5 Laos: The Transformation of Periphery Socialism

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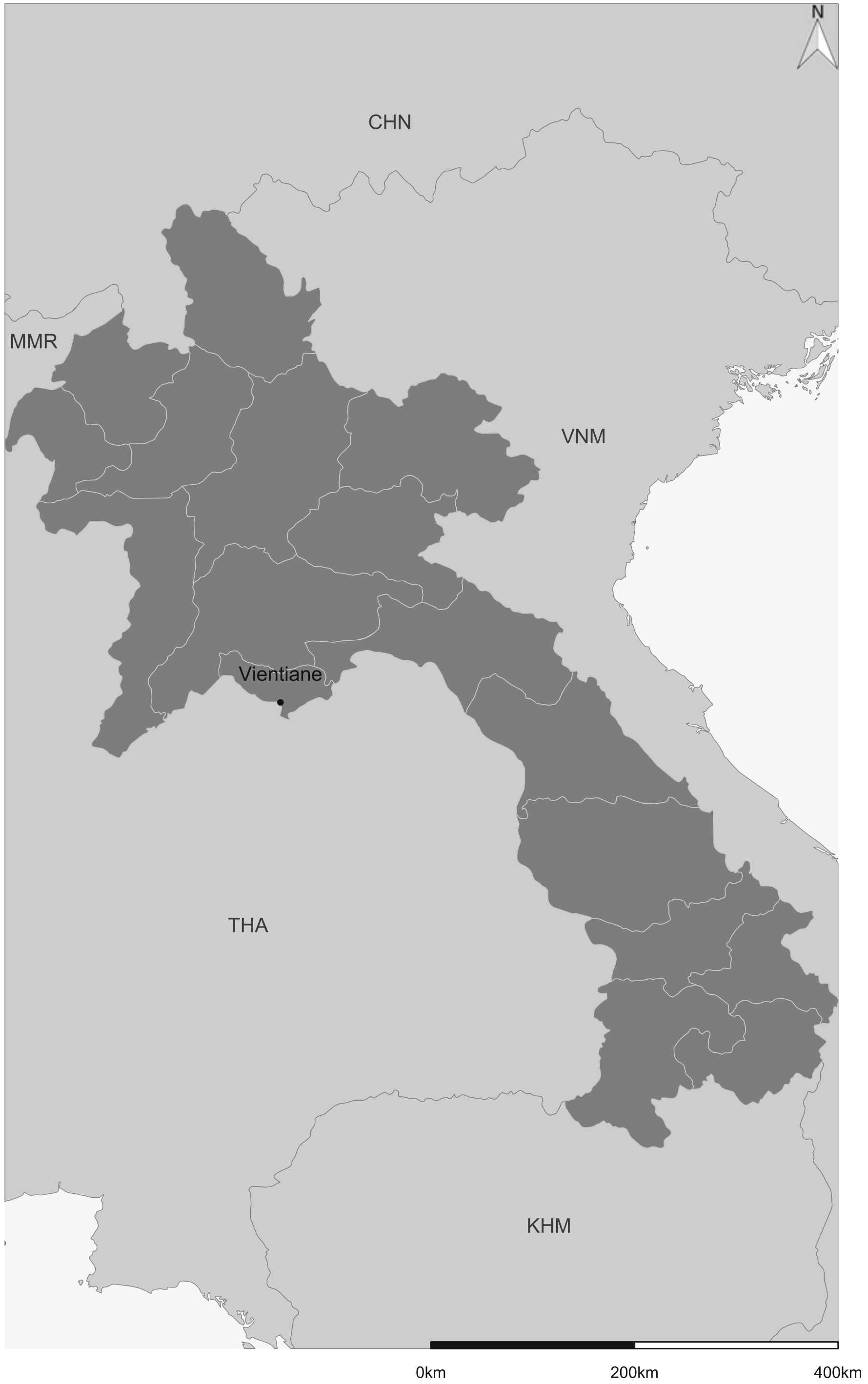
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5.1 Historical Background

The Democratic People's Republic of Lao is one of only five communist single-party regimes in the world today (Dimitrov 2013, p. 5).[1] When the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (*Phak Paxaxôn Pativat Lao*, LPRP) took power in 1975, more than 80% of the population was engaged in subsistence farming (Soukamneuth 2006, p. 48), making Laos a case of peripheral socialism in an economically underdeveloped society (Fitzgerald 1985). As a landlocked country with a sparsely populated hinterland, politicized ethnic identities, and a history of a weak central power, Laos struggles with unfavorable circumstances for economic development. Wedged in by more powerful neighbors, the country was frequently threatened both politically and military (see Table 5.1 for the Country Profile).

The Kingdom of Lan Xang, founded in 1354, was the precursor of modern Laos. It covered the territory of today's Laos, parts of Myanmar, and parts of contemporary northern Thailand (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 6). Historical memories of the ancient kingdom still play a key role in postcolonial nation-building and Laos's socialist politics of legitimacy (Tappe 2008). After Lan Xang was divided into the kingdoms of Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champasak in 1707/13, all three eventually became vassal states of Siam and Vietnam (Schneider 2001, p. 11), delaying the emergence of Lao nationalism until the era of French colonialism between 1893 and 1946 (Evans 2002, pp. 70–83).[2] While Luang Prabang as the royal seat initially became a French protectorate in 1893, in 1898, all of modern Laos was fully integrated into the French Indochina Union and unified with French colonial possessions in Vietnam and Cambodia. The royal court remained in Luang Prabang, but authority was de facto exercised by France and the rest of Laos was reorganized into provinces directly ruled by the French government in Vientiane, represented by a resident governor (Evans 2002, p. 45; Brocheux and Hémery 2011). In the "hybrid" colonial bureaucracy, all senior posts were reserved for French bureaucrats. Mid-level positions open to "Asians" were mostly held by Vietnamese civil servants, whereas the protected royal dynasty, the local aristocracy, and former ruling classes remained sidelined (Brocheux and Hémery 2011). Ethnic Lao were also shunned for auxiliary tasks in the colonial army, as the French relied on members of the Tai Dam or Hmong ethnic groups for support (Schneider 2001, p. 21).

During World War II, the compromise between the French government of Marshall Petain in Vichy and Tokyo "recognized French sovereignty over Indochina" (Brocheux and Hémery 2011, p. 338), including Laos, but Japanese military units could be freely stationed in all of French Indochina and the colonial economy was tightly tied to Japan's. In March 1945, however, all French civilian and military personnel were interned and the Japanese Imperial Army took direct

[1]The others are Vietnam, Cuba, North Korea, and the People's Republic of China. Throughout this chapter, "communism" and "socialism" are used interchangeably.

[2]Lao are members of the country's majority ethnic group, whereas Laotian encompasses all citizens of Laos (Schneider 2001).

Table 5.1 Country profile

Population (2016)	Year of full national sovereignty	Form of government
7,126,706	1949	Republic
Total area	**Current constitution enacted**	**Head of state**
236,800 km^2	1991	Bounnyang Vorachit (since 2016)
GDP p.c. (2005 PPP, 2012)	**Official language**	**Head of government**
$2925	Lao	Thongloun sisoulit (since 2016)
Ethnic groups	**Democracy score (BTI 2016)**	**System of government**
Lao 53.2%, Khmou 11%, Hmong 9.2%, Others 26.6%	2.95 (range from 1 to 10, higher scores indicate higher levels of democracy)	Parliamentary
Religions	**Regime type**	**Cabinet type**
64.7% Buddhists, 1.7% Christians, 33.5% Others	Autocracy	Single-party government

Source: CIA (2017), BTI (2016)

control over Laos, together with the rest of French Indochina. In the final months of the war, the Japanese supported the formation of a non-communist nationalist movement called Lao Issara ("Free Laos"). In October 1945, the Lao Issara declared the sovereign "Lao Nation" (*Pathet Lao*) and formed a provisional government. While French troops regained control of the country in 1946, France agreed to proclaim Laos as a self-governing constitutional monarchy within the French Union in 1949 (Evans 2002, p. 89). In November 1953, however, Laos gained full sovereignty.

During the Vietnam War or Second Indochina War, the Royal Lao Government pursued a policy of neutrality, but the country quickly became another front in the rapidly escalating conflict. Together with a US-funded "Secret Army" of irregular units, government troops fought a civil war against the *Pathet Lao*, the military branch of the Laotian People's Party founded in 1955 (renamed Lao People's Revolutionary Party in 1972, LPRP), and regular North Vietnamese troops (Evans 2002). The conflict was exacerbated by the massive American bombing campaign to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the main North Vietnamese supply line that passed through Laos. During this phase of the conflict, more bombs were dropped on Laos than on Germany during World War II (Soukamneuth 2006, p. 14).

Under the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, all foreign troops were withdrawn from Laos and a ceasefire between the royal government and *Pathet Lao* resulted in a government of national unity. However, the Communists took power in Laos in 1975 after the anti-communist regimes in South Vietnam and Cambodia collapsed. The so-called "Red Prince" Souphanouvong, who had been the figurehead leader of the LPRP during the war, became president of the Lao PDR, while Kaysone

Phomvihane, general secretary of the LPRP since 1955, became prime minister and strongman of the regime.

Since 1975, the single-party regime of the LPRP has gone through various stages of development. In the initial phase of establishing party rule, the LPRP took complete control of the government and state apparatus. Inspired by the Soviet Union and Vietnam, the party also initiated a socialist transformation of the economy and society, implemented a campaign of repression against "counterrevolutionaries" and the ruling classes of the *ancien régime*, organized mobilization campaigns, and tried to indoctrinate the population in its Marxist–Leninist ideology. Still, the totalitarian control of the population and the use of violence remained less intense than in Vietnam and Cambodia (Stuart-Fox 1997). Despite the nationalization of banking, industries, and commerce and the collectivization of agriculture, the low level of economic development and the negligible role of foreign capital in a predominantly rural economy (Soukamneuth 2006, p. 48) meant that central economic planning only began with the first 5-year plan in 1981. Even though the LPRP faced only sporadic resistance from loyalists of the old regime, ethnic minorities, and disillusioned *Pathet Lao* cadres (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 176), an estimated one-tenth of the Laotian population fled the country within the first 5 years of communist rule, mostly better-educated Lao and members of ethnic minorities like the Hmong (Soukamneuth 2006, p. 50). The collectivization of agriculture resulted in food shortages and again swelled the stream of refugees until the program was stopped in late 1979 with the so-called "seventh resolution" in which Kaysone Phomvihane suggested the party would tolerate private property (Freeman 2006, p. 125).

The second stage of economic corrections and political institutionalization took place from 1979/80 to 1991. The regime came to terms with the realities on the ground and cancelled further measures towards a centrally planned economy. In addition, the LPRP, which had ruled without a constitutional basis since 1975, also formally institutionalized its reign by promulgating a constitution in 1991. Both economic reforms and institutionalization were a reaction to the failure of previous economic policies and the emergence of centrifugal tendencies among local party cadres in the provinces. Furthermore, from the mid-1980s on, the LPRP faced the looming end of economic and military aid from the Soviet Union and other communist Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) member states, which had made up 60% of the country's overall foreign aid in 1979 (Evans 2002, p. 189). Similarly, the Vietnamese government signaled its intention to cut back financial and military assistance for the Vientiane government, whereas Western donors and international financial institutions and development agencies demanded political reforms in exchange for economic aid and development assistance. Economic problems caused by the inefficiencies of the centrally planned economy, geopolitical changes, and the need to find new sources of external aid finally led to the announcement of a "New Economic Mechanism" (NEM) in 1986 (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 182). The aim of the NEM was the transition from a socialist economy to a market economy through the introduction of open market policies and market economic principles, including the liberalization of domestic and foreign trade and investments, the abolition of price controls and the privatization of state enterprises, tax and

monetary reforms, as well as the modernization of the legal and administrative system (Stuart-Fox 2009c, p. 38). The economic reforms were flanked by the adoption of a new constitution in 1991 (Leather 2008, p. 126) as well as several changes to party bylaws. Oversight over the state administration was transferred from the prime minister to the LPRP Central Committee to reduce the autonomy of provincial party chairs (Freeman 2006, p. 138).

The 1991 Constitution marks the *passage from revolutionary to consolidated party rule*, under which the party and government strove for a model of authoritarian modernization of the economy and society without political liberalization. Laos remains a closed single-party regime in which the LPRP monopolizes access to political office. Other parties are banned and all political decisions are made within the LPRP-controlled party state. However, the policies of LPRP have become less ideological over the past two decades to favor pragmatic goals over communist ideals. Today, LPRP is no longer a revolutionary party and has become primarily an instrument for the political elite to control and exercise political power. It serves as a patronage machine for members of the first and second generation of party and military cadres and their families as well as newly co-opted sections of society. Performance-based legitimation from economic growth and improving the livelihoods of the population have become important new sources of legitimacy for the party. In recent years, nationalist-oriented (instead of ideology-based) claims of legitimacy by the LPRP—who stresses its role as custodian of Lao culture and history and has facilitated a process of nation-building that includes both Lao and national minorities—have become key ingredients of the party's legitimation strategy (Evans 2002; Soukamneuth 2006, p. 50).

In view of these adaptive changes of party rule, some observers argue that the regime can no longer be meaningfully characterized as communist, but has become a "post-socialist" political order (Evans 1998, p. 2; Soukamneuth 2006, p. 44; Stuart-Fox 2009c, p. 11). Yet the socialist ideology still serves as a disciplinary instrument to control party cadres and society (Lintner 2008, p. 173) and while the party's commitment to the economic and social program of socialism remains suspect, adherence to the political structure of the communist party state signifies the enduring importance of Marxist–Leninism.

Even though the absence of any significant political opposition within Laos reflects the strength of single-party rule in the country, the LPRP still faces some challenges that could potentially endanger regime stability in the long term. First, the economic transformation has resulted in rising horizontal socioeconomic inequalities, both between urban and rural areas as well as between the lowland Lao and highland minorities (Stuart-Fox 2009a, p. 157). Second, opaque decision-making procedures and weak government revenues due to inefficient institutions, widespread tax evasion, and persistent corruption have resulted in weak administrative capacity and a low quality of public services. This has limited the government's ability to provide the wider population with public goods like universal access to education and health and social security, amplifying problems of socioeconomic inequality. Third, even though the economy grew an average of 4% annually between 1986 and 2011, this trend is unlikely to continue without major institutional reforms. The privatization of

state enterprises owned by the military, party cadres, or their family members, legal reforms in order to strengthen government accountability and rule of law, and a conclusive anti-corruption policy are all badly needed, but reforms in these areas would threaten opportunities for self-enrichment by those elites whose political loyalty is essential for regime survival—especially cadre capitalists, military officers, and co-opted businessmen—and are therefore unlikely to succeed (Stuart-Fox 2009a; BTI 2014). Inefficient institutions will likely persist, which would stabilize party rule in the short- to medium-term, but which threaten the legitimacy and survival of the communist party state in the long run.

5.2 Constitutional Development and Principles

Laos has had three constitutions. The first provisional constitution was promulgated by various nationalist groups led by Lao Issara in 1945. In contrast to this anti-colonial document, the 1947 Constitution for the Kingdom of Laos was drafted in collaboration with French officials and contained several regulations meant to guarantee French influence over the Kingdom of Laos as a unified "autonomous" state within the French Union (Leather 2008, p. 129). The constitution was abrogated in 1975, leaving Laos without a written constitution for the next 16 years. The LPRP governed on the basis of government decrees and decisions made by the Party's Central Committee and Politburo.

Even though parliament was charged with drafting a constitution in the early 1980s, it was only in 1989 that the LPRP Politburo decided to pursue the issue with more urgency and established a high-level constitutional committee (Stuart-Fox 2002, pp. 295–297). A first draft was published in the party newspaper in April 1990, and party organs, ministries, mass organizations, and provincial governments were encouraged to discuss the proposal. This consultative procedure developed an unintended momentum when a small network of intellectuals publicly criticized the draft and demanded the establishment of a multiparty system. Following a series of arrests of critics of one-party rule in Vietnam and Cambodia, the Laotian regime arrested the network's key figures in October 1990 and sentenced them to long prison terms (Johnson 1992). The final draft of the constitution promulgated in August 1991 differed from the original draft in several smaller points, but it remained unchanged in spirit (Leather 2008, pp. 134–136). The 1991 Constitution was amended extensively in 2003 and, again, in 2015. Even though the amended constitution declares the state's commitment to the rule of law and provides for the separation of power, it affirms that the LPRP is a "leading nucleus" (Art. 3) and that all other state organizations function through a process of "democratic centralism" (Art. 5).

With a total length of less than 5000 words, the Lao constitution is a short and often vaguely worded text that in many cases leaves substantive matters open to regulation by government and parliament (Croissant 2014). Rather than being binding for all state organs, it mainly serves as a manual that eases coordination within the party state and as a blueprint that provides guidance for officials and

subjects with respect to the kind of actions they are required or allowed to take (cf. Ginsburg and Simpser 2014).

The text consists of 11 chapters and 98 articles. Only the National Assembly has the right to amend the constitution. The first two chapters (Art. 1–12, 13–30) provide the basis of the political system and the socioeconomic order. The two following chapters deal with national defense and security (Art. 31–33) and the fundamental rights and obligations of citizens (Art. 34–51). Chapter 5 through 9 address the legislature (Art. 52–64), the president and the government (Art. 65–74), local government (Art. 75–78), and the judiciary (Art. 79–86). The remaining chapters cover issues like the national language, currency, national flag, anthem, and capital and includes some final provisions.

While the constitution invokes revolutionary achievements like national liberation and the establishment of a socialist regime in the preamble, it is not a typical socialist constitution: There is no mention of a utopian communist society, the dictatorship of the proletariat, or the worker and peasant class. Instead, the text amalgamates elements from other communist constitutions such as the 1977 Soviet Constitution, post-socialist reform constitutions, and innovations from more recent constitutions drafted since the late 1980s (cf. Tan 2002; Elkins et al. 2009). It also retains elements from earlier Laotian constitutions, including the importance of Buddhism as a tradition that deserves special attention and protection and patronage by the state (Art. 9[new]). The articles on the "socioeconomic regime" in Chapter II of the constitution emphasize the constitution's reformist post-socialist character but at the same time emphasize the state's commitment to develop a "sustainable multi-sectoral economy" (Art. 13[new]) rather than a market economy. New universalist elements of the constitution include relatively recent innovations like the principle of gender equality (Art. 37).

Two articles are essential for the actual structure and operation of the system of government. Following the example of the 1977 Soviet Constitution, Article 3 defines the LPRP as the "leading nucleus" of the political system, while Article 5 subordinates all state organizations to the principle of "democratic centralism." The Leninist principle of "democratic centralism" is the ultimate organizational and leadership principle of party, state, and mass organization in all communist states. It is characterized by six elements (cf. Schmidt 2010): (1) a centralist and hierarchical party- and state structure; (2) the supremacy of the party over the state apparatus; (3) a system of hierarchical control from higher to lower echelons of party and state organizations; (4) firm party discipline and a ban on party factions; (5) party control over the selection of state officials; and (6) the principle of collective leadership in the party and state.[3]

Like other authoritarian constitutions, the Lao constitution bears resemblance with democratic constitutions but serves a different purpose (cf. Finer 1979;

[3]Of course, in reality, the collective leadership principle has often been superseded by the dominance of personalist leaders like Josef Stalin in the Soviet Union or Mao Zedong in the People's Republic of China.

Ginsburg and Simpser 2014). The constitution is primarily a legal tool to consolidate the party's claim on sociopolitical leadership. Still, its specific content gives some indication about the actual distribution of authority in the political system and serves as an "operating manual" (cf. Przeworski 2014) for the actual functioning of the state and political regime. However, its formal regulations concerning the system of government and the relationship of the legislature, executive, and judiciary remain of secondary importance. De facto, politics in Laos follows the model of the socialist party state, which supersedes all other political, legal, or administrative structures, institutions, and organizations.

5.3 System of Government and the Socialist Party State

Laos is a single-party regime. After taking power in 1975, the LPRP adopted the Soviet system of government with a dual structure of party and state that is still the institutional blueprint for today's political system (see Fig. 5.1). Through its network of party organizations in all administrative units and the dual function of party cadres as party representatives and state officials, the LPRP has complete control and authority over politics. Even though provincial governors enjoy a certain degree of autonomy and state institutions are relatively weak, this allows the party to assert its claim to power nationwide.

Nominally, the National Assembly (*Sapha Heng Xat*, before 1991: Supreme People's Assembly) is the highest state body. Its current 132 members are elected every 5 years. The Assembly has legislative power and by two-thirds majority elects the state president and—on his proposal—the prime minister and the Council of Ministers. Finally, it also selects the judges for the People's Supreme Court and the attorney general. Parliament is in session twice a year for a few weeks and its Standing Committee (NASC) is supposed to oversee the implementation of its decisions, interpret the constitution, and propose candidates for several important state offices, including the president and before 2003, judges of the civil and military courts. It consists of the president of the National Assembly, his deputy, and eight additional members of parliament. The NASC oversees the six parliamentary standing committees and is widely considered to be the key decision-making body within the parliament.

Unlike the Vietnamese National Assembly (see Chap. 12), the Lao National Assembly has not experienced an expansion of its political authority in recent years. It remains a rubber stamp for the Politburo and the Central Committee of the LPRP, and there is no indication that the parliament has ever attempted to exercise some of its constitutional prerogatives to control other organs of the party state or to set an agenda for government policies.

President and prime minister wield executive authority, and the Council of Ministers serves as a cabinet. The government's term of office is tied to the National Assembly's election period. While the prime minister leads the government, he or she usually merely confirms the party leadership's preliminary decision. Outside the authority granted by the president, the prime minister has no formal political

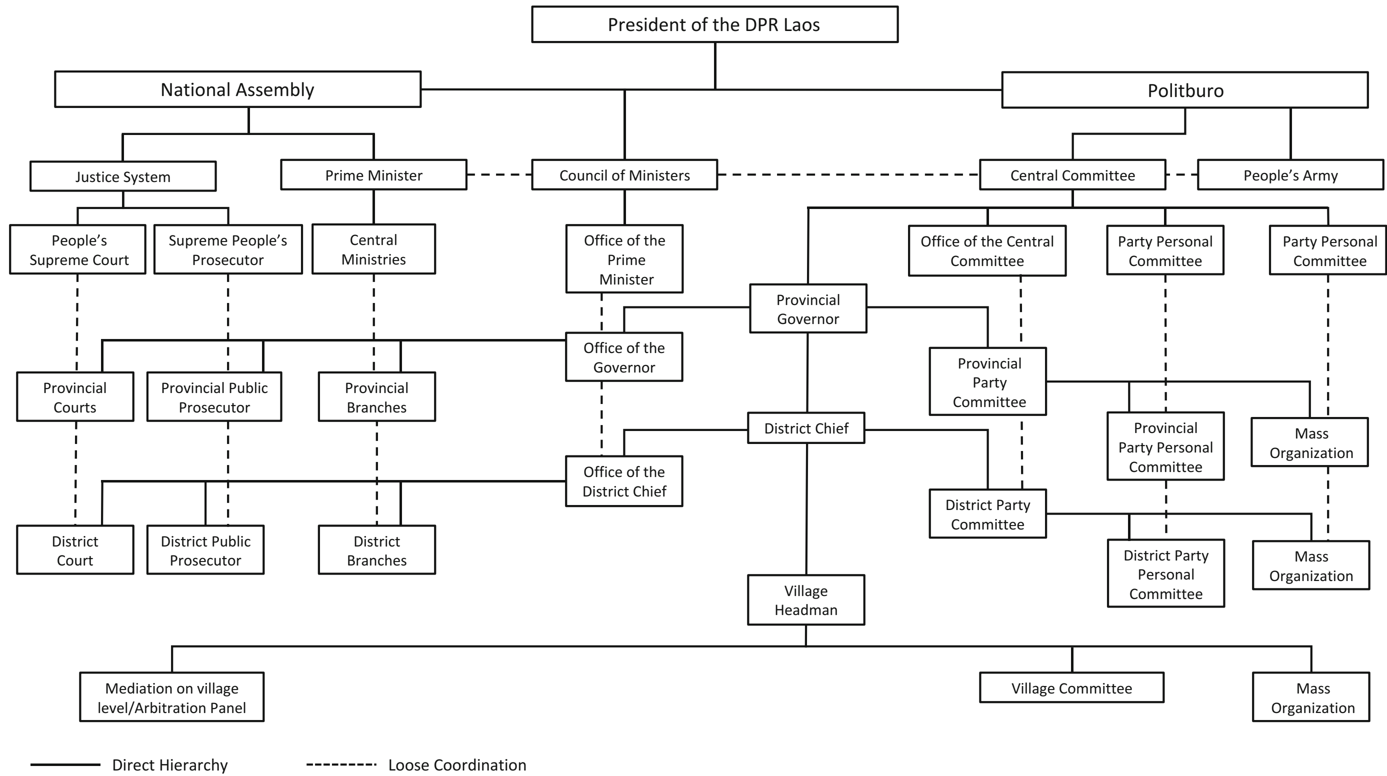

Fig. 5.1 Dual structure of the party state in Laos. Source: Authors' compilation based on UNDP (2005), Soukamneuth (2006, p. 84)

latitude. The prime minister chairs the Council of Ministers, which in March 2016 consisted of 21 cabinet ministers, four deputy prime ministers, the chairs of the National Committees for Planning and Cooperation and the Central Bank, as well as two Ministers for the Government's Office. The Council of Ministers reports directly to the prime minister. Nominally, the ministers and the prime minister are accountable to parliament, while in practice they are accountable to the party's Politburo. The Office of the Prime Minister, which also oversees the implementation of government policies, coordinates the Council of Ministers.

The Office of the President used to be largely symbolic, but the 1991 Constitution and especially the 2003 constitutional amendments have shifted power from the prime minister and the NASC to the president (Leather 2008, p. 141). The president appoints and dismisses the prime minister on the recommendation of the National Assembly and the president of the People's Supreme Court. The president is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, appoints all provincial governors, and presides government meetings. Since the 1990s, the president has also held the office of the Chairman and General Secretary of the Central Committee of the LPRP, which has further strengthened the president's position vis-à-vis the prime minister and other high-ranking party officials.

5.4 Political Parties

With the exception of the Communist Party, modern political parties emerged in Laos only in the 1950s. These political parties did not possess a permanent organizational structure, membership base, or policy platform. Their main purpose was to serve as patronage machines for influential individuals and families (*phu nyai*; Stuart-Fox 2002). Since 1975, the LPRP is the only legal party in Laos.

The LPRP emerged from the Indochina Communist Party (ICP) founded in 1930, but it was not until 1955 that the Lao People's Party was formally established (Schneider 2001, p. 39). The party name was changed to Lao People's Revolutionary Party (*Phak Paxaxôn Pativat Lao*) during the second party congress in 1972. It is organized as a Leninist cadre party, was modeled after the communist parties of the Soviet Union and Vietnam, and adheres to the principle of democratic centralism. As in other ruling communist parties, the Politburo and Central Committee are the party's key decision-making bodies. Since 1972, the party is structured along territorial and sectoral lines, meaning that the party is present in provinces and districts as well as in mass organizations, the armed forces, and state organizations. Party membership is necessary to gain access to most government positions and is mandatory for officers in the Lao People's Army (Stuart-Fox 2009c, p. 12). There is a parallel party structure in each ministry, led by a deputy minister who coordinates party activities and ensures that the administration follows the party line (Soukamneuth 2006, p. 58). Until the early 1990s, a significant degree of provincial autonomy emphasized the party's role as the sole centralized state organization. While governors retain significant influence nowadays, their authority results from their position in the LPRP, not their state office (Stuart-Fox 2002, p. 241).

Membership is by personal invitation only, and member selection is subject to prior screening of aspirants by party organs. However, the degree to which candidates have to demonstrate their ideological aptitude is unclear, and there is no reliable data about the actual number of party members. Estimates put the party's membership at about 25,000 in 1975 and 78,000 in 1996 (Stuart-Fox 1997). Until 2011, however, the party is estimated to have increased its membership to 191,780 members (Jönsson 2011; BTI 2014, p. 10). During the 10th party congress in January 2016, the Vientiane Times, the country's only English language newspaper under the Ministry of Information and Culture, reported that 685 delegates represented 252,879 party members [approx. 3.6% of the population (Vaenkeo 2016)]. Some foreign observers suggest that this—to some extent—reflects the successful co-optation of emerging new elites like private businesses, technocrats, and returning wealthy or well-educated emigres, but also the inclusion of members of ethnic minorities into the party (Stuart-Fox 2005, p. 8, 2009b).

The national party congress is held every 5 years, and according to party bylaws, serves as the party's highest decision-making body. Its 685 delegates (2016) elect the Central Committee's currently 69 members and formally decide important party matters. The Central Committee forms sub-committees for party organization, propaganda and training, party administration, the dissemination of party policies, an audit committee for the state and party, and the State School for Political Theory. The 11 members of the Politburo (2016) and the general secretary of the Central Committee are elected by the Central Committee at the party congress and together form the party's power center. Similar to the Central Committee, positions in the Politburo are ranked hierarchically. Changes to the composition and ranking of members in both the Central Committee and Politburo are usually considered to reflect the power relations among different ideological or programmatic wings within the party (Creak 2011; Jönsson 2011). Little is known about how decisions are made inside the Politburo, but the continuity and homogenous character of the composition of this inner circle before and since 1975 seems to have contributed to the emergence of a collective leadership instead of a personalist dictatorship (Stuart-Fox 2009c, pp. 10–12).

Until 1975, the party leadership consisted mainly of two groups of ethnic Lao (Lao Loum): The first group consisted of men who belonged to the old aristocratic elite of the country or were connected to prominent family clans by extensive family ties, representing the party to the outside world. The second group that formed the key leadership, however, consisted of party cadres and military commanders who remained in the political underground until 1975, who were in close contact with the Vietnamese communists, and only became known to the public after the overthrow of the royal government (Stuart-Fox 1997). Although ethnic minorities represented a disproportionally high share of party cadres and guerrilla fighters (cf. Zasloff 1973), Lao Loum predominated the leadership positions in the party and army before and after 1975 (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 171). Although there has been a gradual change in the composition of party leadership over the last decades, anecdotal evidence suggests that family members of the "old

revolutionary elite" (Stuart-Fox 2005, pp. 8–12) still possess considerable influence within the LPRP (ibid.; Gunn 2007).

One of the striking features of the party elite in Laos is their continuity and homogeneity: Those 25 Lao members of the ICP who established the Lao People's Party in 1955 dominated the Politburo and Central Committee into the 1990s before their advancing age forced a generational change.

Another unique feature of the LPRP, compared to other socialist countries, is the overrepresentation of military forces in the party's *loci* of political decision-making. In recent years, however, the composition of the Politburo and the Central Committee has changed: While the number of members of the old revolutionary guard as well as military officers declined in the Central Committee and the Politburo, a new generation of technocratically minded officials has stepped up to replace the armed struggle veterans. Connections with big entrepreneurs in other Asian countries allow non-military figures to build patronage networks quickly, creating new avenues for successful party careers. However, ideological reliability, training in the Soviet Union or Vietnam, decade-long party membership, and good political connections are still the most important conditions for gaining access to the party's enlarged leadership circle (St John 2006; Lintner 2008; Pholsena 2012, p. 60).

5.5 Legal and Judicial System

After 1975, the LPRP replaced the country's legal system with socialist law similar to those in other socialist states. Following Marxist–Leninist legal theory the judiciary was no longer a governing body of state and private action, but a means of enforcing the will of the ruling party. The judiciary was reorganized accordingly, and the corresponding norms (laws and regulations) were introduced. The party created a system of so-called people's tribunals with ad hoc "revolutionary judges" (Stuart-Fox 2009c, p. 23). These courts, usually consisting of local party officials, interpreted party directives as they saw fit (Leather 2008, p. 151). In order to ensure a more uniform application of justice across the country, the Supreme People's Court and the People's Courts at the provincial and city levels were created in 1983. The 1991 Constitution recognized the Supreme People's Court as the "highest judicial organ of the State" (Art. 53) and established a system of people's district courts and military courts. Since 2003, the president of the Supreme People's Court is appointed and can be removed by the National Assembly on the recommendation of the president of the state. A 2003 amendment to the Law on the Supreme People's Court dictates that judicial positions at all subordinate courts are to be determined by the Supreme People's Court instead of the Ministry of Justice or the provincial governors as before. Most likely, this will not strengthen judicial independence, since the highest judicial organ of the state is itself controlled by the party (Stuart-Fox 2009c, p. 27). At all levels of the court system, judges are usually members of the LPRP and judges in important cases are required to consult local coordination committees—which may include the local prosecutor, local government officials, the police, the local office of the National Assembly, and state and party organizations—before making their

decisions (Leather 2008, p. 156; BTI 2014). Under the 2015 Constitution, the appointment and removal of members of the judiciary involve the National Assembly, the president, and the NASC. Consequently, Laos has not developed an independent judiciary.

Laos is not a constitutional system. The ruling party in Laos is above the law. The constitution is not binding on the LPRP, and it is subject to interpretation by the National Assembly's Standing Committee, which is again subordinate to the party. There are no administrative courts, and although a government registry of decrees and laws was established in 1993, local government officials are often unfamiliar with or unaware of existing laws (Stuart-Fox 2009c, p. 25). Alarmed by escalating levels of corruption in the civil service and local administration, coupled with mounting popular resentment and public discussion (Stuart-Fox 2009a, p. 158), the Politburo created an Anti-Corruption Commission subordinate to the president, passed an anti-corruption law in 2005, and put forth a law to expand the authority of the State Audit Agency in 2007. So far, these measures have had little effect, and high-ranking party and state functionaries are not prosecuted for corrupt behavior and abuse of office (BTI 2014). Even though the National Assembly amended the anti-corruption law in 2012, corruption and abuse of office remain widespread. The weakness of the judicial system and the rule of law is reflected in the country's low scores in the World Bank's Rule of Law Index (World Bank 2017b) and in the Corruption Perception Index reported by Transparency International (2015). Although the latter reports a certain degree of improvement in recent years, Laos was listed at rank 139 out of 175 countries worldwide in 2015.

5.6 Electoral System and Elections

Laos' first representative national election to the legislature was held in 1951. Altogether there were seven multiparty elections for the National Assembly before 1975, although the Royal Lao Government continually manipulated the electoral system to prevent the political wing of the *Pathet Lao* from competing in elections (Hartmann 2001, p. 133). Under the current political regime, popular elections for district, provincial, and local assemblies were held in 1988, and since 1989, elections for the National Assembly are held every 5 years. The sixth national-level legislative elections took place on March 20, 2016. The public also participates in the election of village heads.

The constitution and the Law on National and Provincial Elections, adopted by the National Assembly in December 2015, provide the legal framework for the election process. Parliamentary elections are organized by a National Election Committee appointed by the president and are executed by the Ministry of the Interior. Under the constitution, all citizens aged 18 or older are eligible to vote, and citizens aged 21 or older have the right to stand in elections, but the LPRP is the only party permitted to contest the elections. All party, state, and mass organizations can propose candidates to the National Election Committee through local election committees (Art. 9, 1997 Election Law). Although there are a few

Table 5.2 Parliamentary election in Laos, 1989–2016

		1989	1992	1997	2002	2006	2011	2016
LPRP	%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Seats	65	85	98	108	113	128	144
Non-LPRP	%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Seats	14	0	1	1	2	4	5
Total	Candidates	121	154	159	166	175	190	211
	Seats	79	85	99	109	115	132	149
Voter turnout	%	n/a	99.3	99.3	99.9	99.7	99.7	97.9

Source: IPU (2014), Thayer (2003)

"independent" candidates, all candidates have to undergo a strict selection process by the LPRP's own Lao Front for National Construction (*Neo Lao Sang Sat*) and most "independents" are also party members (St John 2006, p. 187; BTI 2014). According to election law, candidates need sufficient knowledge about the policy position of LPRP and endorse it to be eligible for elections (Art. 7). In local-level elections, only candidates approved by the district administration can run and, following the election, the winner has to be confirmed by the district head, who is always a party representative (Art. 27, Law on Local Administration).

The National Assembly elections use a system of plurality rule in 18 multi-member constituencies in which voters cross out the names of candidates they dislike. The official statistics only report the number of votes cast and the lists of "elected" candidates. Like in past legislative elections, there were more candidates than seats to be filled in the 2016 election (cf. Table 5.2).

Even though elections in the Lao PDR are often dismissed as mere charades, they may actually support the stability of party rule in several ways. For example, even without inter-party competition, elections may help the LPRP to bolster its legitimacy. Limited intra-party competition between party members—although opaque and delineated along intra-party faction lines—provides a modest degree of choice for voters, which may help the party to determine the popularity of its personnel and to gain valuable information about the actual levels of regime support among local constituencies (cf. Magaloni 2006; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). Elections can also provide a venue for the co-optation of new elites and potential critics, and give local officials and party cadres an incentive to improve their performance (cf. Malesky et al. 2011). However, as long as the Election Commission does not publish a more detailed breakdown of the election results, it is impossible to determine whether voters express dissent by handing in empty or invalid ballots or use their ability to cross out unpopular candidates from the ballot to express their political preferences. Furthermore, due to the secretive character of the LPRP, it is unknown if the party has reacted to disappointing or unexpected results at the constituency-level by punishing local officials or rewarding successful candidates.

5.7 State and Decentralization

The Lao PDR is a decentralized unitary state. Administratively, the country is divided into 16 provinces (*khoueng*) and one prefecture (*kampheng nakhon*), which includes the capital city of Vientiane, 139 districts (*meuang*), and about 11,000 villages (*ban*). The subdistrict level (*tasseng*) was abolished in 1991, but district administrations still routinely group together villages into zones (*khet*) for planning purposes. Although not designated as official administrative units, the categories of north, central, and southern region are frequently used in government documents.

Provincial governors are appointed by the president and in turn select the district chiefs. One of the striking features of Lao authoritarianism is the high degree of decentralization and the de facto autonomy of the provinces. Unlike "decentralized authoritarianism" in China (Landry 2008), political decentralization predates economic reforms and was not implemented to improve the efficiency of local government services or create creative competition among the country's subnational units (Landry 2008; Heberer n.d.). Instead, it was the result of the precarious conditions under which the party state was established and had to survive after 1975.

Prior to French colonialism, Laos did not have a strong central power. When the three Lao Kingdoms were incorporated into French Indochina, traditional power structures were marginalized but not destroyed and continued in one way or the other at the local level (Zasloff 1973). The fragmentation of political authority under the constitutional monarchy and political instability during the civil war perpetuated the weakness of the state and the national government, dividing the country into different zones controlled by government forces, pro-government irregulars, and the *Pathet Lao*. In addition, the *Pathet Lao* itself was forced to adopt a flexible form of regional and decentralized organization to safeguard its lines of communication and supply, which prevented the party from centralizing political power (Zasloff 1973, p. 1; Stuart-Fox 2009a, p. 169). When the LPRP took power in 1975, the strength of regional party leaders and military commanders and the weak infrastructure linking the provinces to the capital allowed provincial governors to determine party policies at their own discretion. As the economy collapsed in the late 1970s, the central government in Vientiane demanded self-sufficiency among the provinces. Consequently, the provincial governors gained a high degree of political and economic autonomy (Soukamneuth 2006, p. 81; Stuart-Fox 2009a, p. 169). During this period, the governors acted as quasi-feudal lords, monitoring the movement of people, finances, and goods in their territories (Soukamneuth 2006, p. 81).

Yet this particular mode of center–periphery relations created friction between the national priorities of the central government and the regional interests of governors. Following the proclamation of the NEM, the central government gradually formalized the existing devolution of powers to the provinces but also moved to regain economic and administrative initiative by unifying and expanding administrative control (Soukamneuth 2006, pp. 67–69). In addition to abolishing the subdistricts, the central government dissolved local administrative committees as well as provincial and district councils. Furthermore, the central government

reasserted its authority over policy planning and budgeting from the subnational authorities (Sida 2004, p. 27). However, the degree of fiscal decentralization is still extensive: In 2006, the provinces accounted for 45% of total government expenditure and 56% of all government revenue (Soukamneuth 2006, p. 269; World Bank 2007, pp. 24–25). This suggests that Laos is one of the most decentralized authoritarian regimes in the world.[4] In addition, about 82% of all civil servants are appointed by the provinces and districts, whereas the party and central government only appoint 7 and 11%, respectively (Soukamneuth 2006, p. 232). While civil servants remain accountable to their government ministry, the provincial governors appoint, supervise, and remove them. Under this system, lack of coordination between ministries and local administrations, overlapping responsibilities, and vaguely formulated regulations engender manifold tensions in central-local relations, organizational dysfunctions, and operational inefficiencies (Soukamneuth 2006, pp. 98–105). However, the administrative capacity of the Laotian state and the quality of its bureaucracy also suffer from a low level of tax revenue, which used to be less than 10% of GDP (Soukamneuth 2006, pp. 145–155), although it increased from 12 to 16% between 2008 and 2014 (World Bank 2017a).

Yet for a long time, the weakness of state structures strengthened the LPRP's unique role as the only truly effective political structure with a nationwide presence. In this regard, it is important to note that even in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when de facto devolution and subnational autonomy was especially strong, the political authority and power of provincial elites, including governors, did not result from their position as state officials but from their rank in the ruling party, and all governors sat on the LPRP's Central Committee (Stuart-Fox 2002, pp. 241–242). However, the 1991 LPRP Constitution strengthened the political center vis-à-vis the periphery by putting forth that all local administrative committees were to be supervised by the party's provincial committees and making all governors accountable to the party's Central Committee. Since 2006, governors are no longer automatically members of the Central Committee, which has further reduced their autonomy.

Despite its relatively small size and population, Laos has always been one of the most ethnically heterogeneous societies in Southeast Asia. According to the 2005 census, there are 49 different ethnic groups in Laos. Ethnic Lao are the largest group at 54.6% of the population, followed by the Khmou with 10.9 and the Hmong with 8%. Several smaller groups with sometimes only a few hundred members make up the remaining 26.5% of the population. Religious diversity is also pronounced: Buddhist's make up 66.8% of the population and 1.5% are Christians. The remaining 30.9% comprise a plethora of animistic beliefs (Lao Statistics Bureau 2005, pp. 14–15). This diversity is often conflated into three groups. First, there are the Lao-Tai speaking, mostly Buddhist Lao Loum, or lowland Lao (roughly 55% of the population). Second, there are the Lao Theung or upland Lao (about 22% of the

[4]The average subnational share of government expenditure in autocracies is 17.76% in the period 1972–2000; for government revenue it is 14.05% (Landry 2008, p. 6).

Table 5.3 Discrepancies between geographical areas in Laos

	Population share in percent, 2005	Share of ethnic Lao in percent, 1995	Average monthly household expenditure, 2007/2008	Share of the population below national poverty line, 2007/2008	Adult literacy rate in percent, 2005	Infant mortality rate in percent, 2011
National	100	54.6	100	27.6	70.4	6.8
North						
Phongsaly	3	<20	57.9	46%	43.1	12.0
Luangnamtha	2.6	<16	67.2	30.5	50.6	5.4
Oudomxay	4.7	<12	79.9	33.7	55.9	8.7
Bokeo	2.6	13.4	58.9	32.6	58.1	9.2
Luangprabang	7.2	28.6	100.3	27.2	67.2	8.4
Huaphanh	5	30	67.7	50.5	64.7	10.0
Xayaboury	6	63.4	139.8	15.7	80.4	5.9
Central region						
Xiengkhuang	4.1	44.3	100.9	42	72.7	5.3
Vientiane Capital	12.4	92.6	146.6	15.2	91.7	2.7
Vientiane	6.9	63.8	85.5	28	79.7	3.1
Borikhamxay	4	40.2	93	21.5	77.2	4.5
Khammuane	6	59.4	86.2	31.4	69.9	12.1
Savannakhet	14.7	57.5	108.9	28.5	68.5	8.1
Xaysomboon SR[a]	0.7	19.4	–	–	72.6	–
South						
Saravane	5.8	60	67	36.3	61.6	9.8
Sekong	1.5	<15	69.9	51.8	61.7	7.1
Champasack	10.8	84.8	105.9	10	81.8	8.9
Attapeu	2	36.9	81	24.6	63.9	5.8

Source: Yokoyama (2010), Lao Statistics Bureau (2005), Government of Lao PDR and United Nations (2013), MPI (2011)

[a]Xaysomboun special region was merged into Vientiane province in 2007

population), who typically reside in the slopes of the mountain areas in northern and southern Laos. Third, there are the Lao Sung or highland Lao (about 13% of the Lao population), who speak Sino-Tibetan and Tibetan-Burman languages and reside in the highest altitude areas of the country (Schneider 2001, p. 96).

Although the GDP annual growth rate of Laos averaged 7% from 1989 until 2015 (World Bank 2017a), and despite significant reductions in the overall poverty rate, Laos remains one of the poorest nations in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, inequality appears to be on the rise, following similar patterns as, for instance, in Vietnam and China, and the fruits of economic development have largely bypassed rural Laotians (some 70% of the population), who remain trapped in poverty. Moreover, there remain considerable discrepancies between geographical areas and between ethnic groups.[5] Generally, provinces with a larger share of ethnic minorities and rural provinces in northern and southern Laos tend to have lower household incomes and rates of school enrollment as well as higher poverty rates. Incidences of child mortality are also higher compared to urban areas and provinces with smaller minority populations in the central region (see Table 5.3).

Since the 1950s, Laos had suffered from various armed conflicts between the central government and ethnic minorities. The end of the civil war in 1975 was followed by a long-running low-intensity conflict between government and ethnic Hmong forces, the latter of whom played a major role in the civil war as U.S.-funded irregular troops fighting against *Pathet Lao* forces (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 176). Yet in contrast to the Kingdom of Laos, the Lao PDR is defined as a multiethnic nation-state (Pholsena 2006) and the LPRP has made some effort to co-opt ethnic minorities into the wider party leadership as members of the Central Committee or Politburo or ministers or appointed governors (BTI 2014).

5.8 Civil–Military Relations

As in other communist regimes in Asia, the Lao People's Armed Forces (LPAF) are a key political and economic actor but are formally under the supremacy of the ruling party. The constitution charges the LPAF with defending the party's revolutionary accomplishments and contributing to national development (Art. 11). It contains no regulations on the character of civil–military relations, including the political control over the armed forces. The party's political leadership and its direct, united, and full control over the armed forces and other security forces is enshrined in the party constitution (Stuart-Fox 2002, p. 309).

Like all communist countries, Laos has instituted compulsory military service. The LPAF command 29,000 troops, 90% of which serve in the army. The military also controls the National Police Agency, but the border police and the political police are subordinated to the Ministry for Public Security. In addition to the regular

[5] Overall, poverty rates are twice as high among minorities compared to ethnic Lao (Government of Lao PDR and United Nations 2013, p. 202).

military of about 100,000 militia, troops are organized at the village level and commanded by the provincial governors (Carpenter 2005; Freeman 2006, p. 139; IISS 2014, p. 316).

The president of the state—who is simultaneously general secretary of the Central Committee of the LPRP—is commander-in-chief of the armed forces. While the minister of defence is an active general, the party rather than the ministry controls the LPAF through the Central Committee's Central National Defence and Security Committee. Monitored by the Politburo, it is the most important oversight and decision-making body in all matters of security and defense policy. The Politburo also oversees the General Political Department of the Army and the party committee of the Ministry for Public Security. Additional Committees for National Defense and Security at the provincial level are led by the secretaries of local party committees and are appointed by the Politburo (Stuart-Fox 2002, p. 310).

Originally, the LPRP established the Soviet model of a dual chain of military and political command throughout the armed forces by appointing a political "deputy" commander for each military commander. These political commanders exercised official and unofficial control functions over their military command counterparts and also served to further party interests by indoctrinating soldiers in Marxism–Leninism. However, this system was abolished in 1985, and commanding military officers took over the responsibility of the ideological instruction of their troops. Extensive political training and party membership are mandatory for all officers (Stuart-Fox 2002, p. 310).

The traditional understanding of Lao civil–military relations is that the relationship between the party and the LPAF was historically symbiotic, without functional differentiation or institutional boundaries based on technical specialization. Similar to communist China and Vietnam, this kind of symbiosis can be attributed to the legacy of the Communists' guerrilla war in Laos. Under its form of politico-military combat the fusion of political and military elites was inevitable and the governance of liberated territories was performed largely by the guerrilla army itself (cf. Perlmutter and LeoGrande 1982; Zasloff 1973, pp. 40–63). This party-army symbiosis, however, does not necessarily imply a high degree of congruence or consensus among civilian and military leaders. But rather than taking place along civil–military institutional boundaries, political competition and rivalries are characterized by personalized leadership factions or cliques cutting across party-army boundaries. Consequently, LPAF leaders are well-represented in the LPRP's top decision-making bodies. Especially the Sixth Party Congress of 1996 saw the militarization of the Central Committee and Politburo (see Fig. 5.2).

At the height of military representation in party and state organs, the state president and general secretary of the Central Committee of the LPRP, the chairman of the National Assembly, the prime minister, and up to six government ministers were active or former military officers (Stuart-Fox 2002, p. 243, 2009c, p. 15). However, the professionalization of party organization and changes among leadership generations have caused the military's sharply declining representation in the party's main bodies since the eight congress in 2001. In the ninth and tenth congress in 2011 and 2016, respectively, only three out of the 11 members of the Politburo

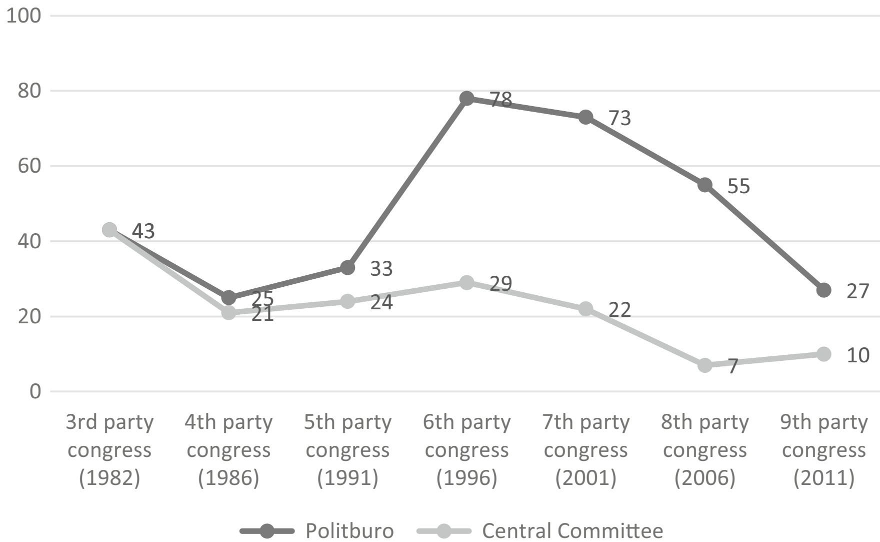

Fig. 5.2 Percentage of military officers in the LPRP Central Committee and Politburo. Notes: Without alternating members. Source: authors' compilation based on Stuart-Fox (1997, p. 203, 208, 2002, p. 238, 2008, 2009c, pp. 14–15), Bourdet (1997), Pholsena (2012, p. 60)

were appointed from among the military ranks. The share of (former) military officers on the Central Committee also declined considerably. Nevertheless, the LPAF continues to play an important role in shaping the political, economic, and social order because the armed forces have become "socialist entrepreneurs" since the introduction of market-oriented policies in the 1980s, i.e., they have linked their communist identity with both national economic development in general and military-owned businesses in particular (Stuart-Fox 2009a, p. 162).

In addition to its national defense and internal security roles, Art. 33 of the 1991 Constitution instructs the LPAF to contribute to the nation's goal of economic autonomy and national reconstruction. There are many facets to this role, including assisting with administrative matters, socioeconomic development, and national disaster response. However, the most prominent role of the LPAF in national reconstruction is in the form of direct ownership of commercial enterprises. Indeed, their involvement in commercial activities has intensified since 1986 with the adoption of the NEM policy. During the second 5-year plan (1986–1991), the LPAF became strongly involved in infrastructure and construction projects, expanding the military's business share in construction, mining, and agriculture (Stuart-Fox 2002, p. 243). While there is no reliable information on the concrete size and economic value of the military-business complex in Laos, most observers agree that commercial activities and military-owned enterprises are actually the main source of income for the LPAF and most military officers. The military also profits from plundering the country's natural resources, often in close connection with the Vietnamese military, local businessmen, and corrupt party officials. For

example, military companies like the Mountainous Area Development Corporation (MADC), the Agriculture, Forestry and Development Company (AFD), and the Development of Agriculture, Forestry and Industry Company (DAFI) are key players in the Laotian economy. They—sometimes in collaboration with companies owned by the Vietnamese military—control vast parts of the logging and mining industries and conduct illicit border trade between Laos and Vietnam, China, and Myanmar (Hodgdon 2008; Baird 2010; EU FLEGT Facility 2011).

5.9 Civil Society and Media System

In Laos, access for foreign scholars is limited and local researchers are denied freedom of science. Field work is largely prohibited and data is often interpreted and released through political lenses. It is also one of four Southeast Asian countries not included in either the World Values Survey or the Asian Barometer Survey.[6] Nonetheless, there are a few overviews of contemporary Lao culture and society that shed some light on how cultural elements synthesize with globalization and economic change and on existing patterns of political values, norms, and attitudes (cf. Stuart-Fox 2005, 2008; Rehbein 2010). But writing on contemporary political culture in Laos requires a large degree of faith, and the actual extent to which the population accepts the LPRP's rule as legitimate is extremely difficult to assess.

The legitimacy of the LPRP's regime seems to rest on three pillars. First, the LPRP strives for normative legitimacy within the ideological framework of Marxism–Leninism. While allegiance to official ideology is still relevant, the transformation of revolutionary to established party rule suggests a gradual dilution in its ideological stance ("ideological legitimation", Evans 1998, 2002; Pholsena 2006; Lintner 2008). Second, the Communist Party has increasingly emphasized its nationalist-oriented claims of legitimacy in recent decades. The Lao PDR's official historiography and iconography are manifest attempts to create a connection between the Kingdom of Lan Xang and the LPDR. The regime presents itself as the legitimate successor to the legendary kings of Laos and the protector of Buddhism ("nationalist-traditional legitimation," Tappe 2008; Evans 2002, p. 203). The leadership cult surrounding the revolutionary leader Kaysone Phomvihane, who died in 1992, follows along the same lines (Evans 1998, p. 31; Creak 2011, p. 110). The third pillar of regime legitimacy stems not only from economic growth and the regime's ability to satisfy the social and economic needs of broad segments of the Lao populace ("performance-based legitimation"), but also from the party's 'historical achievements' in the struggle for national sovereignty against French colonialism and American imperialism, providing political stability, and including ethnic minorities into the nation (Pholsena 2006; Stuart-Fox 1997).

[6]The others are Brunei, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste.

The absence of any form of organized political opposition within Laos seems to indicate that the LPRP has been successful in its attempts to legitimize its rule. Yet societal peace and regime stability are also—to some extent at least—a result of political repression. Public criticism of the government and party is not tolerated, and there is no space for a critical intelligentsia, political participation, or organized civil society outside of the LPRP (Stuart-Fox 2009c, p. 29). Although the infamous *samana* reeducation camps established after 1975 are no longer in operation, there are still political prisoners in custody and all the media and press remain under the full control of the Ministry for Information and Culture (Jönsson 2011). However, the country's relatively porous borders and the lack of technological means to control social media limit the regime's control of information flows. Yet only 19.9% of the population has access to the internet, tailing even Myanmar (22.4%) and Cambodia (25.5%) and lagging far behind Vietnam (52.1%; Internet World Stats 2017). Laos regularly scores at the bottom of the Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders, reaching rank 170 of 180 in 2017 (Reporters without Borders 2017) and 183 of 199 countries in the 2015 Freedom of the Press ranking (Freedom House 2015).

All existing social organizations are legally required to contribute to the development of the country under the leadership of the LPRP. Apart from the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), originally founded in 1950s under a different name, there are three additional mass organizations: The Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU), the Lao Women's Union (LWU), and the Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union (LPRYU). They all serve as a transition belt for the LPRP party line into society and are meant to unify all "patriotic forces," create "national solidarity," and mobilize the masses (Art. 7 of the constitution). At the same time, these organizations serve as a recruiting instrument for the party. Front organizations of the party are subordinate to the LPRP's Central Committee and operate at the national, provincial, district, and village or factory level. Even though all of these organizations have a significant membership base (cf. Fig. 5.3), only the LWU retains a visible presence in Laotian society (Stuart-Fox 2009c, p. 13).

Even though the government has recently issued a decree that legalizes (but also tightly regulates) certain kinds of nonprofit organizations in the country, the legal and political environment remains hostile to the emergence of a genuine, "modern" civil society in Laos (Kunze 2012). While the government has come to accept the Buddhist faith as the national religion, only one officially approved sect of Theravada Buddhism is permitted to operate; the *sangha* remains under the watchful eye of the Religious Affairs Department and is co-opted within the Lao United Buddhist Association (LUBA; Evans 1998, p. 57).

5.10 Outlook

The Lao PDR is a communist party state in transition. Since the mid-1980s, the LPRP has abandoned—at least de facto if not officially—its socialist experiment and is searching for new sources of legitimacy. It is no longer a revolutionary party striving

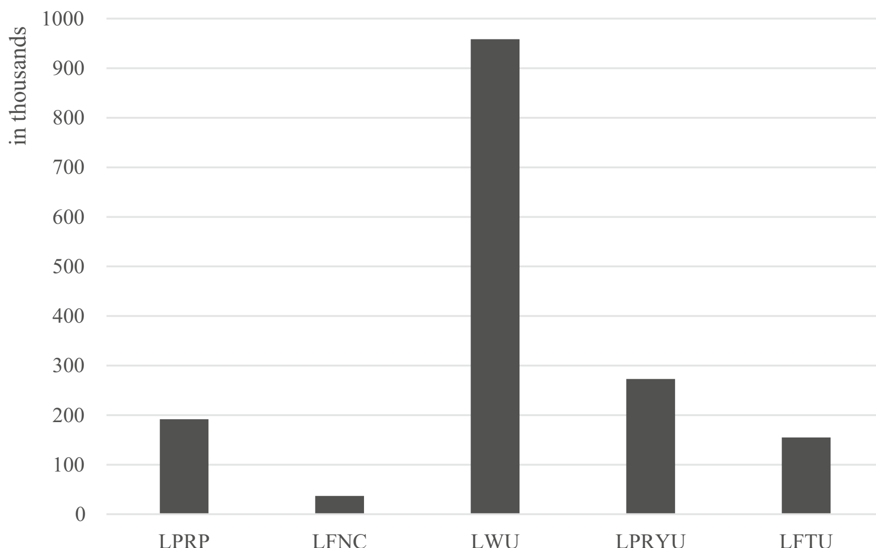

Fig. 5.3 LPRP and mass organization membership, 2007–2011. Notes: Most recent data available for all organizations. Source: authors' compilation based on LWU (2011), Thammavong (2005), Fry (2012), Jönsson (2011)

to realize a utopian communist society but has become a ruling party looking to perpetuate its rule and stabilize the political status quo. In the past, elite cohesion and collective leadership have proved to contribute to political stability: The LPRP succeeded thrice (1992, 2006, 2016) in accomplishing peaceful leadership succession at the top of the party and state without provoking a political crisis or instability. As shown, the persistence and stability of the regime essentially rest on the combination of the three dominant strategies of political survival: co-optation, normative and "output"-based legitimation, as well as selective and institutionalized repression (cf. Gerschewski et al. 2013; Backes 2016).

Despite the collapse of communist rule in other parts of the world, the LPRP has been able to continue its rule well into the early twenty-first century by adjusting its pillars of stability to the changing international and social context. These adjustments include (1) the introduction of a market-based economic system, (2) the selective integration and co-optation of elite groups and parts of the population through access to private goods, (3) the creation of new political institutions like parliament and elections to combine a limited level of elite participation with political and social control, and finally, (4) a "re-traditionalization" of its ideological base, including an increasing reliance on nationalism that has established the party as the guardian of Laotian culture, history, and sovereignty. Of course, the LPRP had always treated Marxism–Leninism and socialist propaganda mostly as a means to mobilize its military and society for Laos' "national liberation" (Soukamneuth 2006, p. 48; Stuart-Fox 2005, p. 11).

While these processes of adaptation are regular features among communist regimes, the LPRP implemented them very successfully thanks to a set of beneficial factors. The LPRP has always been a genuinely indigenous party, even though it depended on military support from Vietnam to take power in 1975 (Evans 1998, 2002). This differs from many Eastern European countries, in which the Soviet Union forced the transition towards communism after the Second World War (Dimitrov 2013). In addition, the party was tightly organized but still flexible because of its "decentralized authoritarianism." Finally, the Laotian government managed to receive not only economic and military assistance from Vietnam, the USSR, and other COMECON countries, but also development aid from Western countries. Currently, foreign assistance (ODA) makes up 8.5% of the Laotian GDP (World Bank 2017b). Moreover, Laos is surrounded by authoritarian regimes in neighboring countries who are all looking for political stability in the region rather than regime change, making any kind of democratic diffusion highly unlikely.

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