

Laos

Population: 5,900,000

GNI/capita: \$340

Life Expectancy: 54

Religious Groups: Buddhist (60 percent), other [including animist] (40 percent)

Ethnic Groups: Lao Loum [lowland] (68 percent), Lao Theung [upland] (22 percent), Lao Soung [highland] including the Hmong ("Meo") and the Yao (Mien) (9 percent), ethnic Vietnamese/Chinese (1 percent)

Capital: Vientiane

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 6

Status: Not Free

Ratings Timeline (Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status)

Year Under Review	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Rating	7,6,NF	7,6,NF	7,6,NF	7,6,NF	7,6,NF	7,6,NF	7,6,NF	7,6,NF	7,6,NF	7,6,NF

Overview:

In May 2005, the World Bank approved \$270 million in loans and risk guarantees for the \$1.25 billion expansion of the Nam Theun hydroelectric dam, the most high profile and controversial industrial project in Laos. Four foreign nationals were arrested for “illegally liaising” with the ethnic Hmong minority, and three of them were deported in June. Meanwhile, the Thai government forced thousands of Hmong refugees to return to Laos.

Laos, a landlocked and mountainous country, won independence in 1953 after six decades of French rule and Japanese occupation during World War II. The new constitutional monarchy soon entered into a civil war with the Communist Pathet Lao (Land of Lao) guerrillas that were backed by the Vietnamese Communist Party. As the civil war raged on, Laos was drawn into the Vietnam War in 1964, when the United States began bombing North Vietnamese forces operating inside Laos. The Pathet Lao seized power in 1975 and set up a one-party Communist state 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 controls on prices, encouraged foreign investment, and privatized farms and some state-owned firms. These actions spurred much needed economic growth, but the government has rejected deeper economic reform for fear of losing its power. The government suppresses all calls for political reform.

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 country's gross domestic product. Trade, tourism, and sales of hydroelectric power to neighboring Thailand are key sources of foreign revenue. Expansion of the Nam Theun hydroelectric dam in southern Laos

will produce more electricity for export and revenue for the government. Thailand will buy 95 percent of the 1,070 megawatts of power the dam will generate beginning in 2010. The World Bank has agreed to provide \$270 million in funding and risk guarantees for the project, which critics say will threaten wildlife and displace thousands of subsistence farmers and persons belonging to hill tribes. These two groups—who rely heavily on the illegal growth and sale of opium poppy for their economic livelihood—have also suffered recently from the government's anti-drug campaign, conducted with rigor in order to secure assistance from Europe and America. Pushed into extreme poverty, some are forced to leave their land to find legitimate work elsewhere or to go deeper into the mountain to continue their illegal trade.

In June, four U.S. nationals were detained and three were deported by the government for “illegally liaising” with members of the ethnic Hmong minority. All were members of a U.S. non-profit organization, the Fact Finding Commission, investigating whether 170 relatives of Hmong rebels surrendering to the government were safe.

Thousands of Hmong refugees in Thailand were forced to return to Laos by the Thai government in 2005, despite international warnings that they could face political persecution. The Hmong had allied with U.S. forces during the Vietnam War. Laotian government actions to destroy alleged rebel elements have created significant hardships for these mountain people. Many fear for their lives, and thousands have been forced off their land to allow for the exploitation of timber and other natural resources.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Laotians cannot change their government democratically. The 1991 constitution makes the LPRP the sole legal political party and grants 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. General Khamtay Siphandone succeeded Kaysone Phomvihane in 1992 as both head of the LPRP and chief executive. The National Assembly re-elected Siphandone to a third term as president in March 2001.

Corruption and abuses by government officials are widespread. Official announcements and new laws to curb corruption are rarely enforced. 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. The country ranks 77 out of 159 nations surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perception Index.

Freedom of the press is denied in Laos. The state owns three newspapers and circulation is extremely low. Lao National TV is government-owned and Laos Television 3 is a joint venture with a Thai company. There is only one radio station and internet access is heavily restricted and censored by the government. However, residents within frequency range of Radio Free Asia and other foreign broadcasts from Thailand have access to these alternative media sources. Any journalist who criticizes the government or discusses controversial political topics faces legal punishment.

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. National campaigns and overzealous local officials harass Christians. The government forces Christians to renounce their faith, deprives them of their property, and bars them from

celebrating Christian holidays. The majority Buddhist population is restricted by LPRP control of clergy training and oversight of 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. A small number of young people have been allowed to travel overseas, including to the United States, for university and graduate-level training. However, they are carefully screened by the government and are generally children of officials and military leaders.

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.

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.

Many subsistence farmers and fishermen work for themselves and some Laotians run small private businesses. 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.

Although women are guaranteed many of the same rights as men under Laotian laws, discrimination and abuse against women is widespread. Tradition and religious practice have considerable influence in dictating an inferior position for women in everything from access to education to equal employment and benefits. Poverty exacerbates these hardships and puts many women at greater risk of exploitation and abuse by the state and society at large. Domestic violence is a major cause of divorce. Abortion is allowed only to save the life of the mother. An estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Laotian women and girls, mainly highland ethnic minorities, are trafficked each year for prostitution.