

Laos

Political Rights:	7
Civil Liberties:	6
Status:	Not Free

Overview:

In 2004, government harassment of the Christian minority in Laos continued, as did repressive actions against those seeking political reform. Laotian dissidents outside the country charged that the government denied food and medicine to thousands of civilians caught up in a military campaign against Hmong rebels in a northeastern province since 2003. In October, a court in southern Laos sentenced 16 alleged rebels to prison for attacking a checkpoint on the Thai-Laotian border in July 2000.

Laos, a landlocked and mountainous country, won independence in 1953 after six decades of French rule and Japanese occupation during World War II, and a constitutional monarchy was established. Backed by Vietnam's Viet Minh rebels, Communist Pathet Lao (Land of Lao) guerrillas quickly tried to topple the royalist government in Vientiane, which began a civil war involving the Communist, royalist, and "neutralist forces" in 1960. Amid continued internal fighting, Laos was drawn into the Vietnam War in 1964, when the United States began bombing North Vietnamese forces operating inside Laos. The Pathet Lao finally seized power in 1975, shortly after the Communist victory in neighboring Vietnam. A one-party Communist state was set up under Prime Minister Kaysone Phomvihane's Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP).

By the 1980s, the Laotian economy was in tatters after years of civil war and the inept economic policies of the LPRP. Seeing the success of China's economic opening, the LPRP began to relax control on prices, encouraged foreign investment, and privatized farms and some state-owned firms. These actions spurred much needed economic growth, but the government rejected deeper economic reform for fear of losing its grip on the nation. Moreover, those who called for political reform—however minor the proposed change—either were jailed or faced other forms of suppression.

Ethnic Hmong rebels, who are remnants of an army once backed by the U.S. CIA during the Vietnam War, are today a fractious and poorly equipped group. Critics charge that the government exaggerates the Hmong threat and contend that many civilians have been killed by the Laotian military in its campaign against the Hmong rebels. Laotian exiles also maintain that the government had starved 3,000 civilians to death in its blockade targeting rebels in Khouang Province since 2003.

In 2004, about 35 Christian families in Luang Prabang province were ordered to renounce their faith by district government officials. All Christians in a village in Savannakhet province were asked to renounce their faith or face arrest. In some cases, local governments ordered their agents to live in Christian homes and forced these impoverished families to bear the living costs of these agents.

Laos remains one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. More than three-quarters of Laos's 5.3 million people live on less than \$2 a day and about four-fifths of Laotians are subsistence farmers contributing about 53 percent of the gross domestic product. Trade, tourism, and sales of hydroelectric power to neighboring Thailand are key sources of

foreign revenue. A recent decision to expand hydroelectric power generation in southern Laos is expected to displace more subsistence farmers. The economy has yet to recover from the regional financial crisis that began in 1997, and the government's refusal to deepen reform discourages foreign investment.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Laotians cannot change their government democratically. The 1991 constitution makes the ruling LPRP the sole legal political party and gives it a leading role at all levels of government. The LPRP vets all candidates for election to the rubber-stamp National Assembly; elections are held once every five years. In the last election, held in 2002, only 1 of 166 candidates fielded for the assembly's 109 seats was not a LPRP cadre. Kaysone Phomvihane was prime minister and head of the LPRP from 1975 until his death in 1992. Khamtay Siphandone succeeded Kaysone as both head of the LPRP and chief executive.

Corruption and abuses by government officials is widespread. Official announcements and new laws to curb corruption have little real impact. Government regulation of virtually every facet of life provides corrupt officials with many opportunities to demand bribes. High-level officials in government and the military are also frequently involved in commercial logging and mining, as well as other enterprises aimed at exploiting Laotian natural resources. Laos was not ranked by Transparency International in its 2004 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Laotian media are controlled by the state and parrot the party line. For example, the party paper *Paxoxon* bans criticisms of "friendly" countries like Vietnam and Burma. Any journalists who criticize the government or discuss controversial political topics, such as questioning the authority of LRLP, are punishable by law. Two European journalists investigating conditions for the Hmong minority were arrested in June 2003 for the alleged killing of a village guard. They were sentenced to long prison terms but were quickly released and expelled. Although the state controls the country's television and radio stations, residents within frequency range of Radio Free Asia and other foreign broadcasts from Thailand can pick up these foreign broadcasts. Internet access is severely limited, and Web sites critical of the government are blocked. The government is the only Internet service provider.

Religious freedom is tightly restricted. Dozens of Christians have been detained on religious grounds, and several have been jailed for proselytizing or for other religious activities. A campaign was launched in some provinces in 1999 to shut churches and force Christians to renounce their faith. While the national campaign has eased, local officials have continued to harass Christians—from forcing them to renounce their faith to barring them from celebrating major religious holidays and withholding permission to build places of worship. For the majority of the population who are Buddhists, the LPRP controls training for the Buddhist clergy and oversees temples and other religious sites.

Academic freedom is highly restricted. University professors cannot teach or write about democracy, human rights, and other politically sensitive topics. However, a small but increasing number of young people have been allowed to travel overseas, including to the United States, for university and graduate-level training.

Laos has some nongovernmental welfare and professional groups, but they are prohibited from having political agendas and are subjected to strict state control. All unions must belong to the official Federation of Lao Trade Unions. Strikes are not expressly prohibited, but workers rarely stage walkouts and workers do not have the right to bargain collectively. Laotian trade

unions have little influence also because the vast majority of people are subsistence farmers and fishermen.

The courts are corrupt and are controlled by the LPRP. Long delays in court hearings are common, particularly for cases dealing with public grievances and complaints against government abuses. Security forces often illegally detain suspects, and some Laotians have allegedly spent more than a decade in jail without trial. Hundreds of political activists have also been held for months or years without trial. Prisoners are often tortured and must bribe prison officials to obtain better food, medicine, visits from family, and more humane treatment. The most recent controversy involves 16 men accused by the Laotian government of attacking a Thai-Laotian border checkpoint in July 2000. These men escaped to Thailand. In December 2003, a Thai appeal court threw out an extradition order from the Laotian government and ordered the men released within 48 hours. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees said these 16 men were eligible for consideration of asylum or resettlement in a third country. However, they were removed to a detention center and the Thai government decided in July 2004 to repatriate them to Laos, where a local court handed them long prison sentences soon after their return.

Ordinary Laotians enjoy somewhat greater freedom in their daily lives today. Subsistence farmers and fishermen now work for themselves, and many also run small businesses or are employed by private enterprises. Government surveillance of the population has been scaled back in recent years but searches without warrants still occur.

Discrimination against members of minority tribes is common at many levels. An estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Laotian women and girls, mainly highland ethnic minorities, are trafficked each year for prostitution.