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Marxism and the History of the Nationalist Movements in Laos

C. J. CHRISTIE

The relationship between Marxism-Leninism and the national liberation movements of the Third World has always been an uneasy one. The essential issues have been: firstly, the nature of the relationship between movements for national liberation in the Third World and the proletarian movements of the industrially advanced countries; secondly, the question of whether, given the relative backwardness of the Third World countries, leadership of the national liberation movements should be provided by the “bourgeois-nationalist” parties or by Marxist-Leninist parties. The first issue was at least partially resolved by the Comintern in Lenin’s time with agreement on the general principle that national-liberation movements were a vital part of the worldwide struggle against capitalism; but the question of the relative importance of the national liberation movements as against the proletarian movements in the industrialized world was left in abeyance. The second problem of the leadership of the national liberation movements was not satisfactorily resolved in the era of Lenin; however, Stalin’s relative neglect of the national liberation issue (particularly after the 1927 fiasco in China and the emergence of the fascist threat in Europe in the inter-war years) did give the Asian Marxists the opportunity to evolve their own policies. It was in the historical context of Comintern weakness and neglect of the Third World that an indigenously developed Marxist national liberation strategy was to emerge.

This strategy has centred on the assertion, highly unorthodox in traditional Marxist terms, that a Marxist party is capable in a colonial or semi-colonial country of leading the anti-colonial section of society — the peasantry, proletariat, petty-bourgeoisie, “national” bourgeoisie, and even enlightened sections of the feudal class — through the period of national liberation struggle; and that, after the goal of national liberation has been achieved, a Marxist-Leninist party can through its domination of the state guide a backward society through the process of economic modernization and development that would in orthodox Marxist theory have been reserved for a capitalist era of economic transition dominated by appropriate bourgeois political institutions. The most influential proponent of this strategy has of course been Mao Tse-tung, but it has also been an integral part of Vietnamese Communist strategy.

In the post-war decades, Communist parties of the Third World no longer saw Communist domination of national liberation movements as simply *possible*, as in Lenin’s time, but as desirable and in certain circumstances — as for example in the case of a protracted anti-colonial war — as essential. But it is important to bear in mind that there have in fact been very few cases of Marxist-orientated, let alone orthodox Marxist, organizations dominating Third World nationalist movements since the Second World War. Of these, if we exclude the complex example of “semi-colonial” China, Vietnam provides perhaps the most signifi-

cant and concrete example of a nationalist movement that was dominated in all the most important stages of its existence by an orthodox Marxist party. It is therefore fairly easy to determine the relationship between Marxism and nationalism in Vietnam, even if the background to Marxist domination of the nationalist movement has been the subject of intense and continuing debate.

In Laos, however, the relationship is not nearly so straightforward. The efficacy of the social and political programme of the Marxist-Leninist movement in Laos, the umbrella movement known as the Pathet Lao, is accepted by most commentators, at least when compared with the shoddy history of the Royal Government. But the question mark centres rather around what might be called the nationalist "legitimacy" of the Pathet Lao movement. In the first place, it has been in its origins and day-to-day strategy inextricably linked with the Lao Dong party of Vietnam. Secondly, there has never existed in Laos the appropriate social base that would allow for the kind of mass organization, linking peasant and worker grievances with nationalist aspirations, that the Vietnamese Communists had so assiduously built up in the 1930s. And finally, admittedly for obvious strategic reasons, the Pathet Lao built its administrative base in minority areas remote from the heartland of Lao nationalism. It is hardly surprising that the nationalist credentials of the Pathet Lao have been questioned, particularly when compared with the Viet-Minh.

In order to examine the nationalist credentials of the Pathet Lao more thoroughly, it will be necessary to give a historical background to the phenomenon of modern nationalism in Laos. The first essential point to be made is that the nationalist movement in Laos has been based historically on the ethnic Lao people, a branch of the T'ai ethnic group and centred on the Mekong river area. Apart from a common ethnic identity, the factors that have bound the Lao people together are a common language, the religion and institutions of Theravada Buddhism, and a historical tradition of unity under the kingdom of Lan Xang from the fourteenth to the end of the seventeenth century. In the mythical history of the Lao people the subordinate status of the aboriginal minorities of Laos has always been emphasized, while in practical terms there is a clear distinction between the "lowland riverine" culture of the Lao and the less sophisticated cultures of the minorities of the hill areas.¹

Although this sense of common Lao identity exists, the reality of Laotian history after the death of King Souvanna Vongsa was the splintering of Laos into a number of weak semi-independent principalities along the Mekong under constant threat from Burma, Siam, Vietnam, and, in the nineteenth century, from rebel bands and Meo tribesmen fleeing from Manchu China. By the time that France began to show an interest in the Laotian area in the second half of the nineteenth century, Laos was in a state of disintegration; the kingdom of Vientiane had been annexed outright by Siam, while both the kingdoms of Luang Prabang and Champassak were in varying degrees, Siamese dependencies, and this political decline was matched by a parallel decline in the vitality of the religion and culture of the Lao people.² The establishment of the French protectorate over Laos in the period 1893-1907

¹ Charles Archimbault, *Structures Religieuses Lao* (Vientiane, 1973), pp. 77–78.

² Marcel Zago, *Rites et Ceremonies en Milieu Buddhiste Lao* (Rome, 1972), pp. 36–39.

was therefore crucial in maintaining a sense of Lao unity and preventing the more or less complete absorption of the ethnic Lao into Siam. It is therefore not surprising that henceforth the Lao elite tended to hold the view that the patronage of a major power was vital for the Lao people if their rapacious neighbours were to be fended off and their separate identity was to be assured.

In a sense, therefore, French imperialism “saved” Laos. But, against this, it has to be borne in mind that the Mekong was traditionally the centre rather than the boundary of Lao civilization, and that in consequence the Mekong boundary established by France in 1893 had the effect of leaving a great number, in fact the majority, of the ethnic Lao population outside the territory of French Laos.³ Furthermore, for most of her period of rule in Laos, France made no effort to encourage a sense of Laotian national identity or create the basis for a viable independent nation. In the first place, she maintained the separate political entities of Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, Vientiane, and Champassak. In the second place, in an attempt to offset the depredations caused by Laos’ neighbours and create a genuinely “Indochinese” political and economic identity, France deliberately encouraged Vietnamese settlement in Laos — a policy that struck at the very roots of the notion of a *Lao* national identity.⁴ Finally, despite the fact that most of the territory of Laos was occupied by non-Lao minorities, the French made no serious attempt to resolve the traditional hostilities that divided the ethnic Lao and the minorities — an omission that was also to have grievous consequences for independent Laos in the future.⁵

But despite this, there was no *Lao* national agitation against the French in the years up to the Second World War, since the Lao elite were allowed by the French to retain a substantial measure of their traditional influence within Lao society, and since they continued to regard the French presence as an essential guarantee against either Thai or Vietnamese dominance. It was the radical upheaval of the Second World War that stimulated the birth of modern Lao nationalism.⁶ The defeat of France in Europe and the sudden arrival of the Japanese on the South-east Asian scene in 1940 threatened to undermine France’s role as protector of Lao interests — a possibility that was partially confirmed when France was forced by Japan under the terms of the France-Thai agreement of May 1941 to cede to Thailand the right bank territories of both Luang Prabang and Champassak — territories that were regarded as integral parts of the two kingdoms. This agreement simultaneously revealed the implacable threat that Thai irredentism posed to a separate Lao identity, the weakness of France in the new international context, and, perhaps most significant, Japan’s unwillingness to inherit France’s role as protector of Lao interests.⁷

This evident lack of interest in Lao political pretensions on the part of Japan inevitably had the effect of drawing the Lao elite even closer to France on the logical

³ Pierre Le Boulanger, *Histoire du Laos Francais* (Paris, 1969), pp. 307 – 10.

⁴ Lucien De Reinach, *Le Laos* (Paris, n.d.), p. 118.

⁵ A.W. McCoy, “French Colonialism in Laos, 1893 – 1945”, in *Laos: War and Revolution*, ed N.S. Adams and A.W. McCoy (New York, 1970), pp. 87 – 92.

⁶ This topic has been excellently covered by Nina Adams in her article, “Patrons, Clients and Revolutionaries: The Lao Search for Independence, 1945 – 1954”. In Adams and McCoy (eds.), *op. cit.*

⁷ M. Caply, *Guerilla au Laos* (Paris, 1971), pp. 50 – 51.

grounds that, even if France's position in Asia was gravely weakened, she was nevertheless the only power in the area interested in supporting Lao political interests.⁸ This stemmed from the fact that the Vichy French Administration in Indochina was threatened both by Japan's close links with the Thai Government and its steady penetration of Vietnamese nationalist organizations, and therefore had an immediate interest in tightening the alliance with the Lao political elite. To this end, Vichy France concluded an agreement with Luang Prabang in August 1941 extending the authority of the kingdom over Xieng Khouang, Vientiane, and Nam Tha, thus consolidating Luang Prabang's position as the primary indigenous political authority in Laos.⁹ More important, the Vichy Administration initiated a systematic educational and propaganda campaign designed to stimulate awareness in Laos of a Lao cultural and national identity.¹⁰ This campaign was primarily designed to strengthen Franco-Lao ties against Thailand's irredentist claims; but for young Lao intellectuals of the time it was also seen as a movement to liberate Laos from the administrative conception of "Indochina" and its attendant implications of Vietnamese dominance.¹¹ But it was nevertheless entirely a French-inspired and French-directed movement, illustrating Nina Adams' description of early Lao nationalism as a form of "defensive culturalism" completely dependent on foreign patronage.¹²

This relationship was shattered when in March 1945 the Japanese ousted the French Administration in Indochina and encouraged the states of Indochina to form independent governments. Almost immediately the Lao elite was forcibly made aware of the extent of the political ambitions of the Vietnamese population in Laos, who organized and acted as though Laos was no more than a political adjunct of Vietnam.¹³ It was this Vietnamese threat that above all things encouraged a significant section of the Lao elite to co-operate with the Japanese in the formation of an independent government under the effective leadership of Prince Phetsarath. While some, notably the Luang Prabang royal family, were still reluctant to co-operate in a Japanese-inspired independence, others, particularly Katay Don Sasorith, felt that active collaboration with the Japanese was the only possible policy in the light of the immediate Vietnamese threat to Laos.¹⁴ This policy of collaboration with the Japanese was at the time not so short-sighted as it might seem in retrospect; the campaign against Japan in mainland Southeast Asia was after all likely to be a long drawn-out affair, and in the event of a compromise peace between Japan and the allies there was every likelihood that Japan would continue to exercise an important influence on the political future of Indochina.

Although the Free French signalled their determination to reassert their position in Laos by forming a guerilla movement under a nucleus of specially trained officers, the future position of France within Indochina remained uncertain through the spring and summer of 1945. Accordingly a number of young Lao nationalists,

⁸ See Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

⁹ Caply, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁰ McCoy, *op. cit.*, pp. 92–93.

¹¹ Interview of the author with Tiao Somsanith, Summer 1973.

¹² Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

¹³ P.E. Langer and J.J. Zasloff, *Revolution in Laos: The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao* (Santa Monica, 1969), pp. 27–34; see also John B. Murdoch, *Lao Issara: The Memoirs of Our Sananikone* (New York, 1975).

¹⁴ Caply, *op. cit.*, pp. 190–92.

rejecting the notion of dependence on either the French or the Japanese, threw in their lot with the pro-Allied underground movement in Thailand known as the Seri Thai. They formed an independence organization known as the Lao-Pen-Lao and a quasi-guerilla network in Laos — not, it may be said, with the aim of resisting the Japanese but rather in the hope that such a move would place them in favourable position with the allies when and if the liberation of Indochina took place.¹⁵

The surrender of Japan in mid-August 1945 made the political future of Laos, in particular France's future position in Laos, even more uncertain, since it was Kuomintang China that was entrusted by the allies with the task of supervising the surrender of the Japanese in north and central Laos. In the event the Chinese troops in Laos played no significant political role beyond initiating rather vague plans for creating a separate state for the Lu minority centred around the district of Muong Sing in the extreme north.¹⁶ But two important sections of the Lao elite — those who had collaborated with the Japanese and those who had been linked with the Lao-Pen-Lao movement — took advantage of the interregnum created by the Japanese surrender and the Chinese occupation to denounce the French protectorate, proclaim the unity of the Lao nation, create a new Lao nationalist front, the Lao Issara, and form an independent government, in the period August–October 1945.¹⁷

The Lao Issara Government was to find, however, that neither of its putative patrons, the Thai or the Chinese, were able or, in the case of the latter, willing to fill the political vacuum left in Laos by the defeat of Japan. France on the other hand was rapidly regaining her international standing and was determined to assert her control over Indochina. Although the Lao Issara attempted to resist the first stages of the French re-occupation of Laos in early 1946, and thereafter for a number of years maintained a Lao Issara government in exile in Bangkok, it soon became apparent that independence under the French aegis was a desirable goal for the Lao elite. France was able to secure the return of the trans-Mekong provinces of Luang Prabang and Champassak, finalize the unification of Laos under the Luang Prabang monarchy with the consent of Champassak, and, perhaps most important of all, was willing to take steps towards independence while at the same time providing protection for Laos against the Viet-Minh.¹⁸ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Lao Issara government dissolved itself in October 1948, and the bulk of its members returned to Vientiane to participate in the final steps towards independence.

The independent Laos that emerged from the Geneva Conference was therefore dominated by a conservative nationalist elite who leaned very heavily on French support. Despite this “political, economic, military and psychological dependence”, it could be argued that the “legitimacy” of the conservative nationalist movement of Laos was far more apparent than that of the parallel conservative movement created and propped up by France in Vietnam and later given a new lease of life by the United States.¹⁹ This “legitimacy” was in fact recognized by the powers at the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 242–44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 343–44; A.J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos* (London, 1964), pp. 22–23.

¹⁸ Charles F. Keyes, “Religious and Social Change in Southern Laos”, in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 3, no. 3 (1972): 611–14; Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer-State or Battleground* (London, 1968), p. 74.

¹⁹ Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

Geneva Conference of 1954, while on the other hand the Marxist-dominated breakaway Pathet Lao movement, although it had been able to consolidate a powerful military and political base on the Vietnamese border during the period 1952-53, was treated by the conference as little more than an adjunct of the Viet-Minh.²⁰

The stability of this conservative regime was, however, shaken by the fact that Laos, as a buffer-state in the Cold War, became almost immediately after 1954 a battleground for influence between North Vietnam and the United States. On the one hand this contest meant that the Pathet Lao, aided by the Viet-Minh, embarked after 1954 on a sustained campaign to “politicize” the minorities and the peasantry and wean them away from loyalty to the Royal Lao Government. On the other hand, France’s role as guarantor of Laotian security and independence was increasingly undermined by the determination of the United States to use her influence to draw the Royal Lao Government into an active role in the struggle against Communist influence in Southeast Asia. The internal consequence of this growing struggle for influence between France and the United States (a struggle that was intensified after De Gaulle’s accession to power in France) was the increasing factionalization and weakening of the Lao nationalist elite, as the United States first supported one faction and then another in her frustrating search for an effective political base for an anti-Communist and anti-neutralist military bastion in Laos.²¹ What had become apparent by 1960 was that the United States was attempting to push the conservative nationalists into a role that they were unable, and a significant number were unwilling, to sustain; hence the more deeply the Americans became involved in Lao politics, the more insecure the pro-American political base became.

América’s attempt to use Laos as a military bastion inevitably led not only to civil war between the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao in 1959 but also to an anti-American *coup d’état* in August 1960 that signalled the rise to predominance of the neutralist faction in Laos. The emergence of the neutralist faction within the army and among the urban civilian population was a most significant development, since it represented a substantial widening of political awareness among the Lao, and a concomitant reduction of the influence of the political elite, and hence a widening of the popular base of Lao nationalism.²²

But although the Laotian neutralist faction emerged as a form of rejection of foreign intervention and patronage in Laos, it ironically depended heavily on another form of foreign patronage — namely, the patronage provided by the “big powers” acting in concert. Of these, France was already committed to neutralism and a reduction of American influence in Indochina; Britain and the U.S.S.R. were anxious that the great powers should not, as MacMillan put it, be “dragged in” to a local conflict; and the new administration of the United States was itself persuaded by the feeble military performance of their proteges in Laos to accept a neutralist solution in Laos.²³

The Geneva settlement of Laos of 1962, therefore, by giving a commanding role in Laos to the neutralists, seemed not only to be satisfactory from an international

²⁰ M.E. Goldstein, *American Policy towards Laos* (New Jersey, 1973), p. 74.

²¹ Charles De Gaulle, *Memoirs of Hope* (London, 1971), pp. 254–56, 263; Neo Lao Haksat, *Twelve Years of U.S. Imperialist Intervention and Aggression in Laos* (N.L.H.S. Publications, 1966), p. 86.

²² J.M. Halpern, *The Lao Elite: A Study of Tradition and Innovation* (Rand Corporation, Nov. 1960), pp. 39–40.

²³ Harold MacMillan, *Pointing the Way, 1959–1960* (London, 1972), pp. 329–38.

point of view but also to be acceptable to the aspirations of Lao nationalism. But support for the neutralists' position as the political mediators of Laos and the pivot of the neutralization agreement depended on the continuing support of the big powers acting in concert. Once it had become apparent that Laos had ceased to be a serious focus of international tension and potential conflict, Britain and the U.S.S.R., two of the major powers involved in the Geneva agreement, lost interest in maintaining the neutralist solution, and Laos was left to its "normal state of tribal and ideological warfare and incompetent government".²⁴ Without international support, the power base of the neutralists withered away; the neutralist-dominated government collapsed in everything but name, and the neutralist army was progressively absorbed into the Royal Lao and Pathet Lao armies. By 1964, Laos had become nothing more than a powerless and divided adjunct in the Indochina war, overrun by competing foreign powers and moving towards what appeared to be a permanent state of partition.²⁵

With the destruction of the neutralist solution (a process that was finalized by the *coup d'état* of April 1964 that left Souvanna Phouma at the head of a rightist-dominated government) the patron-client relationship between the United States and the Royal Lao Government entered a new phase.²⁶ Under the merest facade of support for Lao nationalist aspirations, the United States built a patchwork of alliances with minority leaders and regional military chieftains, with in some cases only nominal reference to the central government.²⁷ The most drastic example of this policy was the exclusive bilateral relationship that the United States developed with the Meo, and in particular with the Meo warlord Vang Pao.²⁸ In addition, while the United States carefully maintained the rhetoric of nation-building in its relationship with the Royal Lao Government, in fact American aid agencies such as USAID virtually usurped many of the functions of government and initiated rural development schemes with, again, only nominal reference to the Royal Lao Government.²⁹

In fact, Laos was treated by the United States as no more than a strategic promontory in the Indochina war — a strategic promontory, moreover, in which the interests of the Thai and the South Vietnamese predominated over those of the Lao themselves. The inevitable consequence of this was that the Royal Lao Government lost all claim to nationalist legitimacy; conservative nationalism had by now become no more than an alliance of convenience between the United States and a small clique of politicians seeking protection from the ever encroaching threat of revolutionary social change. In fact the nature of American aid and manipulation, far from creating a resilient conservative nationalism under the established elite, hastened the fatal process of undermining the traditional links between that elite and the Lao people as a whole.³⁰ The utter weakness of the political power base of the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 344–48.

²⁵ U. Mahajani, "President Kennedy and United States Policy in Laos, 1961–1962", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2, no. 2 (1971): 94.

²⁶ Neo Lao Haksat, *U.S. Imperialist Intervention and Aggression*, p. 48; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 May 1964, pp. 326–27.

²⁷ Neo Lao Haksat, *U.S. Imperialist Intervention and Aggression*, p. 52.

²⁸ A.W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (New York, 1972), pp. 264–78.

²⁹ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 July 1971, pp. 82–84.

³⁰ "In essence the massive American aid programme has inevitably brought about the virtual collapse of the very thing it sought to serve, namely the traditional system of values and authority." Joel M. Halpern, *Government, Politics and Social Structure in Laos: A Study of Tradition and Innovation* (New Haven, 1964), p. 95.

politicians of the Royal Lao Government, whether rightist or nominally neutralist, became apparent after the first stages of American withdrawal from Indochina.

The defeat of the two models of nationalism, represented by the neutralists and the conservatives, leaves the question of the relationship between the Pathet Lao and Lao nationalism. It may perhaps be useful at this stage to re-define in the simplest terms the concept of nationalism and the nature of nationalist movements. A nationalist movement is one that brings about, by peaceful means or by force, the self-determination of the population of a territory that either regards itself and is regarded internationally, or regards itself without international sanction, as a national entity — with all the attendant ethnic, linguistic, historical, and geographical implications of such a definition. A nationalist movement, therefore, is one that defines a national entity and works to create the self-determining status of that national entity.

Essentially, therefore, nationalism as a political force is ideologically neutral. In differing social and historical conditions, a nationalist movement may be conservative, liberal-democratic, or revolutionary; therefore, *pace* many Marxist writers and *pace* American foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s, the “legitimacy” or genuineness of a nationalist movement cannot be gauged by its ideological complexion. As far as Vietnam was concerned, French repression of Vietnamese nationalist aspirations forced the Vietnamese nationalist movement to develop as a revolutionary and militant organization, depending on the mass mobilization of the people as a counter to France’s conventional military power; in the particular historical circumstances of Vietnam, therefore, social upheaval and nationalist organization went hand in hand. But in Laos, as has already been seen, the transition to independence was peacefully achieved *with* rather than *against* the French.³¹ Consequently, there was not the slightest incentive to mass political mobilization on the part of the conservative and traditional elite to whom the French entrusted power. Laos therefore provides a classic example of a conservative nationalist movement, where, particularly in Luang Prabang and Champassak, the network of traditional authority linking the elite and the populace as a whole was maintained intact in the process of transition to self-government.

The Pathet Lao, on the other hand, appeared in its early years to be nothing more than an instrument of the Viet-Minh, depending for its existence not on any mass base in Laos, but on the military-political base created by the Viet-Minh in northern Laos in the period 1952 – 54. Although the precise details of the origin of the Pathet Lao movement are cloudy, the close relationship, amounting to a patron-client relationship, with the revolutionary movement in Vietnam cannot be questioned. Both the Neo Lao Issara (later to be called the Neo Lao Hak Sat), the nationalist *front* of the Pathet Lao, and the People’s Party of Laos, the Marxist *party* of the Pathet Lao, were created under the aegis of the Viet-Minh.³² In fact the institutions of the Pathet Lao have been exactly modelled on those created by the Vietnamese Communists, with the same careful distinction made between the nationalist front and the Marxist-Leninist party (in the case of Vietnam, the Viet-Minh, and the Lao Dong respectively). Likewise, the ideology and the strategies of the Pathet Lao have reflected the ideology and the strategies of the Vietnamese Marxists; and, in their ad-

³¹ General De Gaulle, *Salvation, 1944 – 1946* (London, 1960), p. 210.

³² J.J. Zasloff, *The Pathet Lao: Leadership and Organisation* (Lexington, 1973), pp. 12 – 15.

ministrative and military activities, the Pathet Lao have relied heavily on North Vietnamese advisers, who have exercised a decisive influence over the People's Party of Laos, the most powerful organization within the Pathet Lao.³³ Finally, in the field of international Communist relations the Pathet Lao have maintained a policy that has conformed to that of North Vietnam; in 1968, for example, the Pathet Lao followed the North Vietnamese rather than the Chinese line in supporting the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.³⁴

From the point of view of establishing its position as the legitimate nationalist movement of Laos, these are not promising credentials. But the social and political situation in Laos was of course fundamentally affected by the course of the Indochina war. As has been seen, the "legitimacy" of the conservative nationalists came increasingly into question as the United States manipulated the situation in Laos for its own ends (and to Laos' disadvantage — hence the strength of neutralist feeling in Laos), while American attempts at "nation-building" undermined the social basis for traditional Lao elite authority.³⁵ The elite that gained independence for Laos in the late 1940s and early 1950s had within a decade virtually sold that independence in return for a guarantee of American protection against the revolutionary ferment of Vietnam. It had, in other words, proved impossible to maintain a stable and conservative political structure in Laos in the conditions that have prevailed in Indochina since 1954. The more the United States dominated the Royal Lao Government and carried out policies patently against Lao national interests, the more apparent the anti-national character of the Royal Lao Government became, the more easy and acceptable it was for the Pathet Lao to take on the national liberation mantle and claim that a new and more fundamental form of independence would have to be fought for.³⁶ By deliberately underplaying class as against national issues, by studiously emphasizing their adherence to the main symbols of Lao national identity, the Buddhist Sangha and the monarchy, and by making it clear in their programmes that the national liberation struggle against the United States was the first task of the revolutionary movement in Laos, the Pathet Lao were able to establish their nationalist credentials in the course of the 1960s.³⁷

All this follows naturally on Giap's precept: "Marxism-Leninism never disowns the history and the great constituent virtues of a nation; on the contrary, it raises them to new heights in the new historical conditions."³⁸ This is not to say, of course, that the Pathet Lao ignored social issues; for them, the national and the social struggle have been interlinked. A major aspect of their policy has been the successful exploitation of a fundamental contradiction in American policy in Laos; their attempt on the one hand to modernize Laos and mobilize the Lao for the anti-Communist war, and on the other hand their dependence on the conservative political elite and

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³⁴ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 Feb. 1969, pp. 341–42.

³⁵ See Halpern, *op. cit.*, pp. 93–95.

³⁶ Neo Lao Haksat, *A Quarter Century of Grim and Victorious Struggle* (N.L.H.S. Publications, 1970), pp. 22, 30–31; J.J. Zasloff, *The Pathet Lao: Leadership and Organisation* (Lexington, 1973), p. 8.

³⁷ McAlister Brown and J.J. Zasloff, *The Pathet Lao and the Politics of Reconciliation in Laos* (SEADAG Conference, 30 September–2 October 1974, New York), pp. 58–60; Zasloff, *op. cit.*, pp. 119–21.

³⁸ Vo Nguyen Giap, *The Military Art of Peoples War* (New York, 1970), p. 165.

their consequent reluctance to make any “basic change whatever...in the relations of production”.³⁹ The Pathet Lao understood, like the Viet-Minh before them, that in order to carry through a protracted war of national liberation, it was vitally necessary to mobilize the peasantry; and, in order to mobilize the peasantry, it was necessary to institute immediate reforms at the local level, and to make it clear through political education that the national revolution is but the prelude to a wider social revolution in which the proletariat and the poorer sections of the peasantry would be the main beneficiaries.⁴⁰

In Western social science terms, the Pathet Lao were able through grass-roots activity to subvert or destroy the traditional authority of the Lao elite and its inefficient intermediaries at the provincial, district, and above all village level.⁴¹ In the Pathet Lao’s own analysis, their success against the Royal Lao Government has depended first and foremost on the fact that the Laotian revolution has been directed, even in its nationalist phase, by a “genuine revolutionary party” representing the interests of the peasantry and the proletariat; namely, the People’s Party of Laos.⁴² Only through this party leadership and control could the various, and sometimes seemingly competing, aspects of the Lao revolution be co-ordinated: namely, the identification of and concentration upon the “main enemy” at any given time; the understanding and exploitation of “contradictions” within the enemy camp, an understanding that could only come about through a comprehensive Marxist analysis; and the capacity to understand the nature of the relationship between international and national developments and put the Laotian revolution in an international context. Finally, the Marxist-Leninist party alone could determine the evolution of the relationship between national and social goals, and, in the context of the complex social set-up of the multi-class “national front”, it alone could resolve contradictions within this front in such a way as to make them “non-antagonistic”.⁴³

In the specific question of the history and development of nationalism in Laos, the most important fact to note is that the Pathet Lao have attempted to re-define the very basis of national identity in Laos. As has already been seen, the conservative nationalists identified Laotian nationalism with the lowland Lao — the ethnic group that formed the majority and was the most culturally advanced and politically organized. There was nothing unusual in this — a great number of the nationalist movements in the Third World have ignored in similar fashion the minorities within their national boundaries — and in the case of Laos the various minorities, although they occupied large areas of territory, were isolated, weak, and not as cohesive or politically developed as, say, the Shans and Karens of Burma. They did not appear to be a formidable threat to the dominance of the lowland Lao, and therefore could be ignored. But the Pathet Lao have since the early 1950s been based on the Laos-Vietnam border in the heart of the minority area, and therefore have depended to a

³⁹ Neo Lao Haksat, *U.S. Imperialist Intervention and Aggression*, pp. 72–73.

⁴⁰ For details of the N.L.H.S. programme, see “Twelve Point Program adopted by the 3rd National Congress of the N.L.H.S. in November 1968”, Appendix D, in Zasloff, *op. cit.*, pp. 123–30.

⁴¹ A.J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralisation* (London, 1964), pp. 129–33; Thomas H. Stanton, “Conflict in Laos: The Village Point of View”, in *Asian Survey* 8 no. 11 (1968): 887–900.

⁴² Neo Lao Haksat, *A Quarter Century of Grim and Victorious Struggle* (N.L.H.S. Publications, 1970), p. 27.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–29.

very great extent on the mobilization and support of the various minorities in order to consolidate their military-political position. It was therefore patently necessary for the Pathet Lao to emphasize the minorities' vital and integral role within the Laotian nation. From this standpoint, the Pathet Lao have been able to criticise the nationalist outlook of the Royal Lao Government as a form of narrow ethnic chauvinism rather than genuine nationalism.⁴⁴ In their conception of a *Laotian*, as apart from purely *Lao*, nationalism, the Pathet Lao acknowledged the difficulties of creating one national entity from the separate "nationalities" of Laos; particularly since the civil war period had exacerbated schisms between the nationalities and within them. But the Pathet Lao envisaged the gradual ending of "contradictions" between the Lao and the minorities and the development of a unified national consciousness; while at the same time they emphasized that the separate cultural identities of the minorities should be preserved.⁴⁵ Of course, the dominance of the lowland Lao, both in terms of language and over the political structure, remains inevitable. But the privileged educational opportunities, often abroad, offered by the Pathet Lao to minority cadres, showed their determination not only to bring about political change in the minority areas "from above" but also to allow the minorities to play an active and central role in the political future of Laos.⁴⁶

The Pathet Lao view of their role in the history of modern Laos is clear. They deny the legitimacy of the French-acquired independence of the early 1950s and claim that they were fighting not a civil war but a war of national liberation against the United States. From this perspective, the politicians and soldiers of the Royal Lao Government were seen as enemies, not primarily from the point of view of their class but because of their anti-national role as puppets and compradors working for a neo-colonial power.

The general history of Laotian nationalism that has been outlined in this paper might help us to soften somewhat the sharp outlines of this Pathet Lao view. In the first place, it has shown that the extremely vulnerable position of Laos has meant that there has been a long-standing tradition among the Lao elite of dependence upon foreign patronage and protection — a tradition that continued after Independence. As has been noted, all the major political movements that have emerged in Laos have depended upon some form of foreign patronage — even the neutralists, whose main attraction lay in their rejection of foreign interference in Laotian affairs. This has clearly also been the case with the Pathet Lao itself, whose close links with North Vietnam have been an obstacle to general Lao acceptance of their claim to nationalist legitimacy. Unlike Vietnam, there has not been in Laos a symbiotic link between nationalism and Marxism-Leninism.

Whatever their political inadequacies, and despite their obvious dependence upon the French, there is in fact a strong case to be made for the argument that the Lao political elite of the late 1940s and early 1950s did manage to gain for Laos as genuine an independence as seemed feasible for a weak, vulnerable, and politically and

⁴⁴ See "Ten Point Program adopted by the Second National Congress of the N.L.H.S. on 10 April 1964", Appendix C, and "Twelve Point Program adopted by the 3rd National Congress of the N.L.H.S. in November 1968", Appendix D, in Zasloff, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Neo Lao Haksat, *Twenty Years of Lao People's Revolutionary Struggle* (N.L.H.S. Publications, 1966), p. 22.

⁴⁶ Zasloff, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 26–28, 63–66.

economically underdeveloped country. But the conflicts and varying allegiances — the neutralist and pro-Western conflict, the conflict between pro-French and pro-United States sections, all the conflicts, in fact, that were generated in the course of the Cold War — served to weaken, vitiate, and divide the ruling elite of Laos after (unlike Vietnam) an initial period of relative strength. In addition the sheer scale and destructiveness of the American intervention in Laos, particularly after 1962, and the acquiescence in that intervention, whether willingly or unwillingly, on the part of the Royal Lao Government gave credence to the claim of the Pathet Lao to be directing a movement of national liberation.

Looking at the broader implications of the relationship between nationalism and Marxism in Laos, two points of major importance emerge. The first is that the national liberation movement, based on the tangible and understandable goals of self-determination and ultimately national survival, has enabled the Laotian Marxists to mobilize and thereby politicize the peasantry and minorities to an extent that would otherwise have been impossible. This is an instance of the advantages that the force of nationalism can confer on a Marxist movement.

The second point is an example, conversely, of the great advantage that Marxism can confer on a nationalist movement — namely, the Marxist approach to the minority problem, with which so many Third World countries emerging into independence have been confronted. Most non-Marxist nationalist movements of the Third World have had their power base firmly rooted in the ethnic majority (the Royal Lao Government was certainly no exception here), and it is therefore hardly surprising that their conception of national identity has often, particularly under stress, taken the form of an assertive and narrow ethnic chauvinism — which often degenerates into racialism. Because the Marxist-orientated national liberation movements must in their very nature view the national and minority question through the prism of a broad and relatively sophisticated social and political outlook, they have been able (at least on the evidence of Indochina) to cope far more successfully with the minority problem, and present a far more broad and inclusive conception of national identity. This is not to say, of course, that the Pathet Lao may not in the future have difficulty in reconciling the “contradiction” between national unity and the cultural diversity of the “nationalities” of Laos.

It must on the other hand be seen that the link between Marxism and nationalism in Laos was due to a combination of exceptional circumstances that were peculiar to Indochina and bore little resemblance to the normal patterns of decolonization in the Third World. The spectacular success of the Marxist-led nationalist movement in Indochina was due, firstly, to the existence of an extremely well-disciplined and well-led Marxist-Leninist party, namely, the Indochina Communist party; secondly, to the prolonged anti-colonial war against the French and the opportunity that this gave to the Vietnamese Marxists to consolidate their own power and to expand their influence into Cambodia and Laos; thirdly, to the proximity after 1949 of a friendly Marxist regime in China; and finally, as a consequence of this background, to the prolonged military intervention on the part of the United States.

The experience of Laos has therefore been exceptional. In the history of most of the Third World independence movements, a non-Marxist political elite has succeeded in gaining a tenacious grip on the nationalist movement in the process of acquiring independence. The 1954 independence of Laos is the norm, the subsequent national liberation movement of the Pathet Lao is the exception in the general ex-

perience of the Third World. In fact, the history of the Third World after the Second World War has shown that Marxist movements have generally found great difficulty in harnessing the political energies engendered by nationalism; and that, if the force of nationalism can in some few exceptional circumstances provide the spark and opportunity for Marxist movements, it has more often been the rock on which they have foundered.