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Religion, State and Society in Contemporary Laos¹

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Founded in the mid-fourteenth century as the kingdom of Lanxang, Laos was a monarchy until the declaration of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) in 1975. It has a population of some 5 million, of which about 80 per cent are peasants. It is listed amongst the 20 least developed countries in the world. A considerable proportion of the population practises 'slash and burn' cultivation, and about a third are illiterate despite tremendous educational efforts. Laos is a multinational country. The Lao themselves make up half the population; but more than 50 ethnic groups are represented, of Mon-Khmer, Miao-Yao and Tibeto-Burman stocks.

Laos is usually described as a Buddhist country. Buddhism became the state religion of the kingdom of Lanxang shortly after its foundation and subsequently struck deep roots in Lao society. To a large degree Buddhism determines the Lao mentality and way of life. For perhaps half of the 65 per cent of the population who describe themselves as Buddhists their religion is primarily a matter of customs, habits and rituals. Ethnically, most of the Buddhists are Lao, and are related in kinship groups living primarily in the lowland plains; they traditionally cultivate sticky rice. Generally speaking they constitute the most socially, politically, economically and technologically developed section of Lao society.

Another numerous confessional grouping consists of animists and ancestor-worshippers. They are predominantly Mon-Khmer, Miao-Yao and Tibeto-Burmans and make up about a third of the population. They mainly live in the highlands and cultivate dry rice, corn and sweet potatoes. Their practices permeate the everyday life of the Lao and contribute a distinctive quality to Lao Buddhism.

The third confessional grouping includes Christians and Baha'is. They comprise just a few per cent of the population. According to the population census of 1995, the results of which were published in Vientiane in 1997, the total number of Christians in Laos is 60,000, mostly among Khmer and other Mon-Khmer national minorities, and with a smaller number among the Thai-speaking groups. The most significant Christian denomination is Roman Catholicism. It was first brought to Laos by Italian missionaries in the seventeenth century, but did not survive; it was reintroduced by French missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century as part of the colonisation process. Catholicism is recognised by the Lao authorities; there are four bishoprics in the country and a number of cathedrals. Seventh-Day Adventists and other Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is all came to Laos within the last few decades and none of these denominations has more than a few thousand followers.

The Buddhist Sangha, now called the 'Lao Buddhist Association' (LBA), comprises all Buddhist monks and novices in the country, in the early 1970s totalling

some 18,000. After the foundation of the LPDR in 1975 their number quickly fell to some 12,000–13,000, but as the economic situation improved and political stability returned it rose again and for the last 10 years has stood at around 16,000. According to the annual report of the LBA for 1995, in that year there were 6516 monks and 9358 novices, a total of 15,874, in some 3000 monasteries.

The relationship between the Lao state and the LBA is based on one of the declarations of the Second Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, held in 1972, which proclaims respect for freedom of conscience and belief, the right of believers to worship and the right of clergy to perform religious ceremonies, and the inviolability of sacred buildings, as well as the duty of all believers to observe the laws of the state and contribute to the cause of the Lao nation.²

Article 9 of the Lao Constitution reads: 'The state respects and supports the legitimate activities of Buddhists and followers of other religions, and of Buddhist and other clergy, serving the welfare of the country and its people, and suppresses any activities causing dissension and discord.' Article 3 proclaims 'freedom of conscience' and confirms the right of citizens 'to confess any religion or none at all'.³ After the foundation of the LPDR there was de facto separation of religion from the state: religious subjects were withdrawn from school curricula, the Ministry of Cults was closed, and clergy no longer had an official role in state ceremonies. On the other hand, monks were still invited to take part in all important gatherings, including party congresses, and although they would not participate in the debate, because the regulations of the Sangha do not allow monks to participate directly in political activity, they would be given front-row seats as honoured guests. There was no persecution of religion, and the Buddhist Sangha maintained its high profile in society. Buddhist institutions continued to function; all the monasteries remained open. The political leadership was well aware of the important role of Buddhism in the life of the people, and despite the ideological differences between Buddhism and Marxism constantly emphasised the positive features of Buddhism and the progressive role it had played in Lao history. The leadership has done its best to win the support of the Sangha for its long-term goals, enlisting its members into socio-political activity. Speaking at the Third Congress of Lao Buddhists in February 1989 the acting president of Laos, Phoumi Vongvichit, said: 'The Sangha is not estranged from society and the clergy are not distanced from the people. It plays an important role in securing the unity of believers regardless of their nationality. It has adequate opportunities to apply Buddhist teaching to the policies of the Party and the government.'⁴ Similar sentiments were recently expressed by the then president of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and prime minister, Khamtai Siphandorn, addressing the Third Congress of the National Construction Front in 1996:

Buddhism plays an extremely important role in our country. Buddhist monks have made a meritorious contribution to the liberation of the country and to the defence and progress of our nation. Monks and all the Buddhist faithful are ardent patriots. The National Construction Front needs to support the monks and all other Buddhists so that they can more vigorously perform their noble duties in such fields as the education and enlightenment of the people, public health and the propagation and elucidation of party and state policy.⁵

A survey of Lao history shows that the Buddhist Sangha never constituted a political force or movement distinct from the state; on the contrary it usually played a subordinate role in political life. Its aim was always to remain on good terms with the

state, or at the very least to reach a *modus vivendi* with it. Close cooperation between the state and Buddhist institutions is not peculiar to Laos, however. It is characteristic of all the Buddhist countries of Indochina. In the view of one expert Buddhism in Indochina 'was never an organised orthodoxy'; it 'never strove to elaborate its own political or social doctrine in order to realise its ideal in a particular place'. National movements and political parties with different and even mutually incompatible ideologies were able to appropriate 'the same spiritual values' – that is, those of Buddhism – because 'there were no doctrinal impossibilities for it' and it could therefore become 'the object of different analyses in accordance with different socio-political programmes'.⁶

After the formation of the LPDR in 1975 the Lao Buddhists undertook to draw up a strategy and tactics for their Sangha in the new political and ideological environment. These found their expression in the *Programme* and other documents adopted at the First Congress of the LBA in June 1976 and in three pamphlets by Khamtan Thepbuali, head of the Lao Buddhist Sangha, published in Vientiane in the same year: *Lao Monks and Revolution, Politics and Buddhism* and *Buddhism and Society*.⁷ The main theme of these pamphlets is that 'Buddhism must eventually adapt itself to the new society'.⁸ Khamtan points out that Buddhism is 2500 years old and has outlived a wide variety of civilisations; at the same time the teachings of the Buddha can be reconciled with any social system.

If they properly apply the teachings of the Buddha and follow its morality, members of the Sangha are able to become participants in revolutionary transformation and thus make their contribution to the nation and people. Taking part in national reconstruction, the Sangha may further the development of culture, public health, the economy and other aspects of public life. This is their undeniable right and also their civic duty.⁹

In accordance with these guidelines the Lao Sangha worked with the National Construction Front to develop short-term (one-year) and long-term (five-year) activity programmes. One of the main goals of the Sangha at that time was 'to bring Buddhist morals into line with modern morals'.¹⁰ To achieve this many methods were used simultaneously. In cooperation with the Department of Religious Affairs of the National Construction Front the Sangha examined the texts of traditional sermons and composed many new ones in which Buddhist teachings are interpreted pragmatically from a secular perspective. The titles of the sermons published in a collection called *Ten Dharma Sermons* in 1985¹¹ perhaps speak for themselves: 'Success'; 'Happiness'; 'Self-sufficiency'. Buddhist concepts such as 'heaven', 'hell', 'virtue' and 'sin' are reinterpreted in a secular context. 'Heaven', for example, is described as the good life established as a result of hard work on earth rather than as the gift of a benevolent divinity. 'Hell' describes the real hardships of everyday life which man can overcome by his own efforts. 'Sins' are actions which prick one's conscience because they run counter to social morality. 'Merit' is what one acquires through industrious work. The sermon 'self-sufficiency' is of particular interest. It calls upon people to rely in the first instance on themselves; secondly to rely on each other and help each other. Children are to rely on their parents; pupils on their teachers; the army, the police and the people on the political leadership; the political leadership on the army, police and people. The aim is to teach diligence and to inculcate communal and patriotic feelings; and at the same time to encourage materialism and pragmatic realism in place of transcendent idealism or belief in the supernatural.

Not long after coming to power the new Lao leadership launched a programme of transition to socialism. Lao religious leaders in their turn set out to elaborate a doctrine which I would call a theology of participation in socialist reconstruction. The Lao Buddhist theoreticians argued that although Buddhism and Marxism were quite different from a metaphysical point of view, they were very similar as far as their ultimate goals were concerned. Religious leaders pointed out that socialist ideas were to be found in the Buddha's teachings. The *Programme* of the LBA states that 'Buddha was one of the world's great revolutionary reformers.'¹² Boun Chan, a well-known monk from Luang Prabang, went further, telling me that 'Buddha himself was a socialist. He had nothing of his own.' Such sentiments may sound naive, but they accurately reflect the thinking of Buddhist intellectuals at the time. It is worth noting that socialism was a subject of interest to Lao Buddhists long before the establishment of the LPDR. In 1960 the well-known religious and political figure Bong Souvannavong published a book entitled *Doctrine Lao ou Socialisme Dhammique* in which he proposed a model for an ideal (that is, socialist) society built on Buddhist principles.

The orthodox socialist experiment in Laos was very short-lived. In the mid-1980s there was a significant ideological shift. The word 'socialism' was removed from the motto of the state (although it remained in the Party's programme as a distant goal), and the Red Star and Hammer and Sickle on the state seal were replaced by the Buddhist stupa 'That Luang', which is located in the capital Vientiane and has become an unofficial symbol of the Lao nation. Socialist directives were replaced by the 'New Thinking', which soon produced the new motto 'Renovation' or 'Renewal'. The latter meant transition to the market economy and flung the door wide open to the outside world. Along with goods, capital investment and new technology, mass western culture flooded into Laos. It has been widely seen as undermining national culture, traditions and morals and the psychology of the people – in short, as endangering Lao national identity.

In this new context the role of the Sangha as preserver of the national culture has come into prominence. The Sangha does its best to encourage national customs and ceremonies. Monks are present at festivals and assemblies. They preach against the perceived rapid moral degeneration in society, particularly among young people, which they see as a consequence of commercialisation. The attitude of the Sangha to social problems can be seen from the articles of Bounmyang Sotithorn, who tackles such issues as growing inequality and unemployment by addressing the individual: do your job as well as possible; be on good terms with your colleagues; pay due respect to your boss and avoid quarrelling with him; seek respect from your subordinates; if you work well but your wages do not rise, do not leap to the conclusion that your labour is not valued.¹³

The Sangha plays a prominent role in the sphere of education. It runs a number of primary schools, four secondary schools and one higher educational institution (1995). It is also active in general civil education. In the 1970s Buddhist monks and novices participated in the nation-wide drive to eliminate mass illiteracy. At that time many monasteries were used as schools and hundreds of monks became teachers: 1500 in 1976, for example. This involvement subsequently weakened, but it is still common to find a Buddhist monk providing the first education for children, particularly in rural areas. Now, in the light of increasing social problems, it has been proposed that Buddhist moral teaching should be reintroduced into school curricula. As well as in the field of general education, the Sangha has also cooperated with local authorities in efforts to persuade people to abandon superstitious practices and

reliance on clairvoyants, fortune-tellers and astrologers; they claim considerable success.

The Sangha is also involved in improving public health. Many monasteries provide medical services for the people, with monks as doctors. Figures from 1994 show that the monasteries distributed 1420 phials of medicine, 22,000 pills and some 2400 kilograms of assorted drugs and treated 1113 people. Monks have taken an active role in the national 'Three Cleans' drive (clean living quarters, clean food, clean clothing).

The Sangha is the custodian of an important part of the national cultural heritage in the shape of the monasteries. In 1995 there were 2978 active and 788 deserted monasteries, many of which house statues, ancient manuscripts, articles of folk applied art and other treasures as well as being important historical and architectural monuments in their own right. The Sangha and the local people are responsible for the maintenance of religious buildings and property as well as for new constructions. According to the reports of the Central Board of the Lao Sangha for 1994 and 1995, in those two years monks and novices with the help of the local people repaired or built 244 sanctuaries, 400 cells for monks, 348 preaching pavilions, 139 drum-houses, 76 belltowers, 341 lavatories, 20 enclosures, three arched gates, three depositories for sacred books, 21 rest-houses within monasteries, three school buildings, 177 wells and ponds, one bridge, more than two kilometres of paths and roads, 13 boats, 38 images of the Buddha and seven museums, work costing over US\$2 million in total.

It is thus evident that the Lao Sangha is taking vigorous responsibility for the country's development. It is incorrect to claim, as some do, that Buddhism in Laos is primarily a matter of inward-looking contemplation and that the Sangha exists at the expense of the people. Indeed, another accusation levelled at the Lao Sangha is that it is too politicised, that its social activity involves subjugation to the programmes of the state.¹⁴ A comparison of the activities of the Lao Sangha with those of, for instance, Catholic institutions in some European countries shows that the former is no more politicised than the latter. Recent developments show that the Sangha in Laos is reinforcing its distinctive religious identity. All religious schools, for instance, have recently been transferred from the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education to that of the Sangha; the number of hours of religious instruction in religious schools and monasteries has been increasing; and for the first time Lao monks have been going abroad to study (in Thailand and India).

Over the period since its foundation in the fourteenth century the Lao state has fallen apart and reintegrated itself many times. In these circumstances the kings of Laos have naturally made appeal to Buddhism as a symbol of Lao identity and have enlisted it as a force helping to consolidate Lao society. Against such a background the policy of the government towards non-Buddhist confessions has always been rather cautious. Though outwardly the relationship between the Lao state and the Roman Catholic Church looks normal, in fact it is strained. One should remember that during the period of war from the 1950s to the 1970s the Roman Catholic Church showed its opposition to the Pathet Lao and continued to demonstrate hostility to the authorities of the newly-founded LPDR after 1975. Relations between the authorities and the other confessions – Christians and Baha'is – were also complicated by mutual suspicion. Politicians and the media in Laos have regularly issued warnings to 'inimical elements' and 'ill-wishers' who are allegedly using religion in order to sow confessional, ethnic and social discord.

This tendency seems to have been increasing in recent years. The latest annual

reports of the Central Board of the LBA and a series of articles published in Lao newspapers in 1996, backed up by information from official sources and personal communications to the author, reveal the following concerns. Alien denominations are said to be trespassing on traditional Buddhist territory and sowing discord amongst Buddhists as well as between Buddhists and non-Buddhists – that is, between the Lao and the national minorities. Working with the people, missionaries are said to be emphasising the exclusiveness of their own faith and its superiority over Buddhism. They criticise Buddhism on the grounds that it ‘brings nothing to the people but, on the contrary, only demands donations from them’.¹⁵ They highlight the misdeeds of a minority of Buddhist monks in order to discredit the Sangha as a whole. Missionaries are also accused of misusing the resources of international non-governmental organisations and charitable funds in order to penetrate different areas of the country and distribute gifts and humanitarian aid with the purpose of making conversions.¹⁶ As a result of this kind of activity some villages are split in two, a Buddhist section and a Christian section, and such divisions are particularly dangerous when they involve two ethnic groups, previously living in harmony, which are now divided along religious lines. Missionaries are also said to be encouraging citizens to violate the Constitution and the law by persuading new converts to refuse military and civic service on religious grounds and to marry only their fellow-believers.

Speaking at the Sixth Congress of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, Khamtai Siphandorn warned that the state would ‘punish any action aiming to use religion in order to undermine national unity and solidarity’, and the newspaper *Vieng Chan mai*, taking up his theme, called upon local authorities to control the activities of persons of ill will in order to prevent them infiltrating the religious sphere.¹⁷ There are fears that Laos may turn into another Bosnia. Recalling the fact that there have been two international conferences on Laos (1954 and 1962) and that Laos was once subject to an International Control Commission, politicians warn of the danger that their country might be occupied by a multinational peacekeeping force and become an international colony.

In the wider context, the greatest threat to Buddhism in Laos today comes from the secularisation of society. Rapid economic development, liberalisation, commercialisation and urbanisation are having noticeable effects on the relationship between Buddhism and the community. Many areas of life which until recently were assumed to be the natural domain of religion are increasingly passing into the secular sphere. Religious subjects have been excluded from the curricula in secular educational institutions. The arts and literature were formerly heavily influenced by Buddhist ideas; painting, sculpture and theatre were concentrated around the monasteries and conveyed religious concepts. Nowadays, instead of concentrating on mythological themes, painters and sculptors turn to contemporary models. The classical Lao theatre, which drew its subjects from sacred literature, is dealing increasingly with realistic themes. Only a few decades ago the Lao word for literature, ‘*vannakadi*’, meant the canonical scriptures; contemporary Lao literature champions secular ideas and tackles civic issues. Meanwhile there is a rapid decline in everyday religious observance. Only on holy days and festivals are the monasteries crowded. The number of active monasteries is declining. In 1994 a new monastery was built in Vientiane province but in the end there were no monks to occupy it.¹⁸ The total number of monks and novices in Laos has remained at the same level for some time (16–17,000), but it should be remembered that the population of Laos is increasing at 2.4 per cent a year. Moreover, my own questions to many of those preparing to

become monks reveal that their main motivation is not religious but the desire to gain education. As early as 1986 the venerable monk Bounchan from Luang Prabang told me: 'Nowadays young men have other things on their mind than Buddhist metaphysics. They are being educated in secular schools and their thoughts are far from religion.' 'For the new generation', we read in a recent newspaper article, 'the word "vat" (monastery) is associated with concepts like "outmoded tradition" and "cultural monument".' The article notes that activities disapproved of by religion – drinking, smoking, making a noise in monastery grounds, omitting to remove one's shoes before entering a temple – are becoming commonplace. 'The people of our high-tech age are not afraid of sin.'¹⁹

One should nevertheless bear in mind the fact that for the majority of Lao Buddhists their faith has never been a particularly metaphysical one. Most believers have been content to leave the striving after enlightenment to a dedicated few, and have taken Buddhism as a set of moral precepts for very practical everyday application; as a philosophy of life. It may well be that as Lao society tires of the western-style pursuit of material wealth and grows disillusioned with economic development and modernisation the old Buddhist values will once again reassert themselves as they have so often throughout Lao history.²⁰

Notes and References

- ¹ The author has visited Laos many times to conduct field studies. This article is based on original documents and also on conversations with monks of all ranks, believers and officials in charge of religious affairs.
- ² *Pasason* (a daily party newspaper), 18 October 1988.
- ³ *Alun mai* (a quarterly party magazine), no. 4, 1991.
- ⁴ *Pasason*, 24 February 1989.
- ⁵ *Pasason*, 30 January 1996.
- ⁶ P.-B. Lafont, 'Le Bouddhisme Theravada, les mouvements nationalistes et la décolonisation de la péninsule indochinoise', in *Premier Symposium Franco-Soviétique sur l'Asie de Sud-Est* (Moscow, 1989), pp. 332–33.
- ⁷ Respectively: Khamtan Thepbuali, *Phasong lao kap kaanpativat; Kaanmyang kap satsanaa put; Phutthasatsanaa kap sangkhom* (all Vientiane, 1976).
- ⁸ Khamtan, *Phasong lao kap kaanpativat*, p. 40.
- ⁹ *ibid.*, p. 71.
- ¹⁰ Programme of activities of the Lao Buddhist Sangha, produced by the Central Board of the LBA (typewritten in Lao, 1983), p. 2.
- ¹¹ *Nangsy thamma thetsanaa sip kan* (LBA, Vientiane, 1985).
- ¹² Programme of activities of the Lao Buddhist Sangha, 1983, p. 3.
- ¹³ Phra Bounmyang Sotithorn, 'Phutthasatsanaa kap kadamneun sivit', *Vieng Chan mai* (a daily newspaper), 1 February 1995.
- ¹⁴ See for example the writings of Martin Stuart-Fox, especially: 'Politicization of the Buddhist Sangha in Laos', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, March 1982; 'Marxism and Theravada Buddhism: the legitimation of political authority in Laos', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 56, no. 3, fall 1983; and *Buddhist Kingdom, Marxist State: the Making of Modern Laos* (Bangkok, 1995).
- ¹⁵ Annual reports of the Central Board of the LBA for 1994 and 1995 (typewritten in Lao).
- ¹⁶ *Vieng Chan mai*, 18 September 1996.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Pasason*, 18 January 1995.
- ¹⁹ *Vieng Chan mai*, 21 November 1994.
- ²⁰ For further reading see: Martin Barber, 'Urbanization and religion in Laos', in Martin

Barber and Amphay Dore (eds), *Sangkhom khadysan: Colloques en sciences humaines* (Vientiane, April 1973–74); P.-B. Lafont, 'Buddhism in contemporary Laos', in *Contemporary Laos* (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia and London, 1982); L. N. Morev, 'Buddistskaya sangkha v laose', in *Religii mira* (Nauka, Moscow, 1990); L. N. Morev, 'Gosudarstvennaya politika v otnoshenii religii i sekularizatsiya obshchestvennogo soznaniya v LNR', in *Religiya i sekularizatsiya na vostoke* (Nauka, Moscow, 1993); Marcel Zago, 'Bouddhisme Lao contemporain', *Bulletin des amis du Royaume Lao*, special number 9, 1973.