary idea unprecedented in Lao history before 1945. The Royal Lao Government elite thereby continued to advocate, promote and disseminate the Issara ideals of a truly democratic society. Somboun called on everyone to vote, saying: “thus it is necessary to go vote to elect a representative one prefers, one that one sees is the best.”¹⁵⁵³ He added the best representative would represent the people with “sincerity” (ບໍລິສຸດໃຈ).

Somboun’s article shows the degree to which democracy had revived since the neo-colonial years when it was undermined and challenged by military Strongmen. Now in the neutralist years, Somboun presented a wake-up call to his fellow citizens to take up the cause of democracy. He called on them to go out and vote. He warned them: “[one] should not sleep on

¹⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵⁵³ Ibid.

one's rights by not going to vote."¹⁵⁵⁴ If a person did not vote then they could not be upset about how the government was run. He said if one does not vote then a representative will be elected "that has different ideals than ours and we will regret...then [one] will grumble that "the representative is no good."¹⁵⁵⁵ But he returned to his main point: "if the majority elect a bad representative for you then it is our demerit [ອຸງຸ] that we will grumble thereafter for the next four years..."¹⁵⁵⁶ Once again, one finds in the Royal Lao Government era sentiments on democracy expressed in any modern democracy in the world.

Somboun concluded by presenting democracy as the way for a person to solve their own and the country's problems, exactly as the Issara had seen it. Yet he also warned the reader that there were threats to the democratic form of government:

...therefore, in order to be a satisfactory system, for the welfare of the Lao people, for the development of the nation to be prosperous we should elect a democratic style of government that is complete and not let the government change form, [but] defend our constitution. If it's not like this [then] the Lao system of government will change to be a monarchy, or a one-party state ... in a socialist way and so on.¹⁵⁵⁷

Somboun exhorted people to vote in the upcoming elections at the end of 1971. He continued imploring that: "one should analyze [candidates], discuss [them] completely, to elect representatives that have ability, knowledge, [who] are clever, intelligent, have sincerity to serve the people and the nation, [and] are reliably sincere..."¹⁵⁵⁸ One might say Somboun wanted people to vote for established politicians, and to thereby endorse the existing elite who had been governing the country since elections returned in 1965. In the 1972 elections only nineteen incumbents in the

¹⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 16-17.

¹⁵⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 17.

¹⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

National Assembly kept their seats.¹⁵⁵⁹ Yet more deeply, his essay shows that the elite continued to uphold democracy as highest end of their society, in a bid to realize the Issara democracy of October 12, 1945. Somboun and other elite still idealized democracy, and even imagined their society to be fundamentally democratic.

While texts are a major source by which to reconstruct elite views, an important political science study was conducted which affords unparalleled access to contemporary elite understandings. From July to October 1974, just before the fall of the government, a political science graduate student, Pornsak Phongphaew, conducted a careful study of the elite.¹⁵⁶⁰ He focused on what he called the “political-bureaucratic” elite, meaning the top leadership (132 persons), drawing a representative sample from the Provisional Government of National Unity, the Joint National Political Council, the National Assembly and first-class civil servants in the bureaucracy.¹⁵⁶¹ In his interviews, he separately presented each of the 62 elite selected with a 158-point questionnaire that took an hour to complete, allowing him to capture important information on elite views of the fundamentals of democracy, especially concerning free speech and political rights.

The single most important finding Pornsak made was that the Lao elite surveyed overwhelmingly supported (87.1%) the statement that “people ought to be allowed to vote even if

¹⁵⁵⁹ Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 834. In the elections there were 222 candidates for 60 seats in the National Assembly; 864,114 voted.

¹⁵⁶⁰ Pornsak Phongphaew, “The Political Culture-and-Personality of the Laotian Political-Bureaucratic Elite.” (Ph.D. diss., The University of Oklahoma, 1976).

¹⁵⁶¹ Ibid, p. 21, 26-33. Of the 62 elite he surveyed only one was a woman, only two were not ethnic Lao and all but five had a secondary education or higher. Pornsak’s inclusion of members of the Provisional Government of National Unity and the Joint National Political Council introduces a confounding variable in as much as half the members each of these two bodies consisted of Pathet Lao and Pathet Lao-aligned Neutrals. Oudone Sananikone claimed the rightists were not fairly represented in either body, but they were well represented in the National Assembly and the bureaucracy. See further *ibid*, p. 32-35 where Pornsak describes translating the questionnaire into Lao.

they cannot do so intelligently.”¹⁵⁶² This response confirmed the elite’s fundamental affirmation of democracy. On other questions their responses were more mixed, such as those concerning the rule of law (53.2% supported), or whether the ends justified the means (54.9% agreed), vigilantism or the denial of legal rights to political subversives (equal number for and against).¹⁵⁶³ In some responses the extent to which the Lao elite surveyed had become desensitized to violence was apparent (66.1% supported the following: “We might as well make up our minds that in order to make the world better a lot of innocent people will have to suffer” while 59.7% approved: “To bring great changes for the benefit of mankind often requires cruelty and even ruthlessness”).¹⁵⁶⁴ In other questions much of the top leadership revealed a marked acquiescence with corrupt politicians (82.3%).¹⁵⁶⁵

On balance, the overall quantified results led Pornsak to judge, perhaps hastily, that support for liberal democracy was low among the elite saying, “we can hardly be sanguine about the prospects for liberal democracy in a country like Laos.”¹⁵⁶⁶ However, he uncritically took the US as the standard by which to judge RLG democracy. He also made no consideration of the fact the country had just concluded a brutal civil war lasting fourteen years which certainly must have affected elite views on violence and legal rights for political enemies. Another insolvable issue is that those surveyed included both individuals from the RLG and Pathet Lao.

¹⁵⁶² See *ibid*, p. 257-258, Table 13 Laotian Elite’s Attitudes Towards the Political “Rules of the Game,” Compared with American and Malaysian Attitudes.

¹⁵⁶³ *Ibid*. See further, *ibid*, p. 329 for a breakdown of responses on these questions (no. 111-118).

¹⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 256.

Nevertheless, it is all the more remarkable that Pornsak found considerable support for free speech and the rule of law among the Lao elite, higher even than Americans or Malaysians – as indicated in this table adapted from Pornsak’s thesis.¹⁵⁶⁷

Statements	Percentage of Lao Elite Agreeing
People who hate our way of life should still have a chance to talk and be heard.	93%
Nobody has the right to tell another person what he should or should not read.	92%
Unless there is freedom for many points of view to be presented, there is little chance that the truth can ever be known.	100%
No matter what a person’s political beliefs are, he is entitled to the same legal rights and protections as anyone else.	98%
Freedom of conscience should mean the freedom to not believe in gods as well as the freedom to worship the religion of one’s choice.	98%
You cannot really be sure whether an opinion is true or not unless people are free to argue against it.	98%

Such strong support led Pornsak to quote Daniel Moynihan “there is no nation so poor that it cannot afford free speech.”¹⁵⁶⁸ Given the aforementioned support among elite for the right to vote,

¹⁵⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 260, Table 14 Laotian Elite’s Attitudes Towards “Free Speech and Opinion,” Compared with American and Malaysian Attitudes.

¹⁵⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 259.

taken together with their support of free speech and the rule of law, it is clear the Lao elite were committed to the fundamental principles of Western liberal parliamentary democracy.

Yet while the Lao elite surveyed demonstrated widespread acceptance of democratic ideals Pornsak also included statements posing dilemmas designed to test the Lao elite's absolute commitment to free speech and the rule of law.¹⁵⁶⁹ Suffice it to say, their support was not absolute, but conditioned by concerns for security; thereby revealing the degree to which elite views had been twisted by war. For certain statements where an author or speaker is portrayed as "bad" or uninformed the results for practical applications of free speech were somewhat mixed (although perhaps more rejected such statements than one might imagine).¹⁵⁷⁰ Yet when "dangerous enemies" or even "great danger" was included in the scenario then the elite were willingly to broadly endorse statements opposed to the rule of law or individual freedoms.¹⁵⁷¹ While Pornsak strove to pose statements that would yield a "realistic test of liberal democratic beliefs" his questions were extreme in the sense they "demand[ed] the sacrifice of other valued goals" in order to uphold democratic values, even the most basic one – that of self-preservation.¹⁵⁷² Yet a simple comparison with Americans may be misleading in this case given that that country did not face existential danger to the degree the Royal Lao Government did in 1974.

¹⁵⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 262, Table 15 Laotian Elite's Attitudes Towards "Specific Applications of Free Speech and Procedural Rights," Compared with American and Malaysian Attitudes.

¹⁵⁷⁰ Ibid. To the statement "A book that contains wrong political views cannot be a good book and does not deserve to be published" 59.7% agreed whereas 40.3% disagreed. To the statement "A man ought not to be allowed to speak if he does not know what he is talking about" 64.5% agreed while 35.5% disagreed.

¹⁵⁷¹ Ibid. To the statement "In dealing with dangerous enemies of the nation, we cannot afford to depend on the courts, laws, and their slow unreliable methods" 82.3% agreed while 17.7% disagreed. To the statement "When the country is in great danger, we may have to force people to do certain things against their will, even though it violates their rights" a whopping 96.8% agreed while a mere 3.2% disagreed.

¹⁵⁷² Ibid, p. 261. As a result, Pornsak finds "the Laotian elites fall far below consensus [i.e. American and Malaysian responses]." He adds the Lao elite's beliefs are "formalistic."

The last issue Pornsak surveyed the Lao elite concerned what he called political equality.¹⁵⁷³ He posed statements to the elite which revealed they perceived numerous problems with democracy. The largest consensus was reached that “the main trouble with democracy is that most people do not really know what is best for them” (85.5%).¹⁵⁷⁴ There was less consensus and more dissent concerning the necessity to always “have a few strong capable people actually running everything” (75.8%), which allowed the leadership to record a high opinion of themselves. While 64.5% agreed that political issues were “beyond the understanding of most of the voters” it is notable that 35.5% disagreed. Pornsak concluded that the elite “have no illusions about the handicaps which a largely illiterate and low income and educated electorate impose on a democracy” yet as stated above 87.1% still supported the principle that everyone should vote, even the ignorant.¹⁵⁷⁵

After three decades of the RLG’s experiment in democracy there remained basic facets of society that hindered further penetration of democratic values and practices. Continued traditional values of deference and respect for the social hierarchy challenged the establishment of more egalitarian relations. This was embedded in the Lao language itself as “there are no such “status-free” person pronouns.”¹⁵⁷⁶ If one did not use the “prescribed patterns of speech” that acknowledged the hierarchy this was cause for offense.¹⁵⁷⁷ It appeared in a wide array of social interactions in the Royal Lao Government era such as “in a meeting, each must be properly seated

¹⁵⁷³ Ibid, p. 265, Table 16 Laotian Elite’s Attitudes Toward “Political Equality,” Compared with American and Malaysian Attitudes.

¹⁵⁷⁴ This question especially may fall victim to acquiescence bias in as much as it leads off with the “trouble” of democracy. See further *ibid*, p. 330, questions 129-132. Question number 132 was similar and had the exact same approval rate: “Few people really know what is in their own best interests in the long run.”

¹⁵⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 264-65 which added: “about three fourths of the elite appear to have little faith in the wisdom of the Laotian people to make the choices entrusted to it by popular government....”

¹⁵⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 132.

¹⁵⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 134. “There are prescribed patterns of speech for greetings between superiors and subordinates and between equals, depending upon the positions held in the social hierarchy. A person loses face if he does not receive the treatment to which his status entitles him.”

according to his social position.”¹⁵⁷⁸ This could be especially problematic such as when politicians, perhaps campaigning for re-election, were greeted with ceremony by the people, who squatted deferentially.¹⁵⁷⁹ Open questioning of superiors was inhibited: “preference, courtesy and proper respect are always expressed toward those in authority. Normally, the wisdom or competence and efficiency of the authority figure is not openly questioned.”¹⁵⁸⁰ Moreover, the law did not apply to all equally, especially the children of the elite.¹⁵⁸¹ However it may be, while the culturally determined societal rules may have differed, lively dissent remained the norm in RLG society, even if it was expressed differently than in the West. Moreover, deference was balanced with “an almost profound concern with personal freedom-of-choice,” which was born of a stubborn self-reliance especially among the rural peasantry.¹⁵⁸² Yet while the fundamental principles and values of democracy were entrenched, at least among the elite, these continued to conflict with basic social patterns.

Not all assessments of democracy were as unqualified in their approval in the neutralist years. In the pages of *Mittasone*, a journal for young Francophone officials and intellectuals, Somphavan Inthavong wrote an incisive critique of the state of democracy in Asia. While he could appreciate the fact that democracy was alive in his own country and criticized the low state of democracy in neighboring countries, he did hint at concern for his own democracy. In his

¹⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷⁹ Frederic Benson, personal communication.

¹⁵⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 133. See further Bounsang Khamkeo, *I Little Slave* (Eastern Washington University Press, 2006), p. 59: “private opinions are rarely blurted out openly but are considered carefully and then revealed or concealed, according to circumstances. Traditionally, Laotians have been taught to avoid stating their personal opinions, especially if those opinions could damage the harmony of a relationship, and to respect hierarchy.”

¹⁵⁸¹ Thanks to Ian Baird for this comment. Further on this issue, one can point to the Na Champassak family whom established illegal casinos in the south without any repercussions. Certain elite families seem in some cases to have been above the law in the RLG. Of course, this problem continues in the LPDR.

¹⁵⁸² Ibid, p. 161.

“exegeses on democracy” Somphavan first discussed democracy more generally.¹⁵⁸³ He then went on to discuss the low state to which democracy had fallen in “the region” by which he meant Southeast Asia and perhaps parts of East Asia as well. He noted democracy appeared “at the dawn of independence” yet it was “often only the form.” He continued:

There does not exist properly speaking true practical applications [of democracy in these countries]. The elections themselves, which are supposed to be fairly disputed, are in fact often arranged in advance. The political forces in play are such that the exercise of democracy is impossible.¹⁵⁸⁴

In his analysis, Somphavan presented a serious indictment of democracy in the region, which he called a “general failure of democracy in the countries in the region.”¹⁵⁸⁵ He and the Lao elite had witnessed the rise of dictatorships in Thailand, South Vietnam, Myanmar, South Korea, Indonesia, and elsewhere. They had even seen the US neo-colonial intervention in their own country which had tried but failed to install a military dictator, Phoumi Nosavan.¹⁵⁸⁶ Somphavan was thus writing in the aftermath of the restoration of democracy in the kingdom, yet he was clearly concerned about the future of democracy in neighboring countries as well as at home. He went on to argue that whether socialist or democratic, both styles of foreign “regimes” were dictatorships. They were “reduced to a monologue since there is no plurality of political parties...dialogue thus does not exist.”¹⁵⁸⁷ He further noted the populist aspect of many dictatorships which claimed to hold power on behalf “of the people.”¹⁵⁸⁸

In the final analysis Somphavan was not content merely to criticize other countries for failing to maintain a true democracy, which would, at least implicitly, praise the Royal Lao

¹⁵⁸³ Somphavan Inthavong, “exégèse de la démocratie” *Mittasone*, 1968, October-December, no. 8, p. 14-20. The author later joined the revolution in 1975.

¹⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸⁶ By early 1965 when Phoumi Nosavan’s was exiled from the country he had lost US support.

¹⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Government by comparison. Instead Somphavan brought home the problem of sustaining democracy in post-colonial Southeast Asia, in both his own and neighboring countries:

If democracy, in the classical meaning of the term, failed in our country and in our neighboring countries, it is above all because of low economic and technology level in which we are. Here again one finds verified the wisdom of nations who say that one cannot import a political regime, like one imports merchandise. Democracy, for an illiterate people, given over to the whirlwind of political propaganda of external powers, degenerates quickly to demagoguery and is lost in anarchy. Yet national survival demands order.¹⁵⁸⁹

Somphavan identified a material cause to the loss of democracy occurring throughout the region, threatening his own country. People's unmet material needs were simply too great to sustain a government founded on high-minded ideals when other political ideologies could offer more pragmatism without all the disorder and disfunction of a democracy. When combined with the feeble education system, the democracies of the region devolved into populist dictatorships. Economic progress without democracy remains a problem prevalent even in the present. Somphavan concluded by drawing the attention of the reader to the willingness of people to sacrifice their ideals when confronted with a threat to their survival, which was a dilemma that had only worsened with the outbreak of the Second Indochina War. To Somphavan the value of democracy was unquestionably high, but the realization of it was fraught with difficulty, especially in the post-colonial world.

Political Rights and Civil Society

The earliest usage of political rights in any real sense must be traced back to the Issara who introduced them in 1945 in the first constitution in Lao history. But this arrival came at the very same moment as the modern centralized state, which granted new and unprecedented power over society. As much as the arrival of modern printing was liberating from oppressive intellectual

¹⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

climate under the French, at the same time that technology could be used by the government to brain wash people, abuse nationalism, or devolve into demagoguery. One finds this especially later in the Second Indochina War when the government actively sought to stir up anti-Vietnamese sentiment in a mass-produced comic book, that was not an erudite work of the neo-colonial years, but only a blunt, populist history to get across the government's message. There were numerous examples of the government suppressing or otherwise censoring publications, although never to the point of banning a political party. Given this one could take a rather dim view of the Royal Lao Government's respect of rights. Since the early democracy in the semi-colonial years, there were those, especially among the loyalists, spoke of rights not as personal liberties but as duties owed to the state. One may infer that the political rights enshrined in the constitution of 1947 were only window-dressing put in place by the French. To what degree did the Lao elite value political rights, which were the bedrock of any Western liberal parliamentary democracy? And were these rights at all compromised by the simultaneous arrival of the modern state apparatus with all its unprecedented power and authority, or later the outbreak of a long grueling war in which these ideals were severely tested?

It was common to find endorsements of political rights in the abstract by the elite who wrote of them as cherished rights. In its December 1969 issue, the elite magazine *National Unity* printed a Lao language version of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man.¹⁵⁹⁰ In the preface to the reprint, the editor writes:

The general assembly of the United Nations recognized and declared the rights of all humanity which we print below in whole. It's an event... that [we] will tell all members. Please do not miss the opportunity at all ... in order to distribute [it] to the people to receive, to read and to investigate [these] important matters in the schools and any place of study because not one [other] speech reaches the political theory of them or any country at all.¹⁵⁹¹

¹⁵⁹⁰ *National Unity*, December 1969, no. 8, p. 55-60.

¹⁵⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 55.

In his paper *the Echo of Liberty*, Sopsaisana wrote about the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man, which he called “sacred” showing it was perhaps the most influential document for political rights among the elite of the Royal Lao Government.¹⁵⁹² On its anniversary on December 10, he wrote that: “the entire world celebrates [it] with fervor” adding “on which is based the democratic spirit of free peoples,” among which he included his own.¹⁵⁹³ However, to Sopsaisana it was more than just rhetoric. To him rights came alive in his own circumstances. As such, his discussion turned immediately to decolonization. To him the rights discourse such that it existed was inexorably tied to the post-colonial situation. To the Lao elite colonization is what had generated their demands for rights in the first place, under the banner of the Issara. Sopsaisana’s talk of rights clearly gave him a humanistic outlook, allowing him to speak of “800 million human beings living under foreign colonial domination.”¹⁵⁹⁴ In his view, decolonization or “the liberation of man from slavery” was accomplished by “freedom and democracy.”¹⁵⁹⁵

Sopsaisana then applied the rights discourse to his own predicament, bringing it to bear on communism. He wrote that just as humanity was gaining its freedom from colonialism, it faced a new “monster,” Neo-Imperialism or Red Imperialism: “Red China and the North Vietnam communists still dangerously threaten the liberty of peoples...”¹⁵⁹⁶ The communists were threatening to impose “their authoritarian and anti-democratic doctrine,” he wrote, employing the same rhetoric used by the CDIN in the neo-colonial years.¹⁵⁹⁷ The communists inflicted “slavery and oppression” on the territory they invaded including in the “liberated” zones under the control

¹⁵⁹² Prince Sopsaisana, “10 Décembre: Journée des droits de l’homme” *Echo de la Liberté*, November 1965, vol. 4, no. 33, p. 20.

¹⁵⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

of the Pathet Lao. If the RLG enjoyed rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man then the communists destroyed those very same rights and freedoms. He turned the rights discourse on the communists themselves charging that only a few held power in communist countries while the rest of the population could only “dream of liberty and democracy.”¹⁵⁹⁸ He asked “what has been done to help these enslaved people in the vast neo-imperialist communist camp who endure the worst suffering behind the ‘bamboo curtain’? How will we be able to free these peoples who struggle under the yoke of their oppressors?”¹⁵⁹⁹ He concluded by calling on “people loving of peace and liberty” to help Laos resist communist aggression.¹⁶⁰⁰ Thus Sopsaisana enlisted rights discourse in the Second Indochina War, another sign of how democracy was altered by war. Yet Sopsaisana’s example does not shed much light on how the same rights discourse existed within the country beyond rallying domestic support against the communist foes invading the country.

The elite believed in political rights in the abstract, but did they respect them in practice? The bedrock of political rights in the Kingdom was enshrined in the constitution and elaborated in the law code. For the first time in history, there existed a legal system that espoused the rule of law, open to public scrutiny and debate, shaped by the people themselves who elected their representatives to the legislature.¹⁶⁰¹ The public had to be informed about any change in the law; such changes appeared in government gazetteer *The Journal of the Kingdom of Laos*. The new legal order was first created by the Issara constitution of October 12, 1945; however, the

¹⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰¹ While the commitment to rule of law may have been mitigated to a degree by elite favoritism, there are signs the RLG did end the racist laws of the colonial era.

constitution promulgated on May 11, 1947 also included key protections including political and civil rights. These protections appeared in the preamble to the constitution which stated:

The present constitution recognizes as fundamental principles the rights of Lao, equality before the law, legal protection of the means of existence, and the liberties in the conditions of exercise defined by the law notably: individual liberty, freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, press [d'écriture et de publier], freedom of assembly [de réunion et d'association].¹⁶⁰²

Yet the constitution underwent a number of revisions over the years. There was a history of highly active constitutionalism in the kingdom that has not been fully understood. Starting with the May 11, 1947 version, the constitution was revised on September 14, 1949, March 22, 1952, September 29, 1956, August 30, 1957, July 30, 1961, and most recently on April 1, 1965.¹⁶⁰³ The revisions of 1949 concerned amnesty for the Issara, and the revisions of 1952 lengthened the terms of office of deputies to the National Assembly, thereby strengthening the political stability of government. The revisions of 1956 introduced women voting rights as previously mentioned.

Finally, the 1965 version of the constitution included major features preserved since 1945. After mentioning the monarchy, the preamble stated: “all the Lao people declare as one a desire to have a democratic form of government.”¹⁶⁰⁴ Section one confirmed the government was a democracy and that sovereignty was derived from the people in conformity with the 1947 constitution, which itself was derived from the Issara constitution of 1945. The crucial passage of the constitution concerning rights was as follows: “This constitution recognizes rights [ເສຍິພາບ]

¹⁶⁰² Royaume du Laos, *Constitution Lao* (Saigon: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, of National Education and Information, n.d.), unpaginated p. 4. The year of publication is uncertain yet the ministry responsible for its publication only existed before the French devolution of power in September 1949. For the 1947 constitution, Bong Souvannavong led the committee established to draft it, which included Chao Sone Boutaraobol of Champassak among others.

¹⁶⁰³ A more careful study of all revisions in each version of the constitution is needed.

¹⁶⁰⁴ Oukham Phomvongsa, ອວາມເປັນມາຂອງລາວ [“Origins of the Lao”], (third edition, 1967).

of the Lao citizens including rights [ສິດ] before the law, rights protecting the livelihood, in belief [ໃນການເຊື່ອຖື] and others that are correct according to the law...”¹⁶⁰⁵

In the 1965 version, the list of rights had become abridged, not explicitly stating “individual liberty, freedom of speech, the press or assembly,” all of which were crucial to maintain a democracy. The lists of rights in the preamble had been abridged (in both French and Lao) in the 1957 version of the constitution.¹⁶⁰⁶ Yet a law passed on October 1, 1957 specified the democratic rights of Lao citizens. The National Assembly had the authority to pass laws concerning the “rights of the people” (Art. 28). The law refers to the democratic rights abridged in the preamble of the constitution. These rights included, in part: “individual rights (ເສຣີພາບໃນຕົວບຸກຄົນ), freedom of speech and freedom of the press (ການບາກເວົ້າຂີດຂຽນອອກໜັງສືພິມແລະພິມຈຳໜ່າຍ), freedom of movement, livelihood and residency (ການເດີນໄປມາທຳມາຫາກິນແລະຕັ້ງສະຖານທີ່ຢູ່), freedom of assembly (ການຕັ້ງສະມາຄົມແລະຮວມຊຸມນຸມ) and the freedom to elect and be elected (ການເລືອກຕັ້ງແລະຮັບເລືອກຕັ້ງ).¹⁶⁰⁷

Freedom of movement in particular was not granted in the 1947 constitution, about which the Issara complained bitterly; thus its appearance in 1957 was a realization of a major concern of the Issara. This expansion of rights, with even more civil liberties protected by law than even the 1947 constitution overseen by the French advisers, indicates that Lao democracy continued to

¹⁶⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 363.

¹⁶⁰⁶ Kingdom of Laos, ຮັຖທັມມະນູນ [“Constitution”] (Vientiane: Kingdom of Laos, 1957), unpaginated p. 2-3.

¹⁶⁰⁷ Kingdom of Laos, ກົດໝາຍວ່າດ້ວຍການເລືອກຕັ້ງສະມາຄົມສະພາແຫ່ງຊາດ [“National Electoral Law”] (Vientiane: National Printing House, 1957). The law then stipulates in detail each of these freedoms. For example, under first freedom there were also strong property rights (Art. 1). Slavery was outlawed (Art. 2). The law was passed in 1957 and then reprinted by the Minister of Interior Pheng Phongsavan in 1973; *ibid*, p. 6. This new election law was shaped by the RLG-Pathet Lao conflict, as the Pathet Lao had demanded the electoral law be reformed before forming the first coalition government.

advance throughout the RLG years, being safeguarded by the Lao themselves. Political rights were not a foreign imposition by the French that thereafter withered away after the French left, but rather there was a localized rights discourse. Thus, one government printing of the constitution could boast that for the first time in history all Lao, men and women aged eighteen and older “have rights to participate in politics via the right to speak out and elect [one’s] representative that they prefer to go sit as their representative in the National Assembly.”¹⁶⁰⁸ This was referring to the enfranchisement of women in 1956, who were not granted the right to vote in the French-backed 1947 constitution. In sum, the Royal Lao Government had instituted arguably one of the most liberal governments in the region, protecting the fundamental freedoms of its people and strengthening its democracy. Critics of anti-communist post-colonial democracies point to the likes of Thailand, which touted democracy while restricting the rights of the people, leaving only a shallow slogan of “democracy” to oppose communism. The Royal Lao Government stood out as notably different from its neighbors, fighting communism by offering the people a functioning Western liberal parliamentary democracy.¹⁶⁰⁹

A May 1971 issue of the *Vientiane Society* magazine presented an analysis of the constitution, providing further context. It began with the statement that “the constitution is most sacred [ສິ່ງສັກສິດທີ່ສຸດ] because it is the thing that guarantees the rights and the essence of rights of the citizens of the democracy.”¹⁶¹⁰ The constitution by then had become highly revered in the country, partly due to its promulgation by the former King Sisavang Vong who was himself

¹⁶⁰⁸ Kingdom of Laos, ຮັຖທັມມະນູນ [“Constitution”] (n.p., Ministry of Information and Propaganda, Royal Lao government, n.d.).

¹⁶⁰⁹ Even the CDIN defended political rights more than the Pathet Lao would after 1975. The CDIN’s members pledge invoked the values of the “free individual,” and placed Western political and civil rights higher than communist ideals of social justice.

¹⁶¹⁰ ຮັຖທັມມະນູນລາວໂດຍສັງເຂບ [“Lao constitution in summary”] *Vientiane Society*, May 1971, no. 7, p. 14.

highly respected. Revisions were undertaken “to make the nation progress according to the world situation.”¹⁶¹¹ In this analysis, the King was the one who gave rights to the people (“of all races”) enshrined in the constitution. Celebrations to mark the constitution were held every year on May 11 in remembrance of the King’s gracious gift to the people. The article notes that 1971 was the twenty-fourth anniversary of the constitution. The paper then reprinted a selection of only the most important parts of the constitution emphasizing those guaranteeing the democratic rights of the people. This was timely in the leadup to the next elections held at the end of the year to elect the seventh congress of the National Assembly.

Yet we still do not know enough about RLG legal practice to determine how exactly civil and political rights were exercised. Given that such records have been lost, it may be difficult if not impossible to establish such practices satisfactorily. The RLG law code itself treats some circumstances under which speech and other political acts could be restricted or punished. Chapter 11 of the penal code included crimes of a political nature involving public peace, order, and acts against the authorities. While this certainly included serious acts like rebellion, it also included more vaguely worded infractions like “attacks endangering public order” that could result in capital punishment (Art. 79).¹⁶¹² Moreover Article 82 specified “anyone who would peddle or spread false news of a nature to compromise the security or to spread trouble in the populations, or...anyone who would attempt to divert from their duty functionaries or agents of the public authority” would be punished by ten to twenty years hard labor.¹⁶¹³ Article 83 stipulated those acts “likely to harm the public tranquility or security or to cause interior troubles” was to be punished

¹⁶¹¹ Ibid.

¹⁶¹² Royal Lao Government, ກົດໝາຍລັກສະນະອາຈຍາ [“Penal code”] (Ministry of the Interior, 1965), p. 15.

¹⁶¹³ Ibid.

by jail from one to five years.¹⁶¹⁴ The RLG criminalized certain expressions that could easily result from something someone wrote or said, or by a political party or protest that was entirely political in nature. It was up to the judiciary where to draw the line. Chapter 11, Section III contained infractions against officials and agents of the government. Treason against the state included capital punishment for those who attacked the King but also more broadly those who “would seek to overthrow the state of things established in the Kingdom...” (Art. 89).¹⁶¹⁵ Further Article 91 stated “all offenses made publicly against the King” was punished by imprisonment of five years and a fine. “Outrages” made by “drawing, speech, [or] gestures” to public officials was punished by six months in jail and a fine (Art. 94).¹⁶¹⁶ Certain crimes like public corruption were punished in part by restricting “civil, civic and political rights” including the right to vote or be elected to office, the right to bear arms and so on (Art. 104).¹⁶¹⁷ While the law code itself cannot indicate the legal practice as it really existed, it nevertheless gives some idea of the scope for legal action to place limits on speech or other political acts.

Was there anything like what could be called a free press in the country? From a survey of newspapers, one can observe a certain level of open criticism was tolerated – or Sila put it, newspapers carried “insults.” The government was criticized on many issues such as aid, the economy, and the conduct and direction of the war.¹⁶¹⁸ Corruption remained a lightning rod for criticism of successive governments. In general, anyone so inclined could publish anonymously under a pseudonym – many such works were published in this manner. Elite magazines like

¹⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶¹⁵ Ibid, p. 17.

¹⁶¹⁶ Ibid, p. 18.

¹⁶¹⁷ Ibid, p. 20.

¹⁶¹⁸ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 152. Evans describes the press as “a vibrant daily press willing to discuss the full gamut of the country’s problems.” See further, *ibid*, p. 158. He describes the editor of *Lao Nation*, Phone Chantala, as “reporting fearlessly on political events” including the presence of North Vietnamese troops in the country in 1974.

Phainam published fiction works that were highly critical of the government, including stories like *Death Price* (ຮາຄາຂອງຄວາມຕາຍ) in which a government official who used air travel for personal enrichment was made to face poetic justice dying in a plane crash while the innocent protagonist was saved.¹⁶¹⁹

On the other hand, there were plenty of examples of censorship and even the outright banning of some publications. The Literature Committee, which was a government department in the Ministry of Education, served as the government censor. The government also periodically censored books, magazines and newspapers. This was periodically reported in the government daily *Lao Presse* as the following example from March 1953 shows: “Vientiane – interdicted on all the territory of the Kingdom of Laos is the introduction, the circulation, the possession, the displaying and the sale of the weekly periodical entitled “The Life of the Worker.”¹⁶²⁰ A similar review entitled “Pacific” was also banned on the same day. It is likely these publications were viewed by the government as disseminating communist or anti-war sentiments. Moreover, these publications were banned at the beginning of the Vietminh invasion that would establish the first base for the Pathet Lao in the east of the country. By this time, the Lao had exercised full control over the Ministry of Information for several years.

This trend continued in later years. For example, after the Kongle Coup of August 9, 1960 when military generals intervened freely in politics and amassed power, these aspiring dictators felt free to silence the press when it suited them. In December 1964, Police-General Siho Lanphoutacoul himself imprisoned the prominent editor of the paper *Xieng Mahason* “for printing

¹⁶¹⁹ See the short story collection, Dara Kanlaya (ed.) ບໍ່ບານກໍຫອມ [“Not blossoming fragrant”] (1973), p. 55-63.

¹⁶²⁰ *Lao Presse*, no. 458, March 21, 1953, p. 1.

editorials criticizing the corrupt practices of the police.”¹⁶²¹ But he was stopped by King Savang Vatthana after the government had failed to protect the journalist’s rights.¹⁶²² There were other cases of newspaper closures such as the closure of *Xat Lao* in 1974, although by then the Pathet Lao had major influence over almost every government ministry, which was more telling about the coming new regime than the old one.

The Lao press code, like many RLG laws, was a holdover from the colonial era, which was modified.¹⁶²³ The press code stipulated that newspapers were to be regulated, requiring each to have a government license to operate (Art. 4). The colonial era law had sought to control especially publications originating from outside the country or those in languages other than Lao or French. Before distributing any newspaper, the editor was legally required each day to first deposit copies “with the Minister of the Interior and the police.”¹⁶²⁴ Yet the press code was modified in April 1957 to ease some restrictions. It permitted foreign publications “unless prohibited by the Ministry of Interior.”¹⁶²⁵ At the same time, the National Assembly also introduced new regulations, such as requiring all newspapers to have a manager who was a citizen “enjoying civil rights” (Art. 4).¹⁶²⁶ If nothing else Souvanna’s frequent criticism of journalists showed that those critical of the government were not silenced or suppressed, but rather were grudgingly tolerated. For example, Souvanna condemned at a press conference in September 1969 the “false news spread by certain journalists who want to satisfy opinion and deform the truth.”¹⁶²⁷ For that matter, Lao journalists

¹⁶²¹ Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 605.

¹⁶²² Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA’s Secret War in Laos* (Paladin Press, 1995), p. 123.

¹⁶²³ “Code de la Presse Lao” *Lao Sappada* no. 1, March 10, 1972 and *ibid* no. 2, March 17, 1972.

¹⁶²⁴ Albert Ravenholt, “Xatla: the history and problems of a Laotian newspaper,” *American Universities Field Staff reports: Southeast Asia series* (Hanover, N.H.: American Universities Field Staff, 1967), p. 12. See further John Lent, “Mass Media in Laos,” *International Communication Gazette* 20 (1974), p. 175.

¹⁶²⁵ “Code de la Presse Lao” *Lao Sappada* no. 1, March 10, 1972 and *ibid* no. 2, March 17, 1972.

¹⁶²⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁶²⁷ *National Union*, no. 6, p. 51. See also his speech to the Tokyo press club in October 1969.

were courted by both the US and the USSR. The US sought to show Lao journalists modern journalism (visiting Voice of America in Washington D.C., Newsday and CBS offices in New York) while they covered Crown Prince Vong Savang's visit to the US whereas the USSR took Lao journalists on a tour of the country to try to disabuse them of the idea that the USSR was a communist wasteland.¹⁶²⁸

In a rare study of the press in December 1973, John Lent argued that the Kingdom of Laos did not have a free press.¹⁶²⁹ He interviewed several newspaper editors, but much of his assessment was due to the fact that Lao newspapers were not financially independent, lacking sufficient sales or advertising revenue to operate. However, Lent's study was made after the aid-dependent economy had already begun to collapse. One editor stated declining sales were due to subscribers' loss of buying power, which was partly a result of the devaluation of the currency in 1971.¹⁶³⁰ Thus, he noted that by then papers had to rely on donations by politicians who liked their reporting.¹⁶³¹ As a result Lent concluded that Lao did not have a free press, but he observed a situation not typical for much of the RLG period.

While Lent himself did not consider the content of any newspaper, he could cite several cases where the government revoked a publication's license to operate, or a publication had shut due to lack of funds.¹⁶³² Prisa Trichanh, editor of *Vientiane Post*, said newspapers were suspended if they printed "rude articles against the government."¹⁶³³ Lent listed some papers as examples (e.g., *Pitouphoun*) without elaborating. One case that was explained concerned the Lao-Chinese

¹⁶²⁸ Lomsvat Sananikone, "Visiting the United States" *Friendship*, 1968, no. 2. *Lao Presse* October, 1965.

¹⁶²⁹ John Lent, "Mass Media in Laos" *International Communication Gazette* (1974).

¹⁶³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 173.

¹⁶³¹ *Ibid*, p. 174. Of course, the government funded newspaper *Lao Presse* was not independent, but merely a mouthpiece for the government.

¹⁶³² It is uncertain how lack of funds could be blamed on the government.

¹⁶³³ *Ibid*, p. 175.

newspaper *Lao Samay* which printed “a verbatim account of the My Lai massacre” in South Vietnam.¹⁶³⁴ This angered the US embassy, which led the government to shut the paper. It was later reopened as *Lao Hua Daily News*, but it was expected to print translations of government reports and notices and was otherwise “watched” by the government. There was also pressure on the *Lao Lane Xang* paper by the military in 1968 that was not explained.¹⁶³⁵

According to a 1967 study *Xat Lao* was the “leading and most independent daily newspaper” before the industry declined after 1971. Yet it too ran into trouble and was closed by the government on November 1, 1967, in a case which is illustrative of how the free press existed in the country in difficult times at the height of Second Indochina War. The paper’s editor Pone Chantharaj had written an editorial in the paper “on the lack of decisive leadership from the bottom to the top” of the government.¹⁶³⁶ “I simply said that unification of Laos will be far in the future, and that chaos will continue until we develop leadership and efficiency. But our officials are not accustomed to criticism. Many still think in the old feudal way. Remember, in our country it was not so long ago that ordinary people were forbidden even to look at the King.”¹⁶³⁷ Yet Pone Chantharaj was able to fight the government closure. As a United Press International journalist he released a story in the Australian press coinciding with Souvanna Phouma’s visit to the country seeking aid. Pone wrote the story so that Souvanna “could thus be asked questions about freedom of press at home in Laos.”¹⁶³⁸ Pone also had support from rightwing members of the government in the cabinet and national assembly: “they want to see his newspaper reappear, both for his sake

¹⁶³⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶³⁵ Ibid, p. 176. According to Lent this was unrelated to the papers closure from 1968 to 1972, which was caused by an employee who stole supplies and bankrupted the paper.

¹⁶³⁶ Albert Ravenholt, “Xatlaos: the history and problems of a Laotian newspaper,” *American Universities Field Staff reports: Southeast Asia series* (Hanover, N.H.: American Universities Field Staff, 1967), p. 12.

¹⁶³⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶³⁸ Ibid, p. 1.

and because they believe that an independent press must emerge in order for their kingdom to move toward constitutional processes.”¹⁶³⁹ Rightwing politicians, including Inpeng Suryadhay, thus felt a free press important to the revival of democracy after 1965, even during war.¹⁶⁴⁰ Pone was able to successfully fight the government to reopen his paper, which remained active until the Pathet Lao forced its closure in 1974. He listed a number of issues he investigated and reported on that upset government officials yet did not result in his being shut down during the 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁶⁴¹ While newspaper editors could enlist politicians to their aid the government still wielded power over newspapers, which operated in a precarious position in the developing economy as Pone reflected on the impact of the closure: “unless they lift the ban before the end of the month when I collect on advertising, they can soon knock me down.”¹⁶⁴² There were nonetheless a core of dedicated newspaper journalists and editors who often worked for little under difficult circumstances in order to defend a free press in the RLG era.

By late 1973 Pone Chantharaj told Lent for his study that Lao press was free: “the fact that we are here speaking freely shows there is press freedom.”¹⁶⁴³ Pone noted that newspapers had some leverage over government officials in the social pages, where the elite feared certain revelations about their private lives: “the officials do not quarrel with us on these items or it may get worse for them.”¹⁶⁴⁴ In general, editors reported that the press represented viewpoints from

¹⁶³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 10. At first Inpeng served as editor of the newspaper to offer it protection when it was opened in late summer 1963. Later in the spring of 1965 Inpeng had to step down from this role, but he assured Pone “I will still be behind you.” Pone himself began working in the RLG press to support the CDIN. They gave him money to purchase printing equipment necessary to set up a newspaper in Bangkok. His first paper was opened in Savannakhet during General Phoumi Nosavan’s countercoup to against Kongle in late 1960. Pone printed a newspaper, but also distributed propaganda on leaflets in support of Phoumi Nosavan.

¹⁶⁴¹ Ibid, p. 13.

¹⁶⁴² Ibid, p. 14.

¹⁶⁴³ Ibid. The Xat Lao editor added “Editors make criticism but editorials are loyalist or government oriented. But in news reporting, we give both sides. People here don’t care about editorials; they are meant for embassies or the journalistic tradition, not for the masses.”

¹⁶⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 173.

across the political spectrum.¹⁶⁴⁵ Likewise on Radio Lao “opposition parties were represented” during regular debates.¹⁶⁴⁶ What Lent missed in his assessment was that the very fact that there were many newspapers funded by different political parties created the space for opposing viewpoints to emerge, itself essential for any free and open civil society.¹⁶⁴⁷ Yet what Lent could not know was that despite its shortcomings, the Royal Lao Government allowed far more freedom under the it than at any time before or afterward in Lao history. To summarize the complicated landscape of press freedom in the RLG one might not do better than observe the government license to print was “good until the paper gets into trouble with the government.”¹⁶⁴⁸

Showing how Lao journalists could at times serve as public intellectuals of a sort, Bounthong Keomanivong wrote a serialized column in the new magazine *Lao Sappada* on “reflections of a journalist, lessons of history.”¹⁶⁴⁹ In one column, he wrote of John Foster Dulles’ regret before his death that the US had not invaded China in 1951 during the Korean War. This error led to ending the war in stalemate and the partitioning of Korea. Now twenty years later, Bounthong saw the same happening thing again in Vietnam. He then discussed Operation Lam Son 719, the joint US-South Vietnam thrust against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Its initial success, including the liberation of Xepon, gave way to defeat. To Bounthong, this pointed to a determination which the communist had and the free world did not. Now “more than ever” the Ho Chi Minh Trail was used by the communists to attack “the three countries of Indochina.”¹⁶⁵⁰

¹⁶⁴⁵ Lent, “Mass Media in Laos,” p. 174.

¹⁶⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 178.

¹⁶⁴⁷ Lent compared the RLG press environment to that of advanced economies which operated in very different media landscape. Moreover, any paper relying on the market for funding would need to tailor its content to the demands of the market (subscribers, advertisers, investors, etc.).

¹⁶⁴⁸ Lent, “Mass Media in Laos,” p. 175.

¹⁶⁴⁹ B. Keomanivong, “réflexion d’un journaliste, les leçons de l’histoire” *Lao Sappada*, no 7, May 12, 1972, p. 7, 13.

¹⁶⁵⁰ Ibid.

Bounthong's criticism of the South Vietnamese was scathing, saying "are they pessimists? Without doubt, but not realists."¹⁶⁵¹ He did not spare the US either whom he said was "playing for time" and did nothing to stop the latest North Vietnamese attacks.¹⁶⁵² He called on the allies, led by the US, to realize the lesson of Korea or else the efforts of the last ten years would amount to failure. Everyone reading Bounthong's article would be aware of the Royal Lao Government's close alignment with the US, especially in the neutralist years. Other criticism of the US, the war, foreign policy and the like, would appear more pronounced in the last years of the Kingdom, indicating another dimension in which the country enjoyed a relatively free press.

Finally, was there a civil society during the RLG period? Without a more rigorous social history of the period one can only observe that there were a number of civic organizations which formed in the post-colonial years, each publishing a magazine informing readers about their recent activities.¹⁶⁵³ Thus, one can point to a number of groups like the Lao Women's Club, the Rotary Club, Lao Boy Scouts, *Mittasone*, the Lao American Association, and Young Buddhist Association, among others. While these civic organizations first emerged in the 1950s, they appeared most strongly in neutralist years, when there were a multitude of such groups. Besides these, one can point more generally to the journalists of various papers and academics on the Literature Committee, which became notably more independent after it transformed into the Royal Lao Academy. There were, moreover, many academics who stood aloof from government sponsorship, such as Khamman Vongkotrattana, who nonetheless were active in society.

Some of these groups would take up social causes and even clash with the government. Some would even form new political parties that would influence important events in the country.

¹⁶⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵² Ibid.

¹⁶⁵³ Each civic organization was formed according to relevant statutes in the RLG legal code.

The Lao Women's Association and Buddhist Youth led campaigns against vices and social evils like substance abuse, prostitution, or gambling.¹⁶⁵⁴ These activities forced the government to step in. In some cases, this led to clashes with military and police generals Siho Lanphoutacoul and Phoumi Nosavan, who sought independent funding sources from casinos and other vice trades. The Lao Women's Association's campaign gained such support that Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma could not ignore it. Yet not all civic groups were in conflict with the government. Some were close to the government like the Young Lao Buddha Association, which was founded in 1967, with a leadership that included a colonel Khamthene Chinyavong of the psychological warfare division of the RLA. This organization had "a large meeting" on March 5, 1972 which lasted "practically all day" with "over 2,000 participants" involved in "debates, conferences on religious subjects, musical and prayer events, etc."¹⁶⁵⁵ The elite were in attendance, including Deputy Prime Minister Leuam Insixiangmay, Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak and Ambassador to the People's Republic of China Lien Pravongviengkham, who "recommended to the Lao youth the practice of spiritual and cultural values..."¹⁶⁵⁶

Mittasone was a society that often advocated for government reform in foreign policy, the economy, modernization, and the like.¹⁶⁵⁷ The Fraternal Association of Former Lao University Students (ມິຕສະມາຄົມອະດີດນັກສຶກສາລາວ), or *Mittasone*, was a society with as many as one hundred members who were former students who had studied abroad in France and thereby constituted a new generation of Francophone Lao.¹⁶⁵⁸ Its journal was a forum for sophisticated

¹⁶⁵⁴ Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 155. Evans refers to a campaign by the Lao Women's Association against prostitution, restricting bars before the That Luang festival in Vientiane. See further, Askew et. al., *Vientiane*, p. 146-147 for a description of gambling, drugs and prostitution in Vientiane. There were earlier similar campaigns by the Lao Women's Association observed by Joel Halpern in the late 1950s.

¹⁶⁵⁵ Khamsay Soukhavong "Actualites Nationales" *Lao Sappada*, 10 March, 1972, no. 1, p. 6.

¹⁶⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵⁷ See further Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 151-153.

¹⁶⁵⁸ *Mittasone*, April-June, no. 10, p. 38 for a complete list of membership.

discussions on culture and society by a new generation of Francophone Lao who showed off their European learning by quoting the likes of Shakespeare and Spinoza. The director was Khamphao Phonekeo, who was an instructor at the School of Law and Administration and had also served in the Ministry of Education as the director of primary education. Members of *Mittasone* were representative of one section of the youth generation in the neutralist years like the loyalists had been during the semi-colonial years or the CDIN were during the neo-colonial years. They were the youth who had gained access to Western education, studied abroad in France and returned to take up important jobs in the government. Judging from their magazine, they were modernists who wanted to improve the development of the country, and were critical of government efforts they saw as insufficient. They may have felt frustrated that they did not have more influence, having more formal education and training than their seniors did, but nonetheless forced to defer. Members of *Mittasone* would go on to found a new political party that would play an important role in later years.

Yet the most profound failure of the government to create a free, open society with respect to civil and political rights may be the exclusion of the Pathet Lao from the political system. Pathet Lao deputies were excluded from the cabinet in 1958 (contrary to agreements) and prevented from taking their seats when the National Assembly was closed in 1959. While these actions were approved by the National Assembly after fighting broke out the situation completely changed. Thereafter the Pathet Lao sought the violent overthrow of the government while the RLG saw them as openly rebelling and freely circumscribed their political and civil rights. Thus, the CDIN arrested Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao leaders in Vientiane on July 28, 1959 on charges of treason.¹⁶⁵⁹ The CDIN never outlawed communism, but NLHX leaders remained in jail during

¹⁶⁵⁹ Eight of those of the Pathet Lao leadership in Vientiane arrested were deputies in the National Assembly.

1960 elections; yet the party itself was not banned – even though it was engaged in open war with the government. Questions over free speech and free assembly were lost in the gapping maw of the Second Indochina War. Thus, the Pathet Lao were beyond the pale, showing the limits of free speech and assembly in the RLG era.

The End of the Royal Lao Government: An Anarchy of Voices (1969-1975)

After losing the Second Indochina War in Laos, the final years of the Royal Lao Government tend to be treated with an air of inevitability. It had failed to defeat its enemy on the battlefield, and on February 21, 1973 entered into a ceasefire, even as its principal backer, the US, was in retreat from the region. Yet this was one of the most vibrant phases of the Royal Lao Government era when Lao vigorously debated the future of the country. In these final years there was a revived neutralism, shorn of its earlier militarism, that propelled a powerful peace movement. Buddhism played an important role in this new push for peace and neutrality.¹⁶⁶⁰ As the US betrayed its former Cold War allies in the region, a rejuvenated anti-Americanism was unleashed.¹⁶⁶¹ New political parties including the Union of Nationalists for Liberal Democracy and the Movement for the New Way emerged to promote their own brand of neutrality and peace. Finally, anti-communism and relations with the US were noticeably weakened as the country gave way to peace and neutrality.

The youth became active in events and took the lead in protests, demonstrations, strikes and other revolutionary activities. The seniors in power looked on the youth with fear. The most

¹⁶⁶⁰ Martin Stuart Fox and Rod Bucknell, "Politicization of the Buddhist Sangha in Laos" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 13, 1 (1982), p. 67-68, which notes the sangha's support of the 1973 peace agreement.

¹⁶⁶¹ Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Advice and Support* (Washington D.C.: Office of Chief of Military History, 1984), p. 146-150.

significant youth movement of the time may be the Movement for the New Way, which had emerged from the earlier *Mittasone* society. Its members had been radicalized while studying abroad in Paris. The most important aspect of the revolution of 1975 was that it did not only come from outside forces, but also from those within RLG society itself, whom had fought loyally on the RLG side yet which nonetheless consented in the self-abnegation of the Royal Lao Government in 1975. Finally, if one accepts that there was in fact an open society with a free press and free speech can one then say that this very openness hastened the demise of the government, descending into anarchy at the end of the war? Was the Royal Lao Government's fall due to its open society being subverted by Pathet Lao agents spreading messages of peace, neutrality, and opposition to the war even as Pathet Lao and North Vietnam troops gained major military advantages across the country?

There was a discernable opening of dialogue in the late neutralist years, not just concerning peace negotiations with the Pathet Lao, but about many issues. It was one last burst of creativity before RLG society was wiped out forever. The mood of the time was one for debate. There was “verbal sparring” on national radio between different schools on topics like “only the one who has known misfortune is capable to help those less happy than he.”¹⁶⁶² There were several books and magazine articles discussing different political systems like dictatorship and communism. Democracy was only one possible political arrangement presented to the reader in these discussions. Dr. Somphavan Inthavong, a member of *Mittasone*, wrote in the forward to his book *Political Philosophy* (ປຣັຊຍາກາວເມືອງ) that “the ways of thought which humanity has ever had, is a thing that we should take up in study for our own individual development of knowledge and

¹⁶⁶² Khamsay Soukhavong, “Actualités Nationales” *Lao Sappada*, March 10, 1972, no. 1, p. 5. The radio debate was February 27, 1972.

to better carry out [our] duties and exercise our rights.”¹⁶⁶³ His book addressed nationalism, socialism and included a chapter on revolution according to Lenin as well as one devoted to the thought of Adolf Hitler; he opened with a discussion of Niccolo Machiavelli. Capturing the mood of the times in an article for *Mittasone*, Somphou Oudomvilay wrote about the role of the brain in national progress:

This era is the age of the wise individual, [where] issues of intelligence [and] of thought are important matters. [This is] because [it] invents new medicines for the health and happiness of the people, air flight, [even] reaching the stars are the fruits of it, the human brain. Combined with these [achievements], [one] will progress to prosperity and development because of the use of the brain itself.¹⁶⁶⁴

He pointed to individual geniuses who changed history such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu. Karl Marx was the example to the socialist world, while M.K. Gandhi and Mao Zedong were agents of change in the post-colonial world. For any country to develop it needed such individuals. Yet Somphou warned that Lao intellectuals were overworked and out of touch with the average person, no longer able to see good or ill.¹⁶⁶⁵ Given the collapsing economy and the many uncertainties surrounding the peace-process there was a frantic energy and even at times an air of desperation. Meanwhile Somphou and his peers in *Mittasone* praised famous men who changed history.

Multiplicity of Neutralities

The Second Indochina War, even though it was fought on neutralist principles, nevertheless deprived true neutralism of its energy, which was sidelined by the grim business of war. Neutralism would return with a vengeance at the end of the war, to become the single most powerful force in

¹⁶⁶³ Dr. Somphavan Inthavong, ປຣິຊຸຢາກາວເມືອງ [“Political Philosophy”] (Vientiane: Pakpasak Press, 1972), p. i.

¹⁶⁶⁴ Somphou Oudomvilay, ມັນສມອງແລະຄວາມກ້າວໜ້າຂອງຊາດ [“The brain and national progress”] *Mittasone*, April-June 1969, no. 10, p. 3-4.

¹⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 4.

society. Its return was aided by the movement for peace to end the war. There was a great deal of war-weariness. There had already been calls from various quarters for peace and neutrality over sixteen years prior in 1957, as Lao spoke of tiring of “fratricidal” fighting. After the Second Indochina War in Laos was fought from May 19, 1959 to February 21, 1973, profound war-weariness was prevalent throughout society.¹⁶⁶⁶

Yet even as the prime minister Souvanna Phouma led the country in the war, it is evident from his diaries that he never gave up hope that peace might be restored. He carefully watched for any sign of a policy change from the US toward Vietnam, which he knew was linked to the fate of his own country. He carefully followed speeches by Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon for any hint of peace. Toward the end of 1969, Souvanna himself took steps to revive the chances for peace. On September 27, he announced to a press conference he would reform the Neutralists party. At the same time, he rejected the idea that Pathet Lao neutralists ministers who had abandoned their posts in the coalition government would be reinstated. He added: “Neutrality is a law in Laos. All those who make their ideal neutrality and nationalism could adhere to this party which is aimed only to reinforce national unity.”¹⁶⁶⁷ At a later press conference in October, Souvanna described the toll of war on the country, which he called “a war no less cruel” than the one raging in Vietnam:

Being a country with less than three million inhabitants, since the start of the internal rebellion that is to say since 1962 we have already had more than 12,000 killed and more than 20,000 wounded in the army. Among the civilian population, the number of the victims has been about one third of that among the military.

On the part of the Neolao Hakxat...the figures cannot be lower so that if we think proportionately for instance on the scale of the United States with a population of 200 million people, we arrive at impressive figures. For us this is almost unbearable, because it is our young ones, our strongest ones, who disappear in this generation, sacrificing their lives in the battle for their freedom.¹⁶⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶⁶ Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 170.

¹⁶⁶⁷ *National Unity*, no. 6, p. 51.

¹⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Souvanna estimated that nearly three percent of the population were casualties of the Second Indochina War. Like any civil war, casualties on both sides were Lao, compounding the loss. He did not include any figures for refugees internally displaced by the war, which by some estimates was around seven hundred thousand people, with the latter figure representing well over a third of the population.

By any measure the scale of the war was staggering. Its social impacts were enormous. Thus, Souvanna called for peace, which he said was “badly” needed:

To come back to the problem of Laos, twenty years of disorder and of war have accentuated the skepticism. I am making this year yet another attempt in the hope of saving my country from disaster. I am trying to give a preeminently gentle and peaceful people the peace which they need so badly. I shall not tire to repeat my plea, because, definitely this problem of war or peace concerns all of us.¹⁶⁶⁹

Nonetheless peace was problematic for the Royal Lao Government, and could even be dangerous. The government was locked in a struggle for survival, fighting for its existence against a force known to advocate its overthrow, which would sweep it away if victorious. Thus there was caution in government circles about the prospects for peace. Lyteck Lynhiavu, the editor of the government elite monthly *National Unity*, warned the government must not lose in peace what it had safeguarded in war.¹⁶⁷⁰ He spoke of a dangerous situation where the US would withdraw from Laos yet the North Vietnamese would not. This would allow the Pathet Lao to seek to be a legal political party once again to “advance to its permanent and final objective, the establishment of a totalitarian communist regime.”¹⁶⁷¹ Later when the Royal Lao Government discussed peace with the Pathet Lao, Lyteck complained about the Pathet Lao’s poor peace offer which, he said, was “a

¹⁶⁶⁹ Speech delivered by his highness Prince Souvanna Phouma Prime Minister of Laos at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan, Tokyo Oct 3, 1969, *National Unity*, October-November 1969, no. 7, p. 6-7.

¹⁶⁷⁰ Lyteck Lynhiavu, “Ne pardons pas dans la paix ce que nous avons sauvegardé dans le guerre” *National Unity*, January 1970, no. 9, p. 15.

¹⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

new maneuver of propaganda exploiting the ignorance of many and the desire of peace by all.”¹⁶⁷²

The elite were sensitive to the issue of peace because they were acutely aware of what was at stake. If the Royal Lao Government appeared at all to be obstructing the efforts to end the war they risked losing popular support in the race for peace with the Pathet Lao.

The Royal Lao Government elite kept a wary eye on events in the United States as well. They followed the US anti-war protests, seeing the pressure Washington was under to walk away from its obligations to Southeast Asia, returning to “isolationism” and thereby allowing a communist conquest:

Massive demonstration in front of the White House May 9 at Washington: the faces of death representing Vietnam and Laos, the demonstrations plead for the return of the US to isolationism at a moment where communism is left to the conquest of the world; but they have not understood that the return to isolationism will destroy...in the entire world, the trust of free peoples of the West and of the third world in the will and in the capacity of the US to support them durably, and in the case of need, in their defensive struggles for the safeguarding of their political freedoms and their national independence. Moreover, Vo Nguyen Giap bases his strategy on the lassitude of American public opinion in order to win the war not on the field of battle in Vietnam and Cambodia and Laos but on the political field in Washington.¹⁶⁷³

To the Lao elite, the US, leader of the “free world,” had lost its way by the end of the war. This text was printed as a caption accompanying photographs of US anti-war protestors and accompanied by a speech Lyteck made at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and the University of New Mexico-Albuquerque. Members of the Lao elite had predicted as early as 1968 that if South Vietnam was allowed to fall then the Royal Lao Government would fall too: “If the free world runs tired and yields to the point of allowing a communist take-over of South Vietnam, the neutrality of Laos will find it most difficult indeed to survive.”¹⁶⁷⁴ The author, Phouangsavath, then discussed the Sino-Soviet split before predicting that the Second Indochina War would only

¹⁶⁷² Lyteck Lynhiavu, “Eux et Nous” *National Unity*, July-August 1970, no. 12, p. 15.

¹⁶⁷³ Lyteck Lynhiavu, “Le Laos d’aujourd’hui,” *National Unity*, June 1970, no. 11, p. 35.

¹⁶⁷⁴ Tiao Phouangsavath, “Laos in the Balance,” *Mittasone*, 1969, no. 9, p. 17-18. This was the author’s term paper in a course in the School of Public Administration at New York University.

reach a conclusion if the US and the PRC could reach a détente, saying “as long as the United States and Communist China are at odds with each other, there will never be peace.”¹⁶⁷⁵ However, he could not see far enough ahead to predict that both the fall of South Vietnam and détente would come to pass in only a few short years.

The last years of the Royal Lao Government were concerned not just with peace, but with neutralism which moved into ascendancy, regaining vitality and capturing the interest of the people. In these years, discussion of neutralism in all its varieties mushroomed. By early 1972, Bounnack Phommarath argued in a French language magazine that all independent states had a right in international law to declare neutrality, and to not participate in wars of neighboring countries.¹⁶⁷⁶ On the cover of the April 1972 issue of the Francophone magazine *Lao Sappada* was the tutelary deity *Kiniri Thevi* riding on the back of an elephant walking in the clouds, below a banner reading “Peace, New Years.” The editorial which followed spoke of New Years as a time for Lao “to renounce all their vain quarrels” and “equally the New Year brings to all our countrymen divided here more than twenty years the occasion to take real awareness of the higher interests of the country and to put down arms in order to make our dear kingdom a country truly independent and worthy of its centuries!”¹⁶⁷⁷ Yet which version of neutrality would win out, that of the Pathet Lao or the Royal Lao Government, and what would it mean if one or the other prevailed?

In the elite magazine *Vientiane Society*, discussions of neutrality centered on international law and prominent examples such as Switzerland during World War II.¹⁶⁷⁸ Soumit noted that

¹⁶⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 18.

¹⁶⁷⁶ Bounnack Phommarath, “à propos de la neutralité” *Lao Sappada*, March 24, 1972, no. 3, p. 14.

¹⁶⁷⁷ Khamsay Soukhavong, “Editorial: Santi Pimay” *Lao Sappada*, April 21, 1972, no 6, p. 3.

¹⁶⁷⁸ Soumit, ສົງຄາມແລະຄວາມເປັນກາງ [“War and Neutrality”] *Vientiane Society*, September 1971, no. 11, p. 22-24

Switzerland was able to back up their neutrality with force when necessary. He also noted that Belgium's neutrality was not respected by Germany. He further noted that Great Britain defended the neutrality of others. Soumit thus saw a relation between war and neutrality and that “neutrality, that should be a path to peace, depends on military force.” Soumit then discussed “the Cold War” (ສົງຄາມເຢັນ) noting that “in the current age neutrality is difficult because it is the era of total war [ສົງຄາມອັນບໍ່ມີຂອບເຂດ].”¹⁶⁷⁹ He added that while the Cold War may intensify, “the aspiration for neutrality charms many people.”¹⁶⁸⁰ He denounced the Cold War saying “total war between the communist world and the free world or the capitalist world itself is the obstacle to neutrality.”¹⁶⁸¹ Meanwhile smaller, under-developed states were absorbed by larger, more advanced ones in a situation not unlike the colonial era. Thus, Cambodia had lost its neutrality. Smaller countries that had poor educational systems were forced to send students to study abroad where they were “brain washed” (ເອົາໄປລ້າງສະໝອງເພື່ອໃຫ້ຄິດແບບໃໝ່), which was a threat to unity and caused students to become too close to a foreign nation. He was especially critical of the US, which he said did not support Lao neutrality. Those who believed aid was given without conditions were deceived. Poignantly, he added: “when we adopt orphans we only feel compassion, but we still hope the same that the child may be intelligent in the future and able to be a refuge to her parents that were unlucky.”¹⁶⁸² Soumit's essay, which appeared in a popular elite magazine, was an indication of how much thinking had changed since the war began, and how many of the old dogmas were being questioned, even among the elite themselves. He concluded that “the true goal of neutrality is that we Lao try to establish it [in] every way in order to not let

¹⁶⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 22.

¹⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸¹ Ibid, p. 23.

¹⁶⁸² Ibid.

any country swallow us.”¹⁶⁸³ He observed that it was the large tree that fell in the storm but the small and flexible tree that survived. There was a larger trend in the country and among the elite at the time that questioned the old dogmas of the Cold War. It is no mistake that the major political party of the period, the Union of Nationalists for Liberal Democracy, which had a large majority in the National Assembly, had already stated it would “seriously consider” disengagement with the US.¹⁶⁸⁴

Somphavan Inthavong gave perhaps the most thorough treatment advocating neutrality in this period.¹⁶⁸⁵ He covered the history of neutralism, the case of Switzerland, and those of India, Myanmar, and Indonesia before giving an extensive treatment of Laos. Somphavan threw his support behind the revival of neutrality. He dedicated his book to all the youth, of all classes and all races. In the preface, Somphavan noted that all three political factions in the country had recognized the benefit of neutrality. Although the question of Lao neutrality was an important issue in Asia and the “third world,” since 1962 the question had been: “what form of neutrality will we establish ourselves in?”¹⁶⁸⁶ He added there were many forms of neutrality, which the reader could find in his work. In the conclusion he made an impassioned plea “for the victory of neutrality.”¹⁶⁸⁷ He explained the failure of neutrality after 1962, and the “chaos” which was caused, was the result of old thinking and old policies among those within and outside the country. He claimed that Lao neutrality since 1962 under the leadership of Souvanna Phouma was “complete” and no different than Switzerland or Austria, but it was undermined by neighbors who had sided

¹⁶⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸⁴ Mongkhol- Katay Sasorith, “Les forces politiques et la vie politique au Laos” (Ph.D. diss, Pantheon-Sorbonne University, 1973), p. 165. The party also “advocate the struggle for “preservation of our national virtues and those of our truly democratic political institutions.”

¹⁶⁸⁵ Somphavan Inthavong, ຕື້ອຄວາມເປັນກາງແບບຖາວອນ [“for permanent neutrality”] (Vientiane: Lao Library Association, 1973)

¹⁶⁸⁶ Ibid, p. i.

¹⁶⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 140.

with the superpowers, which he said “had nothing to do with the neutrality of the Lao kingdom at all.”¹⁶⁸⁸ Improvement would come when neighboring countries stopped serving the Cold War powers and when the conflict itself de-escalated, which he said was already happening. While he viewed both the left and right political factions as obstacles to the country’s neutrality, he made clear that anti-communism was the old policy that needed to be changed to bring about real neutrality. Somphavan was confident about the future of neutrality not just in his own country but in the region and the world. He noted the new government in Thailand¹⁶⁸⁹ was already considering revising its anti-communism policy, that Australia, New Zealand and Japan were opening relations with China and that ASEAN was considering neutrality as a policy. Neutrality was the central lesson of the war. Its future depended on all people’s understanding of its necessity and its goodness.

Not all calls for neutrality were pro-government and some openly advocated for the Pathet Lao. Before the 1972 elections a short book appeared entitled *Our Lao country... must be neutral* (ເມືອງລາວຂອງເຮົາ... ຕ້ອງຢູ່ເປັນກາງ).¹⁶⁹⁰ It was supposedly written by Souk Ouparavan, Phraya Sounthara Phakdi who was the Tasseng of Choumkhong in Luang Prabang. The book covered general features about the country including a comparison between capitalism and socialism. The author was highly critical of capitalism, saying that “money is the god of capitalists” and linking it to imperialism and colonialism.¹⁶⁹¹ The author portrayed capitalism as a system of slavery: “capitalism enslaves the majority of people who are employees of the capitalists.”¹⁶⁹² This slavery

¹⁶⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸⁹ One wonders what link if any existed between student movements in Laos and Thailand at this time.

¹⁶⁹⁰ Phaya Sounthara Phakdi, ເມືອງລາວຂອງເຮົາ... ຕ້ອງຢູ່ເປັນກາງ [“Our Lao country... must be neutral”] (n.p., 1971).

¹⁶⁹¹ Ibid, p. 22.

¹⁶⁹² Ibid, p. 23.

could only be abolished when one fought against capitalism and established a socialist economy, and only a socialist system would lead the world to justice and peace. The author then went on to explain how the capitalist extorted his employees.¹⁶⁹³ The only way to end this was to “abolish ownership.”¹⁶⁹⁴ The author then called on socialists in every country to resist capitalists locals and foreigners, advising readers to consider whether politicians served the interests of the people or the capitalists.¹⁶⁹⁵ He then described the Issara, which he called “the first political party” in the country, the “left wing” of which continued the fight against France in 1949 under Souphanouvong’s leadership “according to the plan of the people.”¹⁶⁹⁶ He then described the Pathet Lao movement, and the Peace and Neutrality party which were the only parties that would “free the people from the yoke of imperialist America and its followers.”¹⁶⁹⁷ When war renewed in 1959 it was the “war to free the people” or the “political war.” In discussing the upcoming elections for 1972, he acknowledged that the Pathet Lao were accused of being backed by North Vietnam. But he also noted the Royal Lao Government was accused of being supported by American imperialists who invaded and bombed the Lao. The government was also supported secretly by Thai mercenaries.¹⁶⁹⁸ He noted that Lao’s economy depended on foreign aid, which made it a “neo-colony.”¹⁶⁹⁹ The Pathet Lao version of neutrality presented here was socialist and a centralized democracy aligned to China and North Vietnam that realized the true aspirations of the people. For foreign policy “it is a necessity that Lao country must be neutral and friendly with all neighboring countries that have a border with Lao lands.”¹⁷⁰⁰ Thus, the government should not

¹⁶⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 24.

¹⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 24-25.

¹⁶⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 26. Bong Souvannavong’s party Lao Union is neither identified clearly with the left or the right.

¹⁶⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 28.

¹⁶⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 29.

¹⁷⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 36.

make any distinction among neighboring countries on the basis of differences in the system of government and society from the Lao. Finally, it is important to note this subversive text would never have passed the government censors. It is evidence of publications circulating within the Kingdom promoting subversive messages of the Pathet Lao movement.

Subversion and Discontented Youth

Pathet Lao propagandists spread throughout the country after the 1973 cease-fire working to weaken the Royal Lao Government from the inside before the final takeover.¹⁷⁰¹ As one RLA military officer recalled “strange new faces spouting socialist propaganda appeared in all our cities.”¹⁷⁰² By early 1975 Pathet Lao agents “were sowing dissent and disorder throughout the countryside.”¹⁷⁰³ Major General Oudone Sananikone observed the Pathet Lao police who conducted joint patrols in the cities never performed any regular duties but were actually there “to spread anti-government, anti-imperialist propaganda.”¹⁷⁰⁴ They “would launch long, prepared speeches attacking the United States, the Vientiane government and the so-called affluent Vientiane politicians.”¹⁷⁰⁵ Vientiane and Luang Prabang, the neutral cities, were awash in Pathet Lao propaganda spread by subversive agents. More came as time passed including uniformed Pathet Lao soldiers who “would visit the neighborhoods around their camp and make speeches

¹⁷⁰¹ Sisouk Na Champassak claimed there were also DRV advisers helping Pathet Lao agents in Vientiane. See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 929.

¹⁷⁰² Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Washington D.C.: Office of Chief of Military History, 1984), p. 155.

¹⁷⁰³ Ibid, p. 163. Oudone then describes Pathet Lao efforts to infiltrate the RLA. He and Defense Minister Sisouk Na Champassak blocked many efforts by the Pathet Lao deputy Kham Ouane Boupha to access sensitive information at the ministry. Yet the Pathet Lao were able to buy such information from poor soldiers anyway; if an RLA officer even had money problems the Pathet Lao would help... Finally the Pathet Lao may have failed to gain control of the Ministry of Defense, but nonetheless was successful “to sow disaffection in the ranks...in the field.” Ibid, p. 166: “These were very unsettled times and many of our junior officers – and seniors as well – were confused and worried about the future.”

¹⁷⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 152.

¹⁷⁰⁵ Ibid. “It was all very well programmed and rehearsed.”

extolling the virtues of the socialist system and attacking the evils of capitalism...”¹⁷⁰⁶ They “became *agents provocateur*, inciting demonstrations against the government while others joined mobs protesting, striking or otherwise disrupting the functions of government and good order in Vientiane.”¹⁷⁰⁷ As a member of the general staff of the Royal Lao Army Oudone was in a position to know first-hand these events. He noted those most influenced by the Pathet Lao propagandists were “government functionaries and many students who had been unable to get into the universities and who swallowed the Pathet Lao promise of greater opportunities under socialism.”¹⁷⁰⁸

Youth played a leading role in the protests and demonstrations witnessed in the final years of the Royal Lao Government. In 1974 and 1975, labor strikes, protest marches, and demonstrations became almost a daily occurrence, creating an atmosphere of chaos and confusion, which paralyzed the country and facilitated revolution.¹⁷⁰⁹ Yet several years before that the youth were already showing signs of discontent and activism, directing grievances at teachers, public officials, elders and other authority figures. Youth coverage had been a staple of the press and magazines since independence. But in the final years, the elite began to express a certain fear of the youth, describing tense confrontations. They wrote exposés like “Our youth: what do they want to give us: ideas or bricks?”¹⁷¹⁰ The youth in these years, said one observer, “left no doubt the existence and the vigor of Lao national sentiment,” which the writer claimed “derives a part of its force from memories of a few great figures,” former Lao kings, although they were also interested

¹⁷⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 154.

¹⁷⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰⁹ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 171. In January 1974, students protested rising prices and the Chinese community in Pakse. By July there were large labor strikes, linked to the Pathet Lao, concerned about the collapsing economy. For an eye-witness account of student protests, see Bounsang Khamkeo, *I Little Slave*, p. 56-57, 61-63.

¹⁷¹⁰ *Lao Sappada*.

with global protest movements.¹⁷¹¹ Discontent among the youth appeared during a marked increase in violent crimes, including homicides, thefts and rape, which itself suggested rising social instability.¹⁷¹²

The revolution of 1975 must be seen in terms of a much older social conflict between youth and the elders of society. The elite sought to control the youth by sending them to school, enrolling them in civic organizations like Lao Boy Scouts or conscripting them in the army and sending them to the front. One RLA officer commented on his preference for young recruits saying “children pose less questions and are more easily ready to die.”¹⁷¹³ The Ministry of Sport and Youth opened a new: “recreational center...for the youth to use [their] free time beneficially.”¹⁷¹⁴ Even the leading political party, the Union of National Liberal Democrats pleaded to the youth “let us proceed to national reform without brutal and violent revolution.”¹⁷¹⁵

In a column on “Youth Today” Khamlay Mounivongs wrote that “some young Lao of Vientiane have demonstrated on several occasions an attitude very similar to the one of outraged youths in the world.”¹⁷¹⁶ He recalled that in the summer of 1970, the students of the Lycée of

¹⁷¹¹ Saivanh, “Un point d’histoire, les origines du sentiment national lao” *Lao Sappada*, March 24, 1972, no. 3, p. 17

¹⁷¹² From 1970 there were 48 homicides recorded in government statistics, whereas this figure steadily rose in 1971 (77), 1972 (88), and 1973 (103), the last year for which statistics are available. Government crime statistics before 1970 are not reported. Likewise, “involuntary” homicides saw a similar upward trend: 1970 (20), 1971 (27), 1972 (41), 1973 (32). Thefts increased from 1970 (671) to 1972 (774), to 1973 (836). The same trend can be seen in rape: 1970 (19), 1971 (28), 1973 (33). All crimes rose over the period according to government records: 1970 (2,195), 1971 (2,165), 1972 (2,399), 1973 (2,771). For figures for 1970-1971 see Service Nationale de la Statistique, *Bulletin de Statistiques: 1^{er} Semestre 1974*, no. 1 (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, 1975), p. 92. For figures for 1972-1973 see Service Nationale de la Statistique, *Bulletin de Statistiques: 1^{er} Semestre 1974, no. 1* (n.p.: Kingdom of Laos, 1974), p. 69.

¹⁷¹³ He added “and they die day after day, provoking no doubt a rapid self-destruction if ever the process is not checked.” See Mongkhol-Katay, “Les forces politiques,” p. 195. On child soldiers in Vang Pao’s forces see Alfred W. McCoy, Review, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992*, by Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 52, no. 3 (1993).

¹⁷¹⁴ “Youth Center,” *National Unity*, no. 9, p. 21.

¹⁷¹⁵ Mongkhol-Katay, “Les forces politiques,” p. 166. They also urged the youth to prefer liberty without peace to peace without liberty.

¹⁷¹⁶ Khamlay Mounivong, “réflexion sur la contestation des jeunes au Laos et dans le monde” *Lao Sappada*, March 10, 1972, no 1, p. 17-18.

Vientiane protested their exams, and the students at the teacher's college protested the lack of water. The students then complained about the faults of the student association. By January 1972, students brought their discontent to government officials on a tour of the Lycée, protesting against changes to the way exams were held. Khamlay was drawn to ask whether this discontentment of Lao youth was the same as that of other countries. He believed the behavior of Lao youth was essentially the same as in Europe, the US, and other developed countries. Yet he noted that the Lao youth movement did not reach the same extent or have the same objectives as others, and could be satisfied relatively easily, whereas those movements in advanced nations "demanded a new order, thus a fundamental change of their respective societies."¹⁷¹⁷ Khamlay hastily asserted that the Lao youth protestors did not want such fundamental changes. Yet he did note there were agitators, "malicious commentators, who have either exaggerated the facts or tried to politicize them in a variety of ways."¹⁷¹⁸ Nor could he entirely dismiss the trouble and the underlying parallels with local youth, concluding that Lao "young and old" needed to take a lesson from the chaos in rich countries "to avoid errors."¹⁷¹⁹

In another episode, young law students were outraged by a sign at the French Cultural Center which had French written over a Lao title for an establishment.¹⁷²⁰ They demanded it be changed within twenty-four hours or else they would put up a new sign. The press described the youth as having "patriotic indignation" concerning the "injustice made to their national language," and threatened to extend their "vengeful activity" to other establishments which made the same mistake.¹⁷²¹ The report said the protest was sparked by the closure of a movie theater.

¹⁷¹⁷ Ibid, p. 17.

¹⁷¹⁸ Ibid, p. 18.

¹⁷¹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷²⁰ "Tribune Libre" *Lao Sappada*, May 12, 1972, no 7, p. 15.

¹⁷²¹ Ibid.

By the time of the Constitution Day celebrations of May 11, 1972, the elite were embattled with the youth. While Bounthong Keomanivong noted the celebrations were not disrupted, he admitted student protests had been planned and the government responded by setting up barricades for what he called “draconian measures of security.”¹⁷²² Thus, he still lamented things were not “normal.”¹⁷²³ He noted particularly the lack of unity among the youth and the older elite leaders. He said Constitution Day was not the time for any “expression of protest of an avid youth,” which was a “gross error only profitable to the enemies of the country.”¹⁷²⁴ Yet Bounthong conceded it was good that the youth were aware of their role in shaping the future of the country. At least they were no longer indolent. They might even be finally “waking” up.¹⁷²⁵ Yet he warned the government not to refuse dialogue with the younger elite who denounced its errors, inequalities, and indifference otherwise it risked being feudal. All had a right to be heard. Finally, to underline the tension, he warned against “certain excesses in the protest.”¹⁷²⁶

There was one new political party that appeared to offer hope for change and even for a voice for the youth in a society dominated by elders. The *Mittasone* society had initially served as the voice of junior officials in the government newly returned from study abroad with fresh ideas for reform. Yet it was transformed into a “new blood” political party, the Movement for the New Way (ຂະບວນການແນວທາງໃໝ່), which was founded on June 7, 1970.¹⁷²⁷ This party would play a major role in the final years of the Royal Lao Government. The party was described as very political and very nationalist. Its president was Vithaya Sourinho who was joined by other party leaders including Kithong Vongsay, a lawyer, and Somphou Oudomvilay and Khamphao

¹⁷²² Ibid.

¹⁷²³ Ibid.

¹⁷²⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷²⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷²⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷²⁷ Mongkhol-Katay, “Les forces politiques,” p. 166.

Phonekeo, who were both professors. The party's domestic platform rejected feudalism of any kind and opposed regionalism calling for a "truly national administration," improved collaboration between civil and military authorities and a single truly national army (which implied no foreign militaries).¹⁷²⁸ They also called for ousting the old mentality of the "mandarins," for Laocisation of education, promotion of a greater "civic spirit" among citizens and for an "equal chance for all in the domain of education and the struggle for life."¹⁷²⁹ They further called for free enterprise "that does not lose view of national interests."¹⁷³⁰ On foreign policy they called for true neutrality "like other parties."¹⁷³¹

Oudone Sananikone offers a critical account of the Movement for the New Way Party. He described the new party as playing a leading role in the social upheavals of 1974 and 1975. He claimed their aim was "to propel the government as rapidly as possible into a new, liberal, socialist course."¹⁷³² This was due to their receiving a "large dose of socialist doctrine during their student years in Paris."¹⁷³³ Yet their radicalism only grew as they came into contact with Pathet Lao. They rejected the leadership of the Royal Lao Government as "old and reactionary."¹⁷³⁴ The party believed "that only the educated youth of Laos were qualified to shape the destiny of the nation."¹⁷³⁵ Many party members were government bureaucrats yet they would protest against their own department causing chaos and paralyzing the government: "No affront, no apparent injustice was too small to become the cause for an anti-government demonstration."¹⁷³⁶ He further

¹⁷²⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷²⁹ Ibid, p. 167.

¹⁷³⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷³¹ Ibid.

¹⁷³² Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Washington D.C.: Office of Chief of Military History, 1984), p. 154.

¹⁷³³ Ibid. Souvanna Phouma had been spying on Lao students in France for a time in the late-1960s according to his private papers.

¹⁷³⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷³⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷³⁶ Ibid.

noted they cooperated with Souvanna Phouma.¹⁷³⁷ As a result, many were rapidly promoted, including to the Joint National Political Council.¹⁷³⁸ This was the key body, headed by Souphanouvong, that facilitated the Pathet Lao's bloodless takeover during the third coalition government.

But that was not the only source of inspiration for the youth. Not all were able to win access to study abroad in France or the US like members of *Mittasone*, much less go to government schools. Many thousands more were left behind each year by the broken education system. They were blocked from continuing their education after primary school due to their insufficient ability in French. Their opportunities were limited. They were the ones with the most to lose in the failing economy.¹⁷³⁹ These other youths that were not Westernized would be more open to the Pathet Lao appeals to liberate the country from foreign domination, viewing the continued presence of French, Americans and Thai as a serious problem. Yet Bounsang Khamkeo's personal account of the revolution shows that even a Westernized youth who had studied abroad could be drawn into the appeal of the Pathet Lao.¹⁷⁴⁰ Finally, in as much as the revolution of 1975 was a conflict between youth and the elders reveals that every great movement in the thirty years of the Royal Lao Government was at root a generational conflict.

Bounnack Phommarath wrote about "the revolutionary temptation."¹⁷⁴¹ The world was on fire as he observed that "men rise up one against another," and against "the established order, and

¹⁷³⁷ Souvanna for his part feared a coup. Ibid, p. 160. Souvanna was also happy to see the rightwing suffering in this period. Ibid, p. 150. See further Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 930.

¹⁷³⁸ Oudone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 155.

¹⁷³⁹ Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 930 notes inflation due to the collapsing economy was an issue seized on by those leading the anti-government protests.

¹⁷⁴⁰ Bounsang Khamkeo, *I Little Slave: A Prison Memoir from Communist Laos* (Eastern Washington University Press, 2006).

¹⁷⁴¹ Bounnack Phommarath, "la tentation révolutionnaire" *Lao Sappada*, May 12, no. 7, p. 20.

the ones who represent it.”¹⁷⁴² The world was in flux without any safe mooring: even social establishments could not adapt to the changing times. He then turned to the revolution in the country itself, speaking of “one part of our countrymen” who helped the “revolutionary brothers” struggle against “our society.”¹⁷⁴³ The revolution targeted a Lao society “where reigns, they say, the fever of consumption, the desire of the rich individual, the race for pleasure and the exploitation of man by man.”¹⁷⁴⁴ Yet Bounnack could grimly rue that the revolution itself would “only create new injustices, introduce new imbalances, and provoke new ruin.”¹⁷⁴⁵ Yet at the same time, he could agree with the revolutionaries, and even speak of being tempted himself. He saw in Vientiane “every day thousands of manifestations of egotism, of blatant injustice, of corruption.”¹⁷⁴⁶ He was impotent to address it, and even admitted “we are tempted by violence that would produce a total change.”¹⁷⁴⁷ But he was sober enough to realize that were he to give in to this temptation, “which could maybe satisfy our bad conscience” it still would not solve “the underlying problem.”¹⁷⁴⁸ One thing was clear from Bounnack’s account: by the middle of 1972 the country was already teetering on the brink of a major revolution that even some of the educated elite of Vientiane would join.

Arguing “Compassion has not disappeared,” Bounhaeng T. Charoensouk wrote openly in the elite magazine *Vientiane Society* a message that was essentially anti-war.¹⁷⁴⁹ He said the current war might not be easily named, adding that this was because “we do not know [if] it is war between Lao killing Lao or a Lao-North Vietnam war or otherwise – [we] do not know. We only know now

¹⁷⁴² Ibid.

¹⁷⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴⁹ Bounhaeng T. Charoensouk, ມະນຸສທັມຍັງບໍ່ສິ້ນ [“compassion has not disappeared”] *Vientiane Society*, July 1971, p. 27-28.

that the killing goes on.” By mid-1971, the elite no longer could see the purpose of the war. They were clearly demoralized and openly expressing feelings of losing hope. Bounhaeng went on to address all the killing that “had killed the life of a soldier already, many thousands, many tens of thousands...” The average Lao, he said, had not previously been concerned with the grim business of a soldier much less with politics. Thus, for the average Lao in this war “[he] only dies out and receives bad karma as well, [for] many people.” He was particularly upset about the condition of the “seven hundred thousand” war refugees who had “extremely seriously bad karma,” such that they fled and then died in the “war that is an extremely fierce punishment, savage and cruel.” One had to calm the melancholy in oneself with consolations. He observed that one was apt to think that every person in the world was savage and lacking compassion. Before the war, by contrast, everyone was happy in their ancestral lands, living in harmony and unity, observing the customs, helping one-another in the village. But that was no longer what the country was like. The fate of the refugees had laid this bare. In fact, the very thing that the elite had always warned would happen under a social revolution – a social leveling that would destroy society, wipe out tradition, and extinguish Buddhism – had somehow already happened during the course of the war. The Royal Lao Government, which had started out with so much hope and promise, was now nothing more than a shadow of itself in a ruined country.

Conclusion: Consumed by Revolution

The RLG signed the treaty ending the war on February 21, 1973 under great pressure from its former ally, the United States.¹⁷⁵⁰ The treaty, and the protocols, which would establish the third

¹⁷⁵⁰ Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 167 provides an important oral account from one of the RLG negotiators Ngon Sananikone who recalled US pressure as follows: “What could we do when Kissinger told us to come to an agreement as quickly as possible? America underwrote our army!”

coalition government on April 5, 1974 (the Provisional Government of National Unity), would prove to be the instrument that would destroy all that was left of the Royal Lao Government. While the Joint National Political Council (JNPC) was to have equal representation from the RLG and Pathet Lao, the RLG was represented only by neutralists all too eager for peace, who made repeated concessions to the Pathet Lao. The RLG plenipotentiary was none other than the Kongle-Souvanna Neutralist Pheng Phongsavanh.¹⁷⁵¹ Souvanna himself was impatient during negotiations and “wanted an agreement now!”¹⁷⁵² The JNPC came to supersede the administration, the courts, even the National Assembly. At the first meeting of the JNPC, the Pathet Lao economic and political programs were approved without consulting the National Assembly; this began the slow death of democracy in the country.¹⁷⁵³ The Pathet Lao did not bother to wait for new elections supposed to be held in mid-1976 before implementing their programs across the country. In this way, they took control of the government even before 1975 as they placed Pathet Lao representatives in every ministry of the government.

The United States used its power and influence over the Royal Lao Government to ensure a peace agreement was reached and that the third coalition government was upheld, no matter what. During negotiations with the Pathet Lao Souvanna “was already under great pressure from the American Deputy Chief of Mission, John Dean, to see that some kind of an agreement was reached.”¹⁷⁵⁴ Yet even as the US returned to a neo-colonial pose forcing its ally to self-destruction, it now enjoyed broad agreement with Souvanna on ending the war with little concern for the hazards of negotiating with the Pathet Lao. In their rush to peace the US and Souvanna gave up

¹⁷⁵¹ Ibid, p. 147.

¹⁷⁵² Ibid, p. 149. “thus the right wing had no representation in the most important policy-making institution in the country.”

¹⁷⁵³ Ibid, p. 156.

¹⁷⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 147.

many advantages to the Pathet Lao. Oudone Sananikone was involved in negotiations with the Pathet Lao and sought to avoid a bad agreement while remaining “aware at all times that we must prevent a Communist take-over.”¹⁷⁵⁵ Yet he was hindered by Americans who “frequently urged members of the government to make more concessions” amid “thinly veiled threats of cuts in American assistance.”¹⁷⁵⁶ He noted: “it was quite difficult for any Lao official...to fail to respond to the [American] Embassy pressure.”¹⁷⁵⁷ When Oudone and others threatened to resign from the JNPC the US responded by applying pressure: “we would find that the weekly shipments of American supplied rice for the Army would not arrive, or that the American supplied money to pay the Army would be delayed, or that only part of the fuel needed to run the Army’s vehicles would be delivered.”¹⁷⁵⁸ Finally, the US warned the Royal Lao Army not to attempt a coup, which in any event would only restart the war – a war that could not be waged without US aid. Only then did Major General Oudone concede the end of the Royal Lao Government was at hand: “In a word, we were defeated. And most of us realized it.”¹⁷⁵⁹

Wherever the RLG had resisted the Pathet Lao was now open and vulnerable, completely exposed. The government was rendered powerless by being forced to accept dangerous peace terms. While US troops withdrew sixty days from the creation of the PNGU, North Vietnamese troops were never withdrawn simply because the Pathet Lao claimed none were in the country. The RLG was forced to grant the Pathet Lao access to Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Pathet Lao officials were able to paralyze the new government at will via the JNCP. The Pathet Lao slandered anyone who dared oppose them as warmongers. They were led by their charismatic leader

¹⁷⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 149.

¹⁷⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 149-150.

¹⁷⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 150.

¹⁷⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 168. “it had been made very clear to us on many occasions by members of the American mission that U.S. aid would stop immediately if we took any drastic steps.”

Souphanouvong, who himself drew crowds, even as they surreptitiously created protests in the streets. Yet all the while, Souphanouvong repeatedly claimed to support the King, making people believe the Pathet Lao calls for peace were genuine. Finally, Souvanna Phouma had a heart attack on July 12, 1974 which left the RLG adrift, leaderless.

The Pathet Lao launched a new military campaign in August 1974 even as the failing economy required another devaluation of the currency. Yet when any violation of the cease-fire occurred, Souvanna Phouma would invariably blame the Royal Lao Army. In such cases Souvanna forbid the Royal Lao Army to respond: “even if attacked, they could only take passive measures to protect themselves.”¹⁷⁶⁰ The last major cease-fire violation occurred during the Lao New Year in April 1975. The Pathet Lao seized the junction of Route 7 and Route 13 threatening the road connecting Vientiane and Luang Prabang just as top RLG officials headed to Luang Prabang for the Lao New Year’s celebration. The Minister of Defense, Sisouk Na Champassak, ordered General Vang Pao to retaliate and reclaim the road. “A few hours later, Souvanna Phouma summoned Sisouk Na Champassak and firmly berated him for issuing the order to counterattack and accused the leading officers of the RLA of being war provocateurs.”¹⁷⁶¹

The Pathet Lao slowly strangled the country from April to August 1975.¹⁷⁶² King Savang Vatthana, bowing to Pathet Lao pressure, dissolved the National Assembly on April 13, 1975. RLA forces under Vang Pao suffered a serious defeat that same month, leaving the road to Vientiane open. On May 1, the Pathet Lao marched unopposed into Vientiane and other cities. There followed a great demonstration of eight thousand protesters on May 8 against the leaders of

¹⁷⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 158.

¹⁷⁶¹ Ibid, p. 158-159.

¹⁷⁶² Evans suggests the Pathet Lao takeover was effected slowly over several months rather than by a rapid military campaign because they had relied on the North Vietnamese Army too much, whom very well could not spearhead the final campaign for “national liberation.”

the Royal Lao Army and the police, which Souvanna Phouma called to be dispersed, but no longer had any power to stop.¹⁷⁶³ On May 9, demonstrators surrounded the US embassy and demanded RLG leaders leave the country. “Seeing the handwriting on the wall, some of us began preparing to leave because we knew that we could not survive when the Pathet Lao took over.”¹⁷⁶⁴ Sisouk Na Champassak and Oudone Sananikone were among those who left on May 11, the last Constitution Day. Vang Pao left shortly thereafter. This allowed the Pathet Lao to take control of what remained of the RLA. Yet King Savang Vatthana refused to flee his country for a life of exile. The Pathet Lao continued to advance, entering Pakse, Savannakhet and Thakhek on May 19. On May 25, all senior RLA commanders and staff officers were called to a meeting by the Pathet Lao where they were then flown to re-education camps.¹⁷⁶⁵ The RLG was decapitated as “every director and deputy minister remaining...disappeared” including General Bounpone Maktheparak, the commander of the armed forces, his family, General Ouane Ratthikhoun, the military region one commander, and every technical service chief.¹⁷⁶⁶ Even those who so importantly aided the Pathet Lao revolution were arrested and sent to re-education camp, including prominent members of *Mittasone*.¹⁷⁶⁷ Others who were sent to re-education camps included Bong Souvannavong, Touby Lyfoung and Khamchan Pradith, a close follower of Souvanna Phouma. By June USAID was forced to leave the country by angry demonstrators, whom the Pathet Lao

¹⁷⁶³ Oudone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 168, 175. Oudone notes that if the RLA had dispersed the demonstration then the Pathet Lao would have taken power by force. For a detailed account of the May 8, 1975 protest see Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, p. 930.

¹⁷⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 168.

¹⁷⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 175. Re-education camps seem to have first emerged during the course of the war. See *ibid*, p. 157: “When a Pathet Lao soldier was captured by our side, he was sent to a camp for several months and educated on the government policies and structures... When a government soldier was captured by the Pathet Lao, he was obliged to stay in their zone or serve in their forces after his indoctrination course.”

¹⁷⁶⁶ Ibid. Oudone added “so much for the leadership of the RLA and so much for the promises of the Pathet Lao.”

¹⁷⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 155: “The consideration they later received from the Pathet Lao when the Communists gained full control was less beneficial. Only a year after this event those who were able escaped to Thailand and later to France or elsewhere, while the less fortunate ones are in Pathet Lao prison camps.”

could direct at anyone standing in their way. In August Luang Prabang was taken over by a revolutionary council while Pathet Lao troops “liberated” Vientiane. In September Souvanna Phouma’s neutralist paper, *Middle of the Road*, ran serialized stories praising communism and neighboring leaders such as North Korean dictator Kim Jong Sung, whose portrait appeared on the front page on September 9, 1975.¹⁷⁶⁸ One day before the same paper’s front page declared death sentences for a number of former RLG leaders.¹⁷⁶⁹ Finally, the monarchy was abolished and on December 2, 1975 the new Lao People’s Democratic Republic was declared.

¹⁷⁶⁸ *Middle of the Road*, no. 2,188, September 9, 1975, p. 1. The headline for the story is: “September 9 is the 27th anniversary of the founding of the Democratic Republic of Korea.” The story goes on to quote a speech by Kim Jong Sung attacking US imperialism on the Korean peninsula and demanding the US get out of South Korea. For the serialized stories on communism see for example, *ibid*, no. 2,190, September 11, 1975, p. 3, the title of which is: “the Communist Party is on the side of and the founder of great victory.” This open praise for communism in a newspaper was distinct from earlier news articles on the subject in the 1950s and ‘60s that were overwhelmingly negative. *Ibid*, p. 1 the headline tells people to “turn over war weapons to officials” suggesting newspapers aided the regime in disarming the populace. See further *ibid*, no. 2,192, September 15, 1975 which notes the new LPDR regime would celebrate October 12 as independence day, thereby validating the Pathet Lao’s appropriation of the Issara.

¹⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid*, no. 2,187, September 8, 1975, p. 1. Death sentences in absentia were decreed for Prince Boun Oum, Phoui Sananikone, General Vang Pao, General Kouprasith Abhay, Major General Oudone Sananikone. Others were sentenced to life in prison including Sisouk Na Champassak, Prince Sopsaisana, Ngon Sananikone and others. No details on what law was broken was provided or even what court issued the sentence.

CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION – THE OWL OF MINERVA

Introduction

“The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of the dusk.”¹⁷⁷⁰ Hegel’s famous words prompt us to consider why understanding the Royal Lao Government has remained elusive for so long. The conflicts of colonialism and the Cold War were enormously important to the twentieth-century. They have also powerfully shaped our understanding of many issues, framing them with a new set of ideological beliefs. The very fact that one can speak of such a region as “Southeast-Asia” is the result of the largest conflict in human history, World War II.¹⁷⁷¹ As Area Studies began to emerge in the US in the 1950s, communist studies were foremost in the study of modern Asia, which is how Lao was principally studied. As a major battlefield of the global Cold War there was little possibility to study Lao on its own terms, separate from Western or other outside interests. There were no “autonomous histories” of the RLG even as John Smail was calling for them. Yet even today, US-centrism and Eurocentrism remain major problems in the field of Lao history. Moreover, the daily struggles of the period from 1945 to 1975 made it hard for observers to grapple with issues that were then still unfolding. But with the help of hindsight the RLG can be seen in quite a different light.¹⁷⁷²

In this study, I have argued that the single most important factor that has limited understanding of the RLG has been the neglect of the elite. The elite were understudied and treated

¹⁷⁷⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Allen Wood (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) p. 23.

¹⁷⁷¹ Donald K. Emmerson, ““Southeast Asia”: What’s in a name?” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1984).

¹⁷⁷² Most studies of the RLG were undertaken before it had fallen in 1975 to the Pathet Lao. Even major works treating the RLG which appeared afterward did not consider it in its entirety. This has shaped how the RLG is remembered. The major exceptions are the works of Stuart-Fox, Evans and Dommen.

summarily by scholars too eager to criticize rather than seriously engage with them.¹⁷⁷³ There was no assessment of their ideas or their regime's ideology. This oversight led to numerous myths about the RLG, such as the notion that the country utterly lacked nationalism or that the country was largely a colonial invention.¹⁷⁷⁴ It was hard for scholars to appreciate that the RLG's vulnerability to invasion and subversion by China and Vietnam did not necessarily mean its elite were weak-willed, sitting idly by as their country was overrun. At the time, these crucial misunderstandings led the West to actually oppose Lao democracy and anti-communism at pivotal moments. There was all too little consideration of the parallels that existed between the RLG elite's projects and those of the West, or what the alternative would be. Yet by studying the elite one can form a new understanding of the RLG that permits one to see that democracy and anti-communism were central to the regime. What this study has attempted foremost has been to recover an account of the RLG as the elite viewed it. Obviously, this viewpoint has its limits, but it offers the possibility of opening up new areas of discussion, revealing new insights and new problems.

Yet there is another reason why the RLG has remained misunderstood for so long. It is not just the West, but the RLG's old foe, the Pathet Lao who intentionally cast the RLG into obscurity. They succeeded far better than most realize. As Grant Evans has observed on the period after 1975, "a huge silence had fallen over the RLG period, almost as if it had never existed."¹⁷⁷⁵ More recently Kathryn Sweet has noted the RLG "is rendered invisible: irrelevant or simply absent from the

¹⁷⁷³ The elite were blamed for the communist insurgency, yet the schism among the elite only arose in 1949 as a result of France's failed attempt to force the country to return to the status of a colony. And that schism would have been cured were it not for the failed US neo-colonial intervention that followed.

¹⁷⁷⁴ There existed a distinct Lao people and culture with a long history, much of it within a unified kingdom centered on the upper reaches of the Mekong. But this fact gets lost when scholarly attention is focused so strongly on the French conquest in 1893. It was fashionable to say the country was "invented" by the French among scholars, but this can lead to serious misunderstandings about Lao history. On the other hand, the fact that the French drew the boundaries of Laos also had real effects on the Royal Lao Government.

¹⁷⁷⁵ Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, p. 235.

official narrative of Lao history.”¹⁷⁷⁶ Panivong Norindr has likewise observed in regard to his father Pheng, “it is surprising how little remains of an existence, of a lifetime in service of a nation.”¹⁷⁷⁷ These efforts extended beyond national borders as the Pathet Lao have powerfully shaped Western understandings of the RLG.¹⁷⁷⁸ Over the past forty years, historical study of the RLG has been largely retold from the point of view of the loyalists and the Pathet Lao when it is not simply written from the perspective of France or the United States. Ironically, Western scholars’ criticism of the RLG aligns closely with the Pathet Lao’s own accounts. By often relying on Pathet Lao works, without sufficiently addressing their limitations, scholars have contributed to the silencing of RLG voices in history.

This inadvertent confluence has led to a situation where the Pathet Lao have largely written the history of the RLG. The revolution itself laid deep ideas of the RLG. In the wake of the revolution, few could speak positively about the RLG, not just within the country, but also among Western scholars, especially those who had opposed the Second Indochina War.¹⁷⁷⁹ Any positive view of the RLG was generally lost in academic discussions that focused on finding fault. This view seemed correct because the RLG had been defeated, overthrown in a revolution that many

¹⁷⁷⁶ Sweet, “Limited Doses,” p. 59. See further Oliver Tappe, “Geschichte, Nationsbildung und Legitimationspolitik in Laos: Untersuchungen zur laotischen nationalen Historiographie und Ikonographie” [History, nation-building and politics of legitimacy in Laos: Examinations of Lao national historiography and iconography] (PhD diss., University of Munster, 2008), which includes considerations of the complicated memories of Phetsarath and Sisavang Vong in the LPDR.

¹⁷⁷⁷ Panivong Norindr, “On Photography, History, and Affect: Re-Narrating the Political Life of a Laotian Subject” *Historical Reflections* vol. 34, no. 1 (2008), p. 91.

¹⁷⁷⁸ See for example Martin Stuart Fox and Rod Bucknell, “Politicization of the Buddhist Sangha in Laos” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 13, 1 (1982). See further Clive Christie, “Marxism and the History of Nationalist Movements in Laos” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1979). See also Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). See further Fred Branfman, *Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life under an Air War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

¹⁷⁷⁹ See for example Martin Stuart-Fox’s pessimistic account of the RLG in his introduction to *Contemporary Laos: Studies in the Politics and Society of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic* Martin Stuart-Fox (ed.) (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), p. 4-5.

observers felt was basically on the right side of history.¹⁷⁸⁰ Or as the Pathet Lao Foreign Minister of the third coalition government Soubanh Srithirat put it to junior officials as he tried to convert them to the cause “you should swim with the tide of history.”¹⁷⁸¹ Further the new regime referred to its enemies as “reactionaries” and denied them any political significance, treating them simply as bandits.¹⁷⁸² The term “reactionary” itself referred to the fact that the Lao People’s Democratic Republic represented inevitable progress for the country whereas those opposing it represented a reversion to a more primitive stage in human development; to fight the new regime was to fight the future. But this notion itself implies a basic teleology that history constantly marches onward to progress without any mistakes, detours, or reverses along the way. Yet in the era of popular sovereignty, how can the defeat of a democracy at the hands of what became a one-party state, which arrogated to itself all political power while denying the people any fundamental rights, possibly be considered progress? The Lao People’s Democratic Republic, although claiming to be democratic (Democratic Centralism), bans any political party besides the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, denies the rule of law and has never permitted free and fair elections.

Democracy’s Mutation and Neutralism’s Vanquishing of Anti-Communism

Perspective is all important when considering the Lao communist revolution of 1975, which meant many things to many people at the time and since. It was, in many ways, the start of

¹⁷⁸⁰ If the fall of the RLG was really due to the Pathet Lao being on the winning side of an irresistible current of history, a great liberating force bringing national salvation, then why were there so many who refused to accept the revolution? Hundreds of thousands fled, giving up their cherished homeland for the uncertain life of exile in the diaspora. A long insurgency against the LPDR followed, waged on the Thai border by Hmong, Khmu, Lao, Iu-mien, who all fought to restore the RLG. There were even counter-coups within the country. Finally, many who supported the revolution in 1975 soon grew disillusioned by the failure of the LPDR to make good on its utopian promises.

¹⁷⁸¹ Bounsang Khamkeo, *I Little Slave* (Eastern Washington Press, 2006), p. 60.

¹⁷⁸² See Ian Baird, “Party, State and the Control of Information in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic: Secrecy, Falsification and Denial,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2018.1451552, p. 12.

a whole new era in the country. Yet from the perspective of the Royal Lao Government it signaled the end of an independent, anti-communist democracy, which the elite had sought to build since 1945. The fall of the RLG augured by the 1973 Vientiane Agreement was described by one member of the Lao elite as “an agreement that would ultimately destroy our liberties and our identities as Lao patriots, citizens and soldiers.”¹⁷⁸³ The first causality of the revolution was Lao anti-communism, which until then had been central to a certain nationalist outlook that was founded on a particular essentialist view of traditional culture, society, and religion. The elite had originally been able to promote this outlook as a way to safeguard society from all the destructive forces of the post-colonial world. However, Lao anti-communism did not shy away from a near suicidal conflict with North Vietnam, which finally ruined the country just as Lao anti-communists had always warned that communism would. Yet the defeat of Lao anti-communism was not just the loss of this one idea, but a whole host of related, interconnected notions that went with it, including a style of democracy, a set of political ideals, and a way of modernization. Of course, the revolution soured relations with the West for decades. At the root of this transition was the destruction of the elite who themselves more than anyone else embodied Lao anti-communism. Thus, the elite were systemically and brutally eradicated by the new Lao People’s Democratic Republic in a vindictive crime for which there has never been justice.¹⁷⁸⁴

While anti-communism was eradicated in the country, democracy was forever altered.

¹⁷⁸³ Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Washington D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1984), p. 149.

¹⁷⁸⁴ Estimates vary from 15,000 to over 40,000 people dying in re-education camps that existed until 1989 in some form, although no one really knows the real figure. The systematic mass murder of those associated with the RLG garnered much less attention than the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge partly due to the LPDR’s methods of letting prisoners die of starvation and disease to mask its own culpability. The camps were also shrouded in secrecy and any inquiries met with denial by the LPDR. Numerous accounts of survivors have been published, most informally. For a partial list of the Lao elite sent to some of the re-education camps see Joanna C. Scott, *Indochina’s Refugees: Oral Histories from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1989), p. 267-305.

Western liberal democracy gave way to the centralized democracy of Marx and Lenin, under the guiding hand of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (ພັກປະຕິວັດປະຊາຊົນລາວ).¹⁷⁸⁵ Gone were the civil and political rights, Western liberal parliamentary democracy, the rule of law and individual freedoms.¹⁷⁸⁶ The death of the Royal Lao Government also was the end of a vibrant civil society buttressed by free speech. Freedom of assembly allowed real opposition parties in what was one of the few functioning multiparty democracies in the region. The Pathet Lao would answer that these rights were illusory, and had never really existed for most people, especially, poor and marginalized peoples. Yet to what degree was the victory of the Pathet Lao movement over the Royal Lao Government a clear sign that the majority of people actually supported a different political and economic system which the Pathet Lao came to represent? Was the Lao People's Democratic Republic the antidote to the ills of the Royal Lao Government? There was never a referendum where people were presented with clear options between the old system and the new one. Most people were not aware the new government would be socialist, or what that entailed. While many early supporters of the revolution could point to the faults of the RLG, their revolutionary spirit waned when people realized the LPDR itself would perpetuate many of the same problems.

There was a fateful meeting between Major General Oudone Sananikone and Prince Souphanouvong in February 1973. The two men had known each other during the Issara resistance but had not seen each other since. Souphanouvong tried to convince his old ally "that despite the long and bitter war we had fought against each other, he was still the good, patriotic Lao

¹⁷⁸⁵ Bounsang Khamkeo noted Maoist slogans appeared during the Lao revolution. This would match with the rising influence of Maoism in Cambodia and Thailand at the time.

¹⁷⁸⁶ The LPDR's rejection of Western democracy is well illustrated by the new regime's razing of the old National Assembly building of the RLG (which had been near the USAID building) and the subsequent construction of a new legislative assembly building next to the That Luang (perhaps seen by the Pathet Lao as reclaiming native rule).

prince.”¹⁷⁸⁷ Yet Oudone raised important questions for the future of the country under the Pathet Lao. “Would the North Vietnamese really leave Laos now that peace had come and what would happen if they refused?”¹⁷⁸⁸ Oudone added that he “did not believe that [Souphanouvong] had fought the French only to be subordinated to the Vietnamese.”¹⁷⁸⁹ Souphanouvong’s only response was general platitudes on the “brotherhood of all Asians.”¹⁷⁹⁰ Yet Souphanouvong himself was cast aside by Kaysone Phomvihane and others in the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party.¹⁷⁹¹

Enduring Legacy of the RLG

As one of the Lao elite recalled “Laos was able, despite years of war, to build the foundations of a modern state with all its institutions for the conduct of international relations, economic and fiscal management, representative government, internal security and national defense.”¹⁷⁹² He added the RLG had “instituted the forms of democratic government in which all the people of Laos participated” and “the people, although heavily dependent on foreign economic assistance, appeared to be in charge of their own destinies and enjoyed the practice of free economic enterprise.”¹⁷⁹³

A central claim of this work has been that the RLG laid the foundations for the modern country. Indeed, many facets that scholars observe about the LPDR today were in fact first witnessed in the RLG era. In economic matters, given that a socialist economy was abandoned in the 1980s, the revolution did not bring lasting change to the overall approach to the development

¹⁷⁸⁷ Oudone, *The Royal Lao Army*, p. 178.

¹⁷⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹¹ Ibid, p. 179. On the fall of Souphanouvong see further Baird, “Party, State and the Control of Information in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic”.

¹⁷⁹² Ibid, p. 176.

¹⁷⁹³ Ibid, p. 146.

of the modern economy.¹⁷⁹⁴ The Nam Ngum dam built by the RLG was thus only a sign of things to come. Overlap between the LPDR and RLG is apparent not just in economic terms, but also with political and cultural issues as well.¹⁷⁹⁵ The Issara, who were a violent, nationalist dissident movement, presaged the arrival of the Pathet Lao. The Pathet Lao themselves cultivated this perception in the country as they appropriated Issara symbols like its flag and claimed to be a movement of “national liberation” several years after the country was formally independent. Yet the RLG had further overlaps with the LPDR, such as in historical works, which already articulated a “rescue the nation” (ກູ້ຊາດ) narrative, which was later an important trope in LPDR works. Moreover, the RLG had its “heroic kings,” which today the LPDR promotes while linking them to communist party officials. Of course, the RLG itself drew connections between the ancient kingdom of Lan Xang and itself, thereby portraying the Lao nation as eternal. Yet that ploy was less awkward for the RLG than the LPDR given that it had maintained a monarchy that traced its lineage back to the old kings of Lan Xang. In other areas where the LPDR has not directly followed the RLG or even sought to break from it, the RLG nonetheless has shaped how the LPDR approaches certain issues, such as relations with the West. Both the RLG and LPDR had sought to remove foreign influences, although they differed as to which foreigners were problematic. It is rather remarkable how much the LPDR has come to repeat RLG history after abandoning the revolution.

¹⁷⁹⁴ Grant Evans, *Lao Peasants under Socialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

¹⁷⁹⁵ I do not address how the LPDR attempted to distance itself from the old regime, especially in its first years. The LPDR’s rhetoric could never match reality in this regard. Thanks to Ian Baird for this valuable point.

Specter of Democracy

The RLG has, therefore, shaped the country in ways that continue to resonate with the present. Nonetheless, it had a number of achievements that have proven to be unique. Any account of the RLG must include a consideration of its multiparty democracy supported by freedom of assembly, free and fair elections, civil and political rights like free speech, a free press that contributed to an open civil society, which included a number of civic organizations, and a certain tolerance of dissent, even anti-government elements. In summary, the RLG presided over the country's first and only Western liberal parliamentary democracy.

From 1945 to 1975, RLG democracy was more robust and more enduring than most countries in the region, even after accounting for the RLA military's undermining of Lao democracy from 1960 to 1965. A brief comparison will show this to be the case. Thailand had only brief periods when it was not under a military dictatorship in these years.¹⁷⁹⁶ In this respect the Thai revolution of 1973 was the exact opposite to the Lao revolution of 1975 in that it restored democracy, not overthrew it.¹⁷⁹⁷ Illustrative of the more robust democracy enjoyed in Laos but denied in Thailand, the RLG maintained the very same constitution promulgated on May 11, 1947 (albeit amended) throughout its existence, which was very different from Thailand where constitutions were dispensed with all too easily. Cambodia after 1945 had a promising early democracy not unlike the RLG, yet this was undermined by Norodom Sihanouk, whose power and

¹⁷⁹⁶ See especially Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP, 2007), which remains an essential source on Thai dictatorship in the early years of the Cold War. After World War II, Thailand enjoyed a brief period of democracy led by Pridi Banomyong, who created the first fully elected legislature in the 1946 constitution. Military dictatorship returned in November 1947 as Phibun Songkram ousted Pridi. See Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 140-142. Phibun made a failed attempt to restore democracy in 1957 that led to his ousting by Sarit Thanarat, *ibid*, p. 147-148. One should also note the RLG never outlawed communism like Thailand did, *ibid* p. 145.

¹⁷⁹⁷ Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, p. 185-188. Half a million demonstrators in Bangkok demanded a constitution and democracy on October 13, 1973. This brief democratic period was brought to an end on October 6, 1976 when the military and rightwing militia massacred students at Thammasat University and re-imposed dictatorship.

influence was unmatched in the country until 1970.¹⁷⁹⁸ In 1955 Sihanouk abdicated the throne and led the Sangkum Reastr Niyum party which dominated elections through fraud and violence leaving the country without a substantial opposition.¹⁷⁹⁹ Sihanouk further controlled the media to stifle political opposition.¹⁸⁰⁰ The situation did not improve when he was ousted from power by General Lon Nol in March 1970. As for the Republic of Vietnam, it was only created a decade after the RLG in 1955 and was from the beginning under the sway of Ngo Dinh Diem, who assumed dictatorial powers, perpetrated massive voter fraud and abused civil and political liberties.¹⁸⁰¹ After his death in November 1963, South Vietnam remained under military generals until 1971. In its last years there was a brief period of democracy before the fall of Saigon in 1975. Finally, while a comparison of the RLG with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam may be inappropriate given the different political systems, nevertheless some perspective can be illustrative on the two ideological and military adversaries. In North Vietnam, massive violence ensued during land reform that led to the execution of thousands by people's courts without any semblance of legal procedure.¹⁸⁰²

¹⁷⁹⁸ See David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), p. 212-218, 224-232. From 1947 to 1952 there were two important political parties in Cambodia: the Democrat Party, which called for immediate independence, and the Liberal Party, which wanted independence gradually. By 1950 the Royal Lao Government had several important political parties including the Democrat Party led by Kou Voravong, the National Union Party led by Bong Souvannavong, and the Independents Party led by Phoui Sananikone. The new Progressive Party led by former Issara became an important force at this time producing several prime ministers (e.g. Katay Sasorith, Souvanna Phouma). After 1952 in Cambodia, Sihanouk, with French encouragement, dissolved the National Assembly and ruled by decree, which never happened in the RLG era. See *ibid*, p. 225.

¹⁷⁹⁹ The 1955 elections were the last to be freely contested until the 1990s. After elections in 1955 the only opposition parties were the Democrats and the Prachaechon, but the Democrats continued to dwindle, *ibid*, p. 231.

¹⁸⁰⁰ *Ibid*. From 1955 to 1970 Sihanouk enjoyed his "monopoly of political power."

¹⁸⁰¹ Christopher Goscha. *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), p. 299-303. Diem oversaw the constitution and was able as a result to concentrate power in an "authoritarian executive branch." The legislature and courts were subordinate to him. Diem often bypassed the National Assembly to rule by decree. Freedom of speech was protected, but communism was outlawed and anyone's rights could be curbed in the interests of national security. There were many rights abuses not unlike the DRV: "arbitrary arrest, censorship, torture, execution, forced labor, and the use of concentration camps." Diem's pursuit of communist subversives led to mass arrest of 50,000 people, many wrongly accused who were sent to concentration camps, *ibid*, p. 302. See further *ibid*, p. 277, 281, 283, 285-290. Diem held a referendum on establishing a republic in 1955 that involved a propaganda campaign and resulted in a "sham vote" securing 98 percent, *ibid*, p. 290.

¹⁸⁰² Goscha. *Vietnam*, p. 291-295. As many as 15,000 were executed in the campaign which lasted from 1953 to 1956 and destroyed the landowning class while redistributing two million acres of land. Hundreds or thousands more committed suicides. *Ibid*, p. 292, "special people's courts," endowed with extraordinary legal powers

Besides that, the North's citizens did not enjoy free speech and those who spoke out against the government or the Second Indochina War were thrown out of work or jailed.¹⁸⁰³

Further afield, there were several early democracies in the wider region that were toppled amid the early Cold War to 1975. Myanmar enjoyed a short decade of democracy before politicians led by U Nu were sidelined by military generals gradually beginning in 1958, but who in 1962 instituted military rule branded as the "Burmese Way to Socialism."¹⁸⁰⁴ In dispensing with democracy, the Myanmar military and their supporters could claim the most people did not understand democracy nor did they have an egalitarian society.¹⁸⁰⁵ Likewise, Indonesia had a short few years of parliamentary democracy before Sukarno called for guided democracy in 1957, in which he dominated the opposition.¹⁸⁰⁶ In 1965 he was ousted by the military under Soeharto who established a new dictatorship known as the New Order.¹⁸⁰⁷ The Philippines had a functioning

authorizing arbitrary arrest... the dismissal of local authorities, and the confiscation of individual property and assets." Cadres in charge were "excessively zealous" and wrongly accused people to satisfy quotas. Crowds were "whipped into a frenzy of hate" (p. 294) in what was a "very virulent class war" (p. 293). Children spied on parents as did neighbors. Ibid p 296-297, the DRV thereafter faced calls for democratic reforms, as people called for the rule of law, a new law code and the convening of the DRV National Assembly. The National Assembly then passed laws on freedom of assembly, freedom of press and freedom of religion in early 1957. Yet these laws were never promulgated by the DRV. "Like the French before them, the communist leadership feared the implications of allowing a democratically elected national assembly to operate independently." This situation was resolved when a new constitution was introduced in 1960 that enshrined the DRV as a one-party state, *ibid*, p. 298.

¹⁸⁰³ *Ibid*, p. 304. There were earlier calls for intellectual freedom in the mid-1950s, *ibid*, p. 297. The DRV responded with repression and sent some to re-education.

¹⁸⁰⁴ Michael Aung-Thwin and Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012) p. 242, 247.

¹⁸⁰⁵ Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar*, p. 242.

¹⁸⁰⁶ M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia Since c. 1200* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 273-321. From 1950 to 1957 there was a vibrant democracy with multiple parties competing for votes, *ibid*, p. 276-278. The elections of 1955 were strongly contested, but failed to deliver a clear mandate to any one party, *ibid*, p. 285-287. Four major parties were too evenly matched to reduce tensions or govern effectively. Sukarno thus called for "a truly Indonesian form of democracy" rather than a Western form. In February 1957 Sukarno called for the parliamentary system to be replaced by "guided democracy," which consisted of a 'mutual cooperation' cabinet, advised by major social groups (youth, workers, peasants, religions, regions etc), *ibid*, p. 292. Sukarno followed this by declaring martial law. "Parliamentary democracy, such as it had been in Indonesia, was dead." See further *ibid*, p. 296-297, 301-304. By August 1959 Sukarno was calling for "ongoing revolution" as he laid out the official ideology (*Manipol-USDEK*), which included "Indonesian socialism." Newspapers were also curtailed in 1959-1961. The elected parliament was dissolve in 1960, which Sukarno replaced with an appointed one, and some parties were banned, *ibid*, p. 305-306.

¹⁸⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 322-343.

democracy yet (like the RLG and the Pathet Lao) it denied the former anti-Japanese guerrilla Hukbalahap's representatives seats won fairly in the Congress.¹⁸⁰⁸ By 1972, Philippine democracy fell under a state of emergency under Ferdinand Marcos, leaving the RLG as one of the few democracies in the region. South Korea and Taiwan were both under their own dictatorships in this period as was mainland China. The fact that the RLG was a multiparty democracy that included a powerful opposition which was frequently included in the cabinet, and where power changed hands between different parties, suggests its democracy was stronger in some respects than Singapore, India or Japan where one party dominated.¹⁸⁰⁹ Sukarno talked of an 'Indonesian style democracy,' while Sarit spoke of 'Thai style democracy' but both were claiming that a dictatorship was superior to Western liberal parliamentary democracy. Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh and others argued the same regarding their centralized democracy, but these claims do not stand the test of time and now ring hollow.

The death of Lao democracy only became evident gradually as the revolution of 1975 unfolded. At first it appeared as if the Pathet Lao would encourage democracy, or perhaps even advance it – indeed it was important to the Pathet Lao's popular appeal. Bounsang Khamkeo witnessed firsthand how they encouraged people to speak up in RLG administrative offices: "the Laotian people were finally being allowed a voice, and so they spoke."¹⁸¹⁰ The Pathet Lao held "grievance hearings" where those in positions of power were accused of abuses against their

¹⁸⁰⁸ The Huks insurgency ended vary differently than the Pathet Lao, not least because the Philippines had no land border with communist China or North Vietnam.

¹⁸⁰⁹ On the dominance of the Indian Congress Party see Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (2009), p. See *ibid*, p. 404-405 which describes the military dictatorship under Ayut Khan who instituted what he called a 'basic democracy' in neighboring Pakistan. This involved a limited, hand-picked electorate from military families loyal to the regime.

¹⁸¹⁰ Bounsang Khamkeo, *I Little Slave*, p. 57.

subordinates.¹⁸¹¹ Certainly this could be seen as an indication of how far the RLG fell short in practice to engender a truly democratic and egalitarian society. Yet when a woman rose up to speak at one such meeting and freely criticized the Pathet Lao it became painfully clear just what the Pathet Lao meant by democracy.

The political meetings usually proceeded without incident, night after night. One night, though, an elderly woman was sent to the stage to voice her complaint. Evidently, she had failed to grasp the purpose of the exercise. “Ever since the revolutionaries arrived,” she began, “there has been very little food in the markets. The Americans distributed rice, sugar, and other foods, but not the Soviets –” Before she could finish, a Pathet Lao policeman grabbed her by the arms and whisked her away. No one ever knew what happened to her. From then on our neighbors proceeded very carefully, not daring to make a mistake.¹⁸¹²

Later when the Pathet Lao finally formally overthrew the RLG they held a vote, but it was not by secret ballot and anyone who voted the wrong way was taken away.¹⁸¹³ The people were called to meetings ahead of the vote where they were coached on which candidate to vote for leading one early supporter of the revolution to lament “so this is what they think democracy is.”¹⁸¹⁴ The Pathet Lao took power by claiming to uphold, among other things, democracy, and even during the revolution could point to unmet demands for greater democratic voice among marginalized peoples in the RLG. Yet when they took power their new regime did not satisfy those very same demands, and as a result social tensions boiled beneath the surface. There followed many years in which basic individual rights were denied and there was no legal redress for abuses by the Party, no rule of law or any law itself but Party decrees.

¹⁸¹¹ Ibid, p. 57-59. Bounsang said he “did not like the way these hearings were constructed” as they did not conform to Lao custom.

¹⁸¹² Ibid, p. 76.

¹⁸¹³ Ibid, p. 80. “On voting day a ballot was distributed to each person. On it were pictures of the candidates, all of them unfamiliar. Pathet Lao policemen watched us vote, and employees of the voting committee immediately checked our ballots as we stood before them. A policeman would carry off anyone who voted incorrectly or displeased the officials in any way.”

¹⁸¹⁴ Ibid. “cadres of the Pathet Lao explained how to vote: “You check off the candidates numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, and then ignore the rest of the list.”

Yet even decades after the demise of the RLG the specter of democracy reemerged in the country. There remained a basic unmet need, which burst into the open in the 1990s. As communism collapsed there were new democratic movements in the Philippines, Thailand, China, Myanmar, Cambodia and Indonesia. While the LPDR had introduced a constitution in 1991, it remained unwilling to recognize basic civil or political rights, adhere to the rule of law, or open up the political system to allow other political parties to participate. Some saw the opportunity to push for greater political reform. Lao students studying abroad in Poland protested calling for free elections and the removal of all Vietnamese troops from the country. Yet the most serious movement emerged among senior officials within the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, led by the Minister for Science and Technology, Thongsouk Saysangky, along with a former Vice-Minister of Economics and Planning, Latsami Khamphoui and Feng Sakchittapong of the Ministry of Justice. Thongsouk and his peers sought to establish a new political party, the Social-Democratic club.¹⁸¹⁵ The LPDR responded by arresting all involved on October 8, 1990 for "preparations for a rebellion."¹⁸¹⁶

Bounsang Khamkeo, who had himself just been released from a re-education camp after seven years, had a meeting with Thongsouk before he was arrested. Thongsouk spoke out against the arrest of political dissidents by the LPDR and against its closeness to the Vietnamese which he viewed as an infringement of Lao sovereignty.¹⁸¹⁷ He said "revolution is supposed to bring people better living conditions and greater happiness... But what do we see here? families destroyed, the

¹⁸¹⁵ See Baird, "Party, State and the Control of Information in the Lao People's Democratic Republic."

¹⁸¹⁶ Amnesty International, "Lao People's Democratic Republic: Prisoners of conscience suffering in isolation" (November, 1996), p. 2. Each was sentenced to 14 years in prison on November 4, 1992. See further *ibid*, Appendix, p. 4 which notes "the three defendants have unanimously proposed... that an Eastern European democratic style be adopted and ...set up meetings ...with a group of people while talking about free elections and other issues unfavorable to the party and government..."

¹⁸¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 407. "He also expressed his wish that Laos would someday shake off the influence of Vietnam, arguing that a nation's sovereignty should not be violated, regardless of the motives for doing so."

country transformed into a prison – and meanwhile the government continues to hunt down the families of Vang Pao’s former soldiers, and people still live in a state of poverty devoid of any dignity.”¹⁸¹⁸ Thongsouk had become disillusioned with the promises of a Marxist utopia, and especially with Party leaders, who he felt were uneducated and incapable of leading the country out of poverty.¹⁸¹⁹ He advocated allowing educated people to lead the country instead of peasant-revolutionaries; and “to achieve this end, he [Thongsouk] advocated close cooperation with all Laotians presently living in exile and a real democratic government with a multiparty political system.”¹⁸²⁰

Thongsouk had been a member of the Pathet Lao, fought in the jungles and believed in the socialist ideals of equality yet he could see that once the Party was in power it monopolized that power and did not create the egalitarian society it had promised. Thongsouk told Bounsang in their meeting of his intention to seize on the crisis of communism as a moment to push for democracy in Laos.¹⁸²¹ When Bounsang was leaving the country Thongsouk went to see him again and said: “The Lao people are living in a prolonged death. I maintain that a revolution is empty without human dignity. A revolution that replaces one oppressor with another is unjust. The Lao people live with constant humiliation and fear. That’s outrageous! The people deserve better. It’s a matter of basic human rights.”¹⁸²² He added that communism was “un-Lao” and “inhuman” and that he could not possibly understand the educated Lao who “silently collaborate with the regime.”¹⁸²³

¹⁸¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸¹⁹ Ibid. “he told me that he no longer believed in the utopian, egalitarian philosophy of Marx... In Thongsouk’s view, December 2, 1975, was a sad day, a day of tragedy that marked the beginning of a long and difficult period in Laotian history.”

¹⁸²⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸²¹ Ibid, p. 408.

¹⁸²² Ibid, p. 414.

¹⁸²³ Ibid.

After his arrest, Thongsouk was sent to a re-education camp, denied basic medical care and died in 1998 when the authorities denied him life-saving medicine. In his resignation letter to Kaysone Phomvihane in 1990 he wrote: “I have thus always striven to oppose absolutely official malfeasance; to oppose oppression and exploitation of the people; and to oppose the dictatorial power of personal cliques, which are precisely what the Party and the State apparatus are; and I am demanding the holding of free elections, the putting into practice of popular liberties and democracy, and the existence of democratic institutions opposed to the maintenance of a system of communist feudalism and Politburo dynamism. The history of humankind has now confirmed that a single-party system relying exclusively on coercion and deception is incapable of ever bringing prosperity and happiness to our people.”¹⁸²⁴ He returned all medals he was awarded by the State and Party as he resigned his post.

Yet Thongsouk was not alone. In 1978 in post-Mao China there were already calls for a “fifth modernization,” (i.e. democracy) by Wei Jingsheng.¹⁸²⁵ “We want to be the masters of our own destiny. We need no gods or emperors and we don’t believe in saviors of any kind... Democracy, freedom, and happiness for all are our sole objectives... Without this fifth modernization, all others are nothing more than a new promise.”¹⁸²⁶ While Wei himself was thrown in jail for nearly twenty years before being exiled his efforts inspired the democracy protest movements of the 1980s that culminated in the occupation of Tiananmen Square in 1989. Many critics claim democracy is too Western for certain societies in Asia yet the very fact that pro-

¹⁸²⁴ Amnesty International, *Laos: Freedom of Expression Still Denied: Multiparty Advocates and Political Prisoners Sentenced After Unfair Trials* (June 30, 1993), p. 12.

¹⁸²⁵ De Bary, William Theodore and Richard Lufrano (eds.) *Sources of Chinese Tradition, vol. 2: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 497-500. “What is true democracy? Only when the people themselves choose representatives to manage affairs in accordance with their will and interests can we speak of democracy. Furthermore, the people must have the power to replace these representatives at any time in order to prevent them from abusing their powers to oppress the people...”

¹⁸²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 499.

democracy campaigns emerged from (post-)socialist countries, among top party members points to the universal appeal of democracy, notwithstanding its Western origins. In Vietnam an even stronger call for democracy came from a decorated war hero who fought at Dien Bien Phu and had a leading role in the Second Indochina War. General Tran Do wrote to top party figures “we need [to learn] and accept that *humanity today has a number of common democratic values.*”¹⁸²⁷

Conclusion: Problems and Prospects

This is not to say that everything the RLG did was laudable. The RLG had its own set of unique problems just as it had unique achievements. The RLG touted an exclusionary nationalism that failed to respect minorities, at times even seeking to outright assimilation to the dominant Lao culture. This same exuberant nationalism led the RLG’s chauvinist leadership to strain relations with neighboring communist countries and charge headlong into a war in 1959 which it could not win and from which it could not retreat. In this regard, the LPDR is a clear improvement over the RLG, in as much as it promotes ethnic equality in its official policy. The LPDR has enjoyed better foreign relations in recent times as it opened to the West in the 1990s. Likewise, the RLG failed in its modernization efforts as it struggled with the ill effects of rapid growth: inflation, new social inequalities, and the jarring introduction of capitalism. Yet even though the LPDR enjoys huge economic growth today, it too has faced problems all too familiar to the RLG-era. This study thereby has sought to formulate an alternate explanation for the fall of the RLG, which places greater emphasis on the RLG elite’s perceptions of modernity and nationalism, its ideology, rather than focus solely on the outcome of the Second Indochina War.

¹⁸²⁷ Dutton, George, Jayne Werner and John Whitmore (eds.), *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 495. Emphasis in the original text.

Finally, the lack of scholarly attention paid to Laos does not reflect its true importance.¹⁸²⁸ The outcome of events in Laos has decided the fates and fortunes of larger states repeatedly over the centuries. It follows that more study of the country would lead to greater understanding of regional events. Arthur Dommen has described the country as the “keystone” of Indochina and its importance was not lost on the French and Americans during the Indochina Wars. The Vietnam War was lost in Laos as the RLG and US failed to halt movement along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.¹⁸²⁹

Laos was decisive to the First and Second Indochina Wars.¹⁸³⁰ In late 1953, the French established their base at Dien Bien Phu specifically to halt Vietminh invasions of Laos.¹⁸³¹ Later in 1959 when North Vietnam decided to make war on South Vietnam, North Vietnamese leaders including Le Duan looked to their intervention in Laos as a model. North Vietnam’s ability to pursue revolution in the South depended on the Ho Chi Minh Trail passing through Laos. As one USAF official and veteran of the war stated: “the truckers provided the oxygen sustaining the North’s ability to make war in the South.”¹⁸³² In recent scholarship on Vietnam the importance Lao had to the conflict is evident: “...Le Duan saw a model in Laos. He reassured skeptics that the party could go ahead with a more aggressive policy below the seventeenth parallel by authorizing the incremental, carefully managed, and always deniable use of a combination of armed and political action – just as the VWP [Vietnamese Workers Party] was already doing with the Pathet

¹⁸²⁸ Scholars must address the ghetto-ization of Lao history. It has been entirely left out of studies of Asia democracy or even broader regional syntheses.

¹⁸²⁹ Vattana Pholsena, “Highlanders on the Ho Chi Minh” *Critical Asian Studies* (2008) vol. 40, no. 3, p. 447-450 for a discussion on the role of Laos in the Indochina wars. See further Vattana Pholsena, “The (Transformative) Impacts of the Vietnam War and the Communist Revolution in a Border Region in Southeast Laos” *War & Society*, vol. 31, no. 2 (August 2013), p. 166 for a discussion of the importance of Sepone, which was “one of the most important centres for the North Vietnamese Army’s transportation network during the Second Indochina War.”

¹⁸³⁰ This argument is put forward by Norman Hannah, *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War* (Lanham: Madison Books, 1987).

¹⁸³¹ The French granted the RLG full independence in October 1953 yet also committed to its defense in a military treaty. See Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 208-209.

¹⁸³² Merrill A. McPeak, “Bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail” *New York Times* December 26, 2017.

Lao.”¹⁸³³ North Vietnam first conceived of the means to reunify their country by looking to the successes of their campaigns in the remote, rugged hills of eastern Laos. Yet as the importance of Laos to the Indochina Wars has become evident most scholars have still missed the link between the RLG-PL resumption of war in May 1959 and North Vietnam’s own war against the South. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was known by the North Vietnamese forces as route 559 “that memorialized the month (May) and year (1959) the government of North Vietnam reached a formal decision to provide active support to the insurrection in the South.”¹⁸³⁴ It was the night of May 18/19, 1959 that the sole Pathet Lao battalion refused to be reintegrated into the Royal Lao Army and fled for the borders of Vietnam, thus sparking the resumption of war in Laos. Yet the effects of that event were not limited to only the Lao but shaped the fate of Cambodia and Vietnam as well. It is no exaggeration to say the Second Indochina War began in Laos and the war itself was won or lost there.

But, perhaps, the situation in Laos might have been different had the West courted the Lao elite and severed any ties among them to the Vietminh, which would have denied North Vietnam the thin “Lao” veneer to its actions in the country provided by the Pathet Lao. In this regard, the outcome of the Indochina Wars depended on the three failures of the West in Laos: France’s denial of Lao democracy in 1945; the US’s denial of Lao anti-communism as it was in 1958-1959; and

¹⁸³³ Goscha, *Vietnam*, p. 307. The North Vietnamese even considered the first coalition government as a model: “In late 1957, Le Duan also noted that the election of a coalition government in Laos, which did incorporate the Pathet Lao, could serve as a model for advancing the Vietnamese Workers Party’s cause in the south.” Up to this point the North had been supporting the Pathet Lao having “dispatched hundreds of advisers to Laos to build up the Pathet Lao’s army, state, party and territorial control.”

¹⁸³⁴ McPeak, “Bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail.” See further Goscha, *Vietnam*, p. 307-308 where he notes in January 1959 at the fifteenth plenum that the North decided to resume the revolution in the south, but it was only in May 1959 that the VWP “reactivated its work in the south and began expanding an increasingly elaborate network of overland paths southward through eastern Laos, the central Highlands, and eastern Cambodia, which were collectively known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.” In September 1959 a “new advisory group” was created whose task was to expand Pathet Lao control down the RLG-DRV border to the Republic of Vietnam border area.

the escalation of war in 1964, which was in the hands of the RLG elite themselves more than has been realized as they charted their own path amid the perilous Cold War.

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