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Observations on the Social Structure of the Lao Elite

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C O N T E N T S

	<u>Page</u>
SELECTIVE ADMISSION: THE CRUCIAL ISSUE IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION	
C. D. Deshmukh	3
THE INDONESIAN IMAGE OF WEST IRIAN	
Arend Lijphart	9
CAMBODIA'S NEUTRALITY AND THE LAOTIAN CRISIS	
Roger M. Smith	17
OBSERVATIONS ON THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE LAO ELITE	
Joel M. Halpern	25

OBSERVATIONS ON THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE LAO ELITE

Joel M. Halpern

ITS URGENT TOPICAL IMPORTANCE ASIDE, Laos has many features to interest persons concerned with Asian problems generally and, in a broader context, those concerned with the development of newly sovereign nations. This land-locked country of approximately two million inhabitants possesses--on a small scale but often in exaggerated form--many of the problems facing emerging states elsewhere: a small hereditary elite; a lack of trained administrators; an indifferent peasantry; dissident minority groups; inadequate basic industries and exports; poor transportation and communications facilities; and an active communist party that has recently become a competing government.

Before its incorporation into French Indochina in the late nineteenth century, Laos had been in existence for more than 500 years in the form of several petty kingdoms of varying sizes. Today Laos is essentially a formal political entity, shaped by the history of French colonial expansion. Not only is the country not a cohesive geographic unit, but all the ethnic groups inhabiting it are found in greater numbers in neighboring countries, with the possible exception of the diverse indigenous tribal peoples (Kha), who lack a common culture.

In a sense the political independence of Laos has enforced its economic dependence. Several centuries ago the Lao were quite capable of ruling themselves and even of waging wars against their neighbors, but the present resources of the country are inadequate to sustain the complex apparatus and large bureaucracy that the smallest nation requires today. This inadequacy is particularly striking when to the normal burdens of administration and economic development are added those of maintaining an army and a police force. It may be noted in this connection that more Europeans have been on the scene in Laos in recent years than at any time in the colonial era. (In 1960 there were several thousand French and some 750 Americans in Laos, whereas in 1921 and 1950 the "European" population totaled 361 and 802, respectively.)

The social structure of Laos is a complex mosaic of many elements, the most clearly delimited of which are the various ethnic groups. The major ones are the valley-dwelling Buddhist Lao; their linguistic cousins, the tribal Tai (e.g., Tai Dam, Tai Lu); the aboriginal Kha; and hill tribes such as the Meo and Yao, originating in China. In addition, there are the urban minority groups--Chinese and Vietnamese, Indians, Pakistanis, and Europeans.

determined or prolonged resistance or subsequent guerrilla activities, as there were in neighboring Vietnam. Of the large proportion of Lao elite who sought asylum in Thailand, most returned within the next year or two as the French gradually made concessions.

AS THE NATIONAL ECONOMY of Laos has developed in the years since the achievement of formal political independence, members of the elite have moved into profitable business alliances with the Chinese and European merchant communities. This is usually a mutually advantageous situation, since there are severe government restrictions on most alien-owned and -operated businesses, particularly those controlled by Chinese and, to a lesser extent, by Vietnamese. (The French, however, are allowed certain privileges.) At the same time, most Lao lack the technical experience and international contacts necessary for operating either export-import firms or manufacturing enterprises independently. Many prominent Lao officials now own interests in banks, airlines, movie theaters, hotels, sawmills, construction firms, and bus and trucking companies, and have acquired a substantial economic base outside the government. Much of this economic expansion has resulted directly or indirectly from the American aid program. Such opportunities did not exist when Laos was a colony--an important point, since large individual landholdings are unknown in Laos; even the royal family owns extensive agricultural land in but a few villages in the neighborhood of the royal capital. (It is true that in principle the royal family also owns large tracts of forest land, but the income from these is not large.)

The Lao elite has a monopoly on the highest civil service positions and most important political offices. These two categories overlap. That is, a man who occupies the highest civil service rank--for example, as governor of a province--may enter politics and run for the National Assembly. If elected, he can be appointed a minister or secretary of state for a particular department; if he loses, he can re-enter the civil service. It is not necessary, however, for a minister to have been elected a deputy. The province from which a deputy is elected may be one in which he has served as a government official, and not necessarily his place of birth or even permanent residence.

Along with the development of Laos as a nation, the elite has evolved as a group with a national orientation. This has been true even though their family ties and power were originally based in the provinces (except for those whose home was in Vientiane). In the past there has been some conflict between the north and the south, mainly between the descendants of the kingdoms of Luang Prabang and of Champassak. Although this rivalry appears to have been very much muted in recent years, one can still hear frequent complaints to the effect that sufficient economic progress has not taken place in the provinces compared to the city of Vientiane, or

that one section of the country has been favored over another. Most of the elite appear to have originated in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champassak, with relatively few coming from Xieng Khouang and only a limited number from such provinces as Khammouane and Savannakhet. No members of the Lao elite trace their origin to Nam Tha, Phong Saly, Sam Neua, Attapeu or Sayaboury; except for the last province, which was formerly part of Thailand, all these areas are overwhelmingly non-Lao.

If one examines the background of the deputies from these latter provinces, it is possible to find many cases of elite officials who have served there and then run for office. While there may be, for example, a few individuals who were originally from Vientiane Province, served for a long time in Luang Prabang, and then proceeded to run for office from the latter area, such cases are relatively unusual. Like many other members of the Lao elite, most of the Pathet Lao deputies have run for office in their birthplace.

Even in traditional Lao society an outstanding individual could rise in the class hierarchy if he came to the attention of the king or some other royal personage and received a title. There are examples of this mobility in present-day Lao society, but they appear to be relatively few. One of the generals in the Lao army is the son of a farmer, and a provincial governor came from a family of fishermen; in both cases, however, they married members of the hereditary elite. Today their children are fully accepted. A very few members of the elite are said to be of tribal origin (including Captain Kong Lae, who staged the revolt against the royal government in the summer of 1960--but his wife is reported to be related to one of the traditional elite). Once they adopt Lao culture, participate in the French-influenced educational system, and rise in the Lao hierarchy, they appear to be accepted. Acquired culture traits rather than ethnic and racial origins are the determining factor. Both the children of Lao-Chinese marriages and Lao-French métis are accepted, but neither appear to gain particular prestige as a result of their origin. The wife of a former prime minister is a métisse, and some present and former ministers have European wives.

Almost all those who have entered the ranks of the elite were either born or brought up in urban or semi-urban areas. It has been virtually impossible for an individual from a marginal rural district to become a member of the elite, for, as indicated earlier, one of the reasons the elite tended to be self-perpetuating was the restricted access to the limited educational opportunities; these in turn were the key to government employment and hence the means to social mobility. Neither trade nor the priesthood offered this opportunity. Once an individual managed to achieve at least nine years of education, no insurmountable barriers blocked his way upward in the bureaucracy. Yet achieving even this modest education was next to impossible for a villager, since he either had no access to primary schools, or the ones he attended offered inferior

ASIAN SURVEY

and army officers for support and has called on the population to remain true to its traditions and to oppose alien influence. The responsible elite, in other words, has relied mainly on traditional means for countering subversion and has looked hopefully to the past. On their part, the Pathet Lao have directed their appeals to the monks and the tribal peoples and to "persons of all classes," even to such unorganized groups as intellectuals, workers and youth. The Pathet Lao confidently envision a shining future for Laos, in contrast to the royal government, whose deepest loyalty appears to be to outmoded cultural patterns. The ideology offered by the Pathet Lao and their associates is not irresistible, to be sure, but at least it is an ideology that holds some promise for the future, whereas no viable forward-looking alternative has been presented by the royal government. In the writer's opinion, the conclusion is clear: the traditional elite that has controlled the royal government has failed to adapt itself to the demands of the present situation.

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