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Agrarian Change in Communist Laos

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I Introduction

The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) came to power in December 1975, emerging victorious from a two-year coalition government and virtually thirty years of civil war. It took over one of the poorest and most sparsely settled countries in Southeast Asia -- its population of around 3.5 million being spread over an area of 236,775 square kilometres. Not only was this population fragmented into some 68 different ethnic groups (perhaps 40 per cent are ethnic Lao) but the country's topography added to the fragmentation. Mountains covered with tropical forests occupy two-thirds of the surface area and have made the construction of a national communications network difficult and costly. Thus Laos has one of the lowest densities of roads in Asia (0.04 per sq km) and therefore it has not really possessed an integrated polity, economy or society.

The mountains are inhabited by various hilltribe groups practising slash and burn agriculture, while in the lowland alluvial plains along the Mekong River and other river valleys wet-rice fields are worked by ethnic Lao peasants. These lowland Lao rice growing peasants are the subject of the body of this survey. With over 80 per cent of its population dependent on subsistence agriculture for survival, most of whom have a low life expectancy, poor literacy and a low per capita income, Laos exhibits all the features of an underdeveloped country. Thus the Lao communists were confronted with the same problem faced by all new nationalist governments in the Third World -- how were they going to begin the process of economic, social and political development of their country. Like most communist governments before them collectivization of agriculture was accepted as the best strategy for revolutionizing the countryside socially and technologically.

The Lao communists launched their collectivization drive in mid-1978, and suspended it one year later. The government in Vientiane remains committed to a collectivized agriculture, but the prospect of a new campaign in the future is dim. It was an

accumulation of external, internal and natural factors which prompted the LPRP to launch the drive when it did. Deteriorating relations between Hanoi and its neighbours in Beijing and Phnom Penh, plus pressure on Laos from Thailand heightened the security fears of the Lao communists. Their reflex was to strengthen the state's hold, the hold of socialism, on the whole country. In this context the existence of a mass of independent peasants was seen as a potential security risk. If they were gathered into co-operatives the government's political and economic control would be strengthened. Successive bad seasons added a certain desperation to their fears about peasant discontent. Natural calamities also intensified the belief that modernization of agriculture was urgent, and ideology dictated that it could only be achieved through co-operatives. The campaign ultimately faltered because of the government's administrative incapacity, its inability to apply mass coercion, besides inherent difficulties in collectivized agriculture.

Subsequently there was a radical re-thinking of economic policy and a modification of the role of agriculture and the peasantry within it. The change, however, did not involve a retreat from the government's socialist objective, as Western descriptions of economic 'liberalization' in communist countries like Laos sometimes imply. Instead we have the adoption of a socialist strategy which differs from what has been considered communist orthodoxy until very recently. Laos, therefore, has joined the social and economic ferment coursing through most communist societies in the late twentieth century.

Any researcher of contemporary Laos is indebted to the fine work done by MacAlister Brown and Joseph Zasloff in *Apprentice Revolutionaries* (1986), and to Martin Stuart-Fox's work, especially his *Laos: Politics, Economics and Society* (1986). The primary interest of these books, however, is politics rather than economics, and their discussion of agrarian policy is only a minor theme among others. This study, on the other hand, provides a more detailed outline and analysis of the evolution of agrarian policy in Laos.

II Laos 1975-79: "A Profound and Complete Revolution in the Countryside"

The National Congress in December 1975 which announced the formation of the new communist regime expressed its wish that peasants start to adopt collective forms of production. But the statement was moderate and said that for the time being full-scale co-operatives would only be established on an experimental basis. Its broad views on the matter were clear nevertheless:

> Encourage and help the peasants to progress towards a collective way of life with a view to developing production and improving the standard of living.
> (a) Persuade and help peasants to form and consolidate solidarity units and labour exchange units. Through them the peasants will come to seriously plan their exchange of labour and will familiarise them and workers from all ethnic groups to a collective existence, in which the quality is superior to their former way of life. This aims to improve the way of life of all the people from all the ethnic groups.[1]

This straightforward statement of policy is not burdened with exhortations to revolutionize the countryside. Emphasis is on persuasion and force of example, not coercion. The general idea appears to have been that once peasants could be persuaded to operate low level forms of co-operation, such as solidarity labour units and labour exchange teams, and once they had experienced the supposed advantages of such organizations they could be easily persuaded to form higher collective forms of production such as co-operatives. The time scale for this was open-ended and government pronouncements carried no sense of urgency.

During 1976, the government's first year of power, little

attention appears to have been paid to the formation of collectivized production groups in agriculture. However, some over-enthusiastic cadres obviously tried, in some regions and localities, to collectivize everything and prompted a statement of clarification from the government in May:

> The Government's programme of action states clearly that the people's right to own property, money, houses and paddy fields will be respected strictly. This shows clearly that besides not seizing the peoples property, the Government takes steps to safeguard the people's interests.[2]

Having issued this reassurance, the government reiterated that it was in the peasants' own interests to engage in collective forms of production, for only large-scale production, it argued, would enable them to overcome the hazards of natural calamities.

At this time the new government was still grappling with the problem of creating a new administration and controlling the economy at large. It was in no position to launch radical reforms in the countryside. On the contrary, it was trying to create an atmosphere of stability by assuring the peasants that it would protect their basic rights.

Any government wishing to introduce substantial reforms in any society must possess the administrative capacity to do it or else it will create widespread social disruption and even chaos. The new communist government was bequeathed a particularly weak administrative structure by the former Royal Lao Government. This was a product of a poorly developed educational system as well as the fact that the RLG's American backers during the civil war had increasingly taken over the administrative burden of running the country, to the point where the U.S. ambassador was commonly known as the "second Prime Minister".[3] Moreover, the 'semi-feudal' structure of the former state meant that the central government in Vientiane exercised tenuous power in the outlying provinces. The withdrawal of United States Aid for International Development (USAID) in May 1975 removed the backbone of the old administration, and in the following six months a large number of the leading members of the RLG state apparatus fled across the Mekong to Thailand either before or after 'popular uprisings' in the bureaucracy removed them. This period possibly saw the departure of the majority of the educated elite in Laos. Those who remained were often viewed with suspicion by the Pathet Lao cadres, most of whom were less well educated, and a significant

number of old regime bureaucrats were sent off to re-education camps. This in turn created a climate of uncertainty among others who soon decided to leave lest they be sent off to re-education too.

The communist government could ill-afford these losses, however the dynamics of its takeover made them almost inevitable. For thirty years the communists had controlled little more than a proto-state in the rugged Lao mountains and its form of administration ran along military lines. Whatever its weaknesses the RLG did have a civilian bureaucracy and it was this bureaucracy that the communists inherited. No doubt it was their lack of experience with routine bureaucratic work plus their natural suspicion of 'the other side' which inclined the communists to compensate for their weaknesses by exaggerating the importance of revolutionary ideology. Claims were made that there is a 'revolutionary way' of doing virtually everything. In such an atmosphere bureaucratic experts from the old regime who contradicted cadres were easily denounced as 'counter-revolutionary' and often sent off to re-education to acquire 'correct' ideas. This situation soon produced either bureaucratic paralysis among the old personnel or bureaucratic chaos as a result of cadres implementing ill-conceived 'revolutionary' new ways.

The difficulties encountered while establishing the new administration were documented by Australian journalist John Everingham. His account of the Pathet Lao takeover of the southern city of Savannakhet gives a rare glimpse of what was occurring inside Laos during the early months of the new regime. What is immediately apparent is a theme one encounters in most peasant revolutions. That is, the confrontation of the countryside with the city, the 'country-bumpkin' peasant armies with the 'city slickers' more inured to the ways of the urbanized West. Many of the Pathet Lao had literally come out of the hills, onto the plains, and into the cities for the first time in their lives. Thus in the takeover of Savannakhet rural cultural parochialism, indeed puritanism, tended to over-shadow practical administrative measures: "Western-influenced youths were taken to task for their dress; girls, too, were criticised. Youths were dragged in for haircuts and women admonished not to wear any form of make-up. To listen to Thai radio stations was to risk being labelled 'reactionary', as with the playing of western music. Both the pursuit of pleasure or profit were denounced as being unpatriotic while the task of re-building the country remained. For this people were urged to go to bed early." Everingham notes that "without compulsion, and with more visible action simultaneously in the important fields of economy, administration and education among