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Politicization of the Buddhist Sangha in Laos

MARTIN STUART-FOX
and ROD BUCKNELL

Theravada Buddhism as the traditional religion of the dominant ethnic Lao majority in Laos historically has played a key role in structuring Lao society and in assuring the continuity of Lao culture. Though the *dharmma* (the Buddha's teaching) may be only superficially understood and practised by most of the lay population, Buddhism has provided a set of moral values and a view of life which have strongly influenced modes of thought and action over the centuries. As a result, the *sangha* (the order of Buddhist monks) has come to command high respect and its activities pervade every aspect of the social and cultural milieu.

In part the status of the sangha in Laos derived from its independence from mundane political affairs. It represented an alternative hierarchy based not upon birth, but upon the accumulation of religious merit. As such it offered an opportunity for social mobility not available within the static class structure of traditional Lao society. At the same time Buddhism was never divorced from the state: the secular and the sacred were mutually supportive. But the political role of the sangha was limited to providing ritual reinforcement of the social *status quo*. However, after the Second World War Buddhist monks were increasingly drawn into the ideological conflict which pitted rightwing governments in Vientiane against the revolutionary movement of the Pathet Lao (PL).¹ The sangha became a target for political manipulation by both sides.

This paper will analyze successive stages in the politicization of the Lao sangha since 1945. It will show how the independence of the sangha was undermined by attempts of rightwing regimes in Laos, with strong American backing, to make the sangha an instrument of government policy; and it will examine Pathet Lao attempts to subvert the sangha within areas under their control, and to infiltrate it in areas under government jurisdiction. The paper will also discuss the role played by the sangha during the final stages of the Pathet Lao take-over of political power in 1975, and the effect this had upon the order. Finally an attempt will be made to assess the state of Buddhism in Laos under the present regime.

1945-74: The Competition for Political Allegiance

During the Japanese occupation of Indochina, French attempts to encourage a sense of Lao nationalism led to a resurgence of interest in Lao history and traditional culture. The nationalist movement focused attention on the role of Buddhism in Lao society, and on the sangha as a vehicle for propagating traditional Lao values. Many young monks

¹The term "Pathet Lao" strictly speaking means "Laos" ("Land of the Lao"). It is the usual term for the Lao communist movement, and will be used as such in this paper.

became involved in attempts to generate a new sense of national pride, particularly when what had begun as an anti-Japanese movement took on an anti-French and anti-colonial character after 1945.

After the re-establishment of French political control in 1946 forced the Lao Issara (Free Lao) government into exile in Thailand, it was left to the monks who remained in Laos to fan nationalist sentiment, and organize Buddhist festivals as fund-raising functions in support of the independence movement.² In 1950 the Lao Issara movement split into a moderate faction which agreed to co-operate with the French in moving towards independence within the French Union, and a radical faction which supported the armed struggle of the Vietminh. While some monks left the sangha to join the Maquis, others used the teachings of Buddhism "to contribute to the activities of the liberation struggle".³ Thus by 1954 when the Geneva Agreements on Indochina were signed, both the leaders of the government in Vientiane and of the fledgling Lao communist movement were well aware of the key role the sangha might play in furthering their political aims.

One of the earliest member organizations of the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) which was set up in 1956 was an association of Buddhist monks from Sam Neua province, where communist forces in Laos had regrouped in accordance with the 1954 Geneva Agreements. Thereafter there were periodic reports of other Buddhist associations joining the LPF, until in 1963 all these were grouped under the PL-sponsored National Association of Lao Buddhists.⁴

As the United States came to replace France as the dominant foreign power in Laos after the mid-1950s, the sangha in government areas increasingly became caught up in the American-sponsored anti-communist crusade. This was particularly so after the PL negotiated Religious Affairs as one of their two portfolios in the first Lao coalition government in 1957.

The incongruity of a communist minister, Phoumi Vongvichit, holding the Religious Affairs portfolio should not obscure the rationale behind the PL choice. The Ministry of Religious Affairs was responsible for supervision of the sangha, a function it had inherited from the colonial administration. Instructions from the ministry could be passed down the sangha hierarchy independently of the civil administration. Control of this ministry thus provided the PL with a ready-made communication network from the administrative capital, Vientiane, spreading out to the remotest villages.⁵ Also, the ministry could arrange, at government expense, discussion meetings for monks during which social criticism could be introduced. This technique was so effective that even though the first coalition government collapsed within three months, Phoumi Vong-

² Khamtan Thepbuali, *Pha Song Lāu Kap Kān Patiwat* [In Lao, "The Lao Sangha and the Revolution"] (Vientiane: Neo Lao Haksat Press, 1975), p. 36. A useful summary and review of this small book is given by Saveng Phinith in *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, LXIV (1977): 317-23.

³ Khamtan, op. cit., p. 40.

⁴ This organization is called by Zasloff the Laotian Buddhist Association; see Joseph J. Zasloff, *The Pathet Lao: Leadership and Organization* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Co., 1973), p. 141. It adopted the slogan "Unity, Struggle, Neutrality, Peace"; Khamtan, op. cit., pp. 55-60.

⁵ The sangha is "the only permanent vertical functional organization which reaches into the Lao rural population". See Vongsavanh Boutsavath and Georges Chapelier, "Lao Popular Buddhism and Community Development", *Journal of the Siam Society*, LXI, 2 (July 1973): 15. See also Phouvong Phimmasone, "L'organisation du bouddhisme au Laos", *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, No. 9 (1973): 127-29.

vichit reportedly succeeded in convincing a number of young bonzes of the justness of the communist cause.⁶

PL interest in the sangha and success in generating sympathy for their cause alerted the government and their American sponsors to the importance of Buddhism as a weapon in the political and ideological struggle. The rightwing government of Phoui Sananikone which took over power following the collapse of the coalition, reacted by carrying through an administrative reform of the sangha that effectively subordinated it to government (anti-communist) policy. On 25 May 1959, Royal Ordinance number 160 was promulgated defining more precisely the relationship between the Royal Lao Government (RLG) and the sangha. It defined both the organizational structure of the sangha and the extent of government participation in and control of ecclesiastical affairs.⁷ Some of its provisions were particularly galling to the sangha. An implicit right of veto over the election of abbots and elders to positions in the sangha administration was vested in government officials at the next higher rank of the parallel government-sangha hierarchy; higher sangha dignitaries might stand for election only with cabinet consent; and all correspondence between different administrative levels of the sangha had to go via official government channels.⁸

This attempt by the RLG to use the sangha for its own political purposes was ineffective because it was ill conceived. Instead of recognizing and assisting the important contributory but independent role that Buddhism might play in building a Lao culture and ethos, the legislation attempted to make the sangha an arm of government. In the long term this had the unforeseen effect of undermining the traditional role of Buddhism in Lao culture,⁹ and of preparing the way for the later, far more effective utilization of the sangha by the Pathet Lao. The immediate effect of the legislation was to cause a deterioration in government-sangha relations and promote unrest within the sangha, which the PL took every opportunity to encourage. This culminated, in February 1960, in an extraordinary open demonstration against the government for ordering the transfer of a monk who had criticized government policies. Government reaction was to charge communist infiltration of the sangha and to criticize its superiors for failing to discipline the younger monks. This enabled the PL to come out in support of the sangha, the autonomy of its organization, and Buddhism as the national religion and vehicle of Lao culture.¹⁰

During this period, from the collapse of the first coalition to the neutralist *coup d'état* of Captain Kong Le in August 1960, American pressures were instrumental in encouraging government attempts to use the sangha and Buddhism as an ideological counterweight to the nationalist appeal of the LPF. The Pathet Lao were later to accuse

⁶ Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), p. 76.

⁷ This ordinance superceded the earlier 1951 statute on the structure of the sangha. For a detailed account see Kruong Pathoumxad, "Organization of the Sangha", *Kingdom of Laos*, ed. René de Berval (Saigon: France Asie, 1959), pp. 257-67. Also Heinz Bechart, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravada-Buddhismus*, vol. II Birma, Kambodscha, Laos, Thailand (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1967), pp. 268-73.

⁸ Joel M. Halpern, *Government, Politics, and Social Structure in Laos*. Southeast Asia Studies Monograph No. 4 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 50. See also Boutsavath and Chapelier, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

⁹ Cf. Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

the government of introducing ideological content into courses at the Pali School for monks in Vientiane, of recruiting monks to preach anti-communist propaganda, of pressuring the *Sangha-rāja* (head of the sangha in Laos) to enlist his overt support against communism, and, worst of all in PL eyes, of introducing ideologically committed Lao-speaking monks from northeast Thailand to warn of “the communist danger”.¹¹ Since most of these Thai monks belonged to the minority Thammayut-nikai, a reform sect originally founded in Thailand but also well represented in southern Laos, this had the unfortunate effect of further dividing the Lao sangha. Other American activities included financing Buddhist publications, arranging English classes for monks, and sending monks to study in the U.S. While many monks availed themselves of these opportunities, a minority secretly formed two organizations: the “movement of young monks against the Thai Thammayut monks”, and the “movement of novices to demand their rights”. The activities of these two groups, however, were not confined to those suggested by their titles.¹²

Kong Le’s *coup d’état*, the first foray of the Lao military into politics, had the effect of stimulating political debate in Laos. Many monks supported the coup, and took part in political discussions and demonstrations in Vientiane. When in December 1960 the capital fell to an American-backed rightist offensive, most monks retreated with the neutralists. While some young activist monks remained in contact with the PL on the Plain of Jars, the majority later returned to Vientiane. However, many monks retained their sympathies for the neutralist cause.

During the period from December 1960 to the signing of the Geneva Agreement in Laos in July 1962, the PL gained considerable sympathy and support within the sangha. A number of factors were important in this regard, not least of which was the sangha’s “inverse class structure”,¹³ in large part a result of the two-tiered system of education that had come into existence under the French. While the children of the Lao elite attended secular schools established by the colonial authorities, children from the poorer sections of the population had to make do with the traditional education provided in the *wats*. Many boys from poor families joined the sangha temporarily for this reason: by becoming novices they could obtain free board and lodging while pursuing their studies. However, the irrelevance of the largely religious education they received meant that many youths were later disappointed when they went in search of employment: positions in government service went to the French-educated elite. For those with a monastic education the only course open was to remain in the sangha, and attempt to rise within the monastic hierarchy. The PL were able to play on resentment within the sangha against government recruitment policies to win over monks as recruits to their own cause.

A second, closely related reason why PL recruitment within the sangha was so effective lay in the failure of the Lao elite, with their colonial heritage of French political theory, to effectively integrate monarchy, government and sangha into a set of mutually supportive institutions.¹⁴ Under the French, the sangha had been relegated to a marginal position in society. Although according to Article 7 of the Lao constitution, Buddhism was the official state religion, in post-colonial Laos it was left with no sense of social

¹¹ Khamtan, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-52.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 53-56.

¹³ Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

¹⁴ Cf. Boutsavath and Chapelier, *op. cit.*, p. 2; also Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

responsibility in the building of a Lao nationalist identity — at least not as this was generated at the level of government. Political power lay solely in the hands of a few aristocratic and wealthy families, whose French education predisposed them to a view of the state which entailed a sharp division between secular government and ecclesiastical affairs. This situation contrasted with that in Thailand or Burma, where Buddhism played a positive political role.¹⁵ One important result of this exclusion of the sangha from all political influence in Laos was that the higher clergy tended to withdraw into lives of seclusion, some even refusing to preach publicly at all. This broke contact between the upper levels of the sangha and their lay followers, thereby leaving the way open for younger, more radical monks to exercise an undue influence over the lay population, an influence that could easily be directed, for example, towards the need for social reform or more democratic government.

A third factor assisting PL penetration of the sangha was its internal division into two mutually antagonistic sects: the Maha-nikai and the Thammayut-nikai (the latter being the more strictly disciplined reform sect mentioned above).¹⁶ Whereas in Thailand the two sects coexist without undue dissension, in Laos they were deeply divided. In the words of a former secretary-general of the Lao Thammayut sect:

It was as if neither sect recognised the other as made up of Lao people. They were completely distinct from each other, and always trying to get the better of each other. This prevented them from working together.... Each had only its own interests in view. And the entire Lao population was divided on the same basis [as belonging to the one sect or the other]....¹⁷

As another Thammayut monk admitted:

[This] was a weak point at which the Communists could strike and thereby destroy the Sangha. It conflicted with the principle of national unity and cohesiveness.¹⁸

A fourth factor was that at the time the Lao sangha was, as one sympathetic Lao critic put it, “on the steep slope of decay”.¹⁹ Most monks, particularly in rural areas, were poorly educated and ill-informed about events outside their immediate village environment. Worse than this, most monks, except those in the larger urban wats who had studied in Thailand, had only a very meagre understanding of Buddhist dhamma. Many monks

¹⁵ For the role of the sangha in Thai society, see Somboon Suksamran, *Political Buddhism in Southeast Asia: The Role of the Sangha in the Modernization of Thailand* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1977), esp. pp. 22-23; Frank E. Reynolds, “Civic Religion and National Community in Thailand”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXXVI (1977): 267-82; Charles F. Keyes, “Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXX (1971): 551-67; Yoneo Ishii, “Church and State in Thailand”, *Asian Survey*, VIII (1968): 864-71. On the role played by Buddhism in Burma, see especially E. Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Background of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965); Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

¹⁶The two sects had roughly equal numbers of adherents in Southern Laos (i.e., in the provinces of Champassak and Sithandone), but the Mahā-nikai far outnumbered the Thammayut-nikai elsewhere in the country. See Boutsavath and Chapelier, op. cit., p. 26.

¹⁷ Mahacalanā Tanbuali, *Santhāna Phra-Phuttha-sāsanaṅā nai Prathēt Sāthāranarat Prachāthipatai Prachāchon Lāu* [In Thai, “The State of the Buddhist Religion in the People’s Democratic Republic of Laos”], (Bangkok: Khana Sāsanikachon, 1977), p. 71. Monks from the two sects could not attend the same rituals, and lay followers could not inter-marry.

¹⁸ Mahāthawan Thitangkūn, *Prasopkān nai Lāu* [In Thai, “Experiences in Laos”], (Bangkok, 1977), p. 120. See also p. 167 where the point is reiterated that the existence of the two sects left the Sangha disunited and vulnerable.

¹⁹ Thao Nhouy Abhay, *Buddhism in Laos* (n.p.: Ministry of Education Library Committee, 1958), p. 26.

were lax in their practice — discipline was often slack, improper behaviour was common, and the meditation exercises which ideally form the core of the Theravada monk's training, were rarely practised.

A fifth factor was that the sangha saw itself as the principal guardian of Lao culture, defending traditional values against foreign secularism. This led easily to a widely-felt anti-Americanism,²⁰ a sentiment the PL were able to exploit with their call for a neutral and independent Laos, free from Western capitalist influence.

These five factors — the sangha's inverse class structure, its estrangement from government, sectarian division, the low level of education and discipline, and opposition to foreign influence — explain why the sangha proved as receptive as it did to the Pathet Lao cause. The PL call for social, economic, and moral reform struck a responsive chord in many young monks.

For this period only sketchy information is available on PL policy towards Buddhism in the areas of the country under their control. In part, this is because the hill-tribes which made up the bulk of the population in the PL area were non-Buddhist. Reports on the condition of Buddhism were therefore limited to those provided by a few ethnic Lao refugees. From 1965 on, with the beginning of heavy American bombing of communist targets, and fighting around the Plain of Jars, more Lao peasants fled the communist zone. From their reports no general pattern of repression is apparent: anti-Buddhist measures were the result of the actions of individual local cadres.²¹ In one village PL cadres tried to prevent villagers from giving alms to monks; in another the celebration of festivals was considered a waste of resources. In one case it was claimed that the failure of the village co-operative store to carry sufficient robes for the monks' needs was an attempt to limit the number of monks in the local wat. From this it would appear that while the PL officially tolerated Buddhism and used the sangha wherever possible for political ends — the propagation of socialist principles and anti-US sentiments — some attempt was also made to limit its influence.

Throughout the period from 1962 until the cease-fire of 1973, the PL continued to infiltrate the sangha in government controlled areas. The benefits to be derived from this policy were obvious. Since the village wat was the centre of gossip, monks were ideally placed to gather information ranging from assessments of the political mood of the people — how they viewed the government on the one hand and the Pathet Lao on the other — to intelligence on government troop movements and weaponry. The traditionally high status of the sangha in Lao society meant that anything monks said carried special weight, particularly in rural areas. This made the sangha a potentially valuable tool in furthering the PL's immediate aim of getting its message to the people.

It was perhaps recognition by the political right of the effectiveness of this dual policy of tolerance and infiltration that prevented the PL from obtaining the Ministry of Religious Affairs in the second coalition government that followed the 1962 Geneva Agreements on Laos. With the collapse of that government in 1963 the LPRP again resorted to armed insurgency, but throughout the next ten years the pattern of PL attitudes towards Buddhism remained largely unchanged.

²⁰ Cf. Halpern, op. cit., p. 60. See also Bechert, op. cit., p. 296 where he makes the point that Americanization of the lifestyle of conservative rightist politicians and military officers had made a mockery of their claims to stand for traditional Lao values, and lost them the support of much of the sangha.

²¹ See Georges Chapelier and Josyane van Malderghem, "Plain of Jars, Social Changes under Five Years of Pathet-Lao Administration", *Asia Quarterly* 1 (1971): 69-71.

Official tolerance of religion was written into the ten-point action programme adopted by the Second National Congress of the Lao Patriotic Front in 1964. Point 9 called on all Lao people "to respect freedom of belief; oppose all schemes to sabotage and split up religions; and to protect pagodas and respect Buddhist priests".²² The PL later claimed to be rebuilding wats destroyed by American bombing, while many monks were joining the PL "to urge the believers to stubbornly struggle for the defence of the Fatherland".²³

With intensification of the war in Laos, the sangha became more involved in the increasing politicization and polarization of the country, in both insurgent and government controlled areas. A captured PL document dated 14 January 1968 illustrates the way in which the PL were using the sangha in their zone. It mentions the despatch of thirty-three monks to various districts "to preach revolutionary ethics ... to protect Buddhism, to revive the real morality, to explain the revolutionary tasks to the people, and to resist the psychological warfare of the American imperialists and their reactionary lackeys".²⁴

Point 3 of the twelve-point programme of the Third National Congress of the LPF in November 1968 sheds light on the progressive politicization of the sangha. It is worth quoting in full:

A. To respect and protect Buddhism, and unite with all religions, thus contributing to realizing national unity and strengthening the national forces against U.S. aggression.

B. To oppose all acts of sabotage by the U.S. imperialists and their henchmen against Buddhism, such as distorting Buddhist catechism, controlling Buddhist monks and forcing them to serve criminal schemes, destroying pagodas or using them to preach decadent American culture, sowing discord among various Buddhist factions, etc.

C. To respect and defend Buddhism, preserve the purity of monks and their right to practise Buddhism, protect pagodas, encourage unity and mutual assistance among monks and believers of various Buddhist factions, and encourage solidarity among the priests and followers of other religions.²⁵

But the PL alone cannot be held responsible for this process of politicization and polarization of the sangha. The government in Vientiane continued its attempts to manipulate the sangha. After much hesitation, (and as a result of much pressure), the Buddhist hierarchy agreed to become involved in government-sponsored programmes of social and economic development, and, from 1970 on, to attend seminars on these topics organized by the Commissariat of Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Religious Affairs.²⁶ This, together with involvement by the sangha in assisting war refugees, drew young monks into political discussion on what was going on in the country, and made them more receptive to appeals for national unity and an end to the war and the U.S. presence.

Paradoxically, this development was probably aided by attempts at internal reforms

²² Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

²³ Central Committee of the Lao Patriotic Front, *Twenty Years of the Lao People's Revolutionary Struggle* (n.p.: Neo Lao Haksat Press, 1966), p. 28.

²⁴ Zasloff, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²⁶ For the best account of community development programmes involving the Lao sangha, see Boutsavath and Chapelier, *op. cit.* Opposition came principally from monks in Vientiane, who objected that such programmes would become a focus for PL propaganda: "See your monks! They work for the Government and the Americans" (p. 25).

made by the sangha itself. The reforms undertaken included encouraging lay associations, increasing the number of people undergoing religious education, opening meditation centres, and beginning missionary activity.²⁷ This campaign had the unforeseen effect of weakening the cohesion of the sangha, for it led some monks to question the role of Buddhism, and to reject traditional monastic behaviour in favour of political activism. Since many of the discussions in the wats were attended by lay people, another effect was to undermine the prestige and authority of the sangha in the eyes of the people. Criticism was levelled at the way monks lived — unproductively, as parasites on the community. It was argued that monks should not live in comfort, just eating and sleeping; they should work for the good of the community and the nation. Individual monks, particularly high-ranking ones, were criticized, often anonymously, for not living up to the monastic code of discipline. By their constant involvement in social affairs the more politically active monks tended to destroy the traditional image of calm monastic withdrawal from the affairs of the world. All these actions, by provoking acrimonious debate within the sangha, led to confusion in the minds of the people.²⁸

By 1973, thanks to the policies both of successive governments and of the Pathet Lao, the sangha had been effectively weakened as the independent vehicle of a traditional religious belief system. By involving the sangha in political controversy and social reform, the government and PL together destroyed the basis of its authority and prestige, both of which lay in its aloofness from mundane affairs and the immunity to criticism this provided. From the PL point of view, the short-term tactical benefits to be derived from using monks to generate support for the broad political programme of the LPF incidentally contributed to the long-term aim of converting Buddhism from a political and cultural force opposing the envisaged transformation of Lao society to one co-opted to serve socialist aims.

During the twelve months from April 1974 when the third coalition government at last took office, to the fall of Saigon in April 1975, many monks readily accepted the eighteen-point National Political Programme adopted by the coalition government at PL urging. The fifth point contained the usual call “to respect Buddhism and other religions; preserve pagodas and temples and other historic sites; defend the right to worship of Buddhist priests and other religious believers”.²⁹ It was not these guarantees alone, but the liberal democratic tone of the entire document, that caught the imagination of so many Lao monks and appealed to all but the most committed anti-communists. Unity and equality of all Lao nationals of all ethnic groups, free elections, freedom of speech, assembly, and residence, the right to free enterprise and property ownership, development of the country’s natural resources, and improvement of education and health services — all these were goals that no one could take exception to.³⁰

²⁷ On these developments see Marcel Zago, “Bouddhisme lao contemporain” *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, No. 9 (1973): 130-37. A translation of this paper by Alan Wolfe can be found in Heinrich Dumoulin and John C. Maraldo (eds.), *Buddhism in the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 120-27.

²⁸ See Mahacanla, *op. cit.*, p. 35. According to Mahathawan, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-45, a group known as Yuwasong (“Young Sangha”) spearheaded this criticism by (1) denouncing elders of the Sangha, (2) printing criticisms, (3) joining secular protests, (4) teaching that Buddhism was compatible with socialism, and (5) actively propagating their ideas countrywide.

²⁹ “National Political Programme for Building a Peaceful, Independent, Neutral, Democratic, United and Prosperous Laos”, *Laos News*, 12 Feb. 1975; rep. in *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, V, 2 (1975): 253.

³⁰ For an account of popular reaction to the signing of the treaty, see Mahacanla, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38.

Little wonder then, that the sangha contributed enthusiastically to popularizing the eighteen points as *the programme of the PL*. The role monks played in generating support for the PL position contributed materially to the PL victory in Laos. At a time when the civil service remained predominantly under rightist control, PL use of the communication network provided by the sangha was facilitated by the fact that the Minister of Religious Affairs was once again a member of the LPRP — a former monk named Maha Kou Souvannamethi. The way was thus prepared for the popular acclaim that greeted the guerrillas of the Lao People's Liberation Army when they entered former rightist-held areas during the take-over of power between May and August 1975.

1975: The Year of Transition

During the initial stages of their seizure of power the PL were faced with the necessity of establishing their legitimacy to govern, and of generating popular support in former rightist-held areas that had been subject to more than a decade of intensive anti-communist propaganda. This they did by actively popularizing the eighteen-point programme, together with the slogan "Laos: Peaceful, Independent, Neutral, Democratic, United and Constantly Progressing". Both programme and slogan were already well known and generally accepted in the larger towns; the PL immediately undertook an intensive campaign to make them equally well known in the villages. For this purpose they recruited as many monks as possible and sent them out to preach the message of national salvation and a new era for Laos. This was facilitated by the sangha's active support of the eighteen points. In using the sangha, therefore, the PL began by drawing on the fund of goodwill already felt towards them. Monks took a conspicuous part in the mass ceremonies of welcome organized to greet the victorious Liberation Army; and an edict from the Sangha-rāja called on all monks and novices to work together with the revolutionaries for the good of the nation. For their part, the PL made a point of visiting wats to explain their intentions. The LPRP prepared and distributed a booklet for monks entitled *Action Plan for the Lao Sangha*.³¹ This booklet noted the importance of the sangha within the community and stressed the mediatory role that monks ought to play in the settling of differences and disputes — a clear indication of how the PL intended using the sangha to smooth its own transition to power. It also called on monks to become actively involved in the nation's economic development.

Monks were among the first to attend PL political seminars. Initially they attended voluntarily, out of curiosity to see what the new rulers had to say; later, however, when the seminars developed into protracted re-education courses, coercion was resorted to to ensure attendance. The PL made no attempt to hide their reasons for using monks to spread their political programme. Though division and dissension within the sangha had diminished its prestige in the eyes of the urban middle class, monks were still widely respected among the less educated in towns and villages; any message the monks carried was thus given the added weight of ecclesiastical authority. Monks, according to the PL, had a special part to play; they were to serve as a channel of communication between the

³¹ *Mati Khawonkhawai Khana Song Lāu*, *ibid.*, p. 44. This is not to be confused with the Action Plan of the United Buddhists Association, published in *Khaosan Pathet Lao, Bulletin Quotidien*, 24 and 25 June 1976, and in English translation in Joint Publications Research Service, *Translations on South and East Asia*, no. 651, 21 July 1976, pp. 18-22.

party and the people; they were to propagate the new orthodoxy.³² At the same time the monks were to stop teaching certain familiar Buddhist doctrines; they were not to mention heaven and hell, or even merit and *karma*,³³ which the PL considered worthless superstitions. The only merit that mattered was to be gained through working with the new government for the material well-being of all.

In seminars the monks were told that Buddhism and socialism had much in common: both taught that all men are equal, all men are brothers. The sangha, as a body of men living and working together without individual ownership of property, approached the Marxist ideal of a future communist society in which each individual will labour according to his ability and receive according to his needs. The PL also argued the compatibility of socialism and Buddhism on the grounds that both aimed at putting an end to suffering (*dukkha*). The essence of the Buddha's teaching was the attainment of freedom from suffering; the attainment of true happiness (*sukha*); and "the supreme goal of the revolution is to liberate the nation, to liberate the people so that they can be free of suffering, and to make all men happy".³⁴ And the PL argued that Siddhartha (later to become the Buddha) had, in renouncing his family and kingdom, shown himself deeply concerned for social progress.³⁵

A more sophisticated argument for the compatibility of Buddhism and socialism was put forward by Khamtan Thepbuali, a leading pro-PL monk, in his booklet *Politics and Buddhism*.³⁶ Khamtan argued that Buddhism over the centuries had proved itself compatible with a number of different social systems. In each case it adapted itself to the new social order. But under capitalism Buddhism became a tool of the capitalists, and was corrupted as a result. Under socialism it must again "apply its views and philosophy to a new system and new politics".³⁷ But this Buddhism can do, for it is eternal (*akālika*). Hence the need to purge Buddhism in Laos of all the rituals and superstitions that served the old order, and in their place to encourage that morality and those truths of Buddhism that are of value to the nation and which further social progress.³⁸

While proclaiming the theoretical compatibility of socialism and Buddhism, at another level the PL actively sought to discredit the Buddhist dhamma and sangha in order to promote popular acceptance of Marxism-Leninism and the Lao Peoples Revolutionary Party (LPRP). In practical terms Buddhism was *not* compatible with socialism for Buddhism stood in the way of the socialist society envisaged by the leaders of the LPRP in two important respects: (1) the Buddhist world-view and the psychological attitudes engendered by it were an obstacle to the construction of a socialist society; and (2) the authority of the sangha and its organization as an *alternative* avenue of social advancement were an obstacle to the party's monopolization

³² These developments are detailed in Mahacanla, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-45.

³³ It is widely believed in Laos that *karma* (generated in a former existence) determines present social status. This provided considerable support for the elitist structure of Lao society, and was naturally a target of PL criticism. Cf. Boutsavath and Chapelier, *op. cit.*, p. 22. See also Richard Gombrich, "Buddhist Karma and Social Control", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* XVIII (1975): 212-20.

³⁴ Khamtan, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

³⁵ See, e.g. Phoumi Vongvichit's speech to Buddhist teachers broadcast over Vientiane Radio, 18 Oct. 1976 (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 28 Oct. 1976), p. 12.

³⁶ Khamtan, *Kān miāng kap Sāsānā Phut* [in Lao, "Politics and Buddhism"], (n.p.: Neo Lao Haksat Press, 1976).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

of social and political power. In both these areas the Pathet Lao moved to counter Buddhist influence.

Marxism and Buddhism hold radically different views of the place of man in the world: Marxism sees man as conditioned by the economic modes of production in the society in which he lives, that is, by material factors for which the social community is responsible; Buddhism sees man as conditioned by his own *karma*, that is, by moral factors for which each is individually responsible. Thus the Marxist struggles to bring about a transformation of society both by transforming its economic base and by creating a new "socialist man", while the Buddhist — at least at the popular level — resigns himself to the present state of things while ensuring rebirth in one of the Buddhist heavens by accumulating personal merit. For the Marxist the rewards are this-worldly, for the Buddhist principally other-worldly.

The different views of man's place in the cosmic scheme of things were sufficient reason for the PL to set out to undermine belief in the traditional Buddhist world-view. The principal means adopted was to criticize the weakest and least defensible aspects of popular Buddhism as practiced in Laos. Cadres consistently ridiculed Buddhist cosmology and the superstitious animist accretions that characterize Lao Buddhism. For example, it was pointed out that space probes have demonstrated the non-existence of the tiered Buddhist heavens, and deep oil drilling has done the same for the system of hells. The absurdity of pouring water to transfer merit was emphasized, and the idea that merit could be gained by feeding lazy, unworthy monks was scornfully dismissed. The widespread belief in *phi* (spirits) was also disparaged. Thus faith in Buddhism was undermined and the Buddhist world-view discredited.³⁹

Buddhist dhamma, through its emphasis on the supremacy of consciousness and on the importance of mental discipline as the means to enlightenment, encourages an attitude to the material world that is diametrically opposed to Marxism. Buddhism is non-materialistic; it teaches that spiritual freedom lies in freeing the mind from desire for worldly things. All things are impermanent (*anicca*); any attempt to hold on to them is bound to produce disillusionment and suffering (*dukkha*). True happiness lies in turning inward to the discovery of the mind and a deepening conscious self-awareness. This non-materialistic attitude to life and belief in the impermanence of things leads naturally to a lack of interest in the accumulation of possessions for their own sake. It is reinforced, at least for monks, by the third of the key doctrines of Theravada Buddhism, *anattā*, the non-existence of any enduring "soul" or "self". "The most important consequence of the doctrine of nonself to man and society is that the notion of 'possession' is rendered meaningless."⁴⁰

The attitudes engendered by these beliefs are much less evident among lay people than among life members of the sangha, but it has nevertheless often been argued that Buddhist non-materialism has hindered the private accumulation necessary for the development of capitalism in Theravada Buddhist countries.⁴¹ It seems more likely,

³⁹ These examples were given by a Lao refugee monk, Bhikkhu Sathukhamfan, formerly of Luang Prabang, where he was secretary to the former Lao Sangha-rāja. (Interview, Wat Yannawa, Bangkok, 19 Nov. 1978)

⁴⁰ R. Puligandla and K. Puhakka, "Buddhism and Revolution", *Philosophy East and West*, XX (1970): 346.

⁴¹ E.g., by Richard J. Coughlin, "Social Features of Buddhism in Thailand", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, XX (1956): 142. The counter-argument is put by Prasert Yamklinfung, "Family, Religion and Socio-Economic Change in Thailand", *East Asian Cultural Studies*, XIII (1974): 24.

however, that reduced private accumulation among the lay population in Theravada Buddhist societies is due less to non-materialism than to the heavy expenditure of private resources in generating merit.⁴² This explains the PL insistence that monks refrain from preaching the need to accumulate merit: that proportion of resources that once went to the wats (through merit-making) is to be directed instead to the state. The PL evidently felt sufficiently concerned about the retarding effect of Buddhist modes of thought on material development and production to criticize non-materialism in the strongest terms in seminars and re-education courses for monks. Cadres maintained that the material and physical has primacy over the mental and spiritual, pointing out that material conditions (e.g., in society) must be used to criticize mental attitudes. Non-possession was countered by emphasizing the importance of raising living standards.⁴³

More important from the PL point of view than the opposition offered by Buddhist dhamma to the propagation of socialism was that offered by the sangha to the LPRP monopolization of social influence and political power. Traditionally, Buddhism had provided the primary focus of cohesion in Lao society. This was symbolized by the village wat, which together with the *ho phi ban* (the altar to the tutelary spirit of the village) in its grounds, had been the centre for the ritual and social life of the village.⁴⁴ The wat was the site not only of all religious rituals and festivals but also of all community meetings concerning any important secular affairs of the village. All such meetings were attended by monks, who often exercised a moderating role, drawing out a consensus or compromise from the discussion. Monks were thus deeply involved in the secular affairs of the village. As those working on village self-help projects in culturally similar northeastern Thailand discovered, "nothing of any real importance could be accomplished without the active support of the village clergy".⁴⁵

Reduction of this central social role of the sangha was clearly an important aim of PL Buddhist strategy. Of the means adopted for achieving it, the most direct and effective was the practice, begun during the transition period of 1975, of simply bypassing the monks in all important decision-making. Increasingly, the party-controlled village committee alone determined what was to be done. A monk might be elected to the committee but only if he had shown himself prepared to follow party policy. This usually reduced him in the eyes of the villagers to the status of a party cadre. He thus retained little or none of his former prestige as a monk.

Less direct, but in the long run equally effective as a means of depriving the sangha of its authority, was the practice, begun years earlier, of using monks to spread party propaganda. This slowly but surely reduced the sangha's prestige by making monks appear as pliable instruments of party policy. In reality, however, the monks generally had no option. From 1975 on, they were accompanied on their village preaching tours by armed PL cadres, ostensibly for their own protection. Their "sermons" were often tape-

⁴² For a discussion of the role of the wat in the financial and economic life of rural Laos, see Christian Taillard, "Essai sur la bi-polarisation autour du wat et de l'école des villages lao de la plaine de Vientiane: le bouddhisme populaire confronté au développement économique", *Asie du Sud-Est et Monde Insulindien*, V, 3 (1974): 91-108.

⁴³ Mahacanla, op. cit., p. 47.

⁴⁴ For the best account of the nature of popular Buddhism in Laos, see Georges Condominas, "Notes sur le bouddhisme populaire en milieu rural lao", *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, XIII, 25 (Jan.-June 1968): 81-110, and XIII, 26 (July-Dec. 1968): 111-50.

⁴⁵ Toshio Yatsushiro, *Village Organization and Leadership in Thailand: A Summary* (Bangkok: USOM Research Division, Mimeo, June 1966), pp. 115-16.

recorded, to be monitored later, so that party leaders could detect any deviation from the party line or lack of enthusiasm in presentation. The content of the sermons had to consist largely in denunciation of U.S. and Thai imperialism and condemnation of their oppression of the Lao people. This element of denunciation in sermons was stressed at re-education courses, sometimes to the almost total exclusion of any positive content. Monks reluctant to perform their assigned role were disciplined by being sent to re-education camps.⁴⁶ This use of the yellow robe to propagate a partisan message of hate in place of the traditional Buddhist message of universal compassion and altruism might have been expected to have the effect of discrediting the monks in the eyes of the people. That this did not generally occur was probably due to widespread Lao suspicion and dislike of both Thailand and the U.S. What did happen, however, was that the use made of monks in propagating the party's message in due course impaired their effectiveness in this very role. People eventually no longer took what they said seriously, but by that time the monks had served their purpose.

The PL clearly hoped that as the sangha's prestige and authority diminished, people would turn to the LPRP as the only alternative source of national identity and social integration. But one further step was needed: to transform the sangha from an independently organized hierarchy into an instrument of the party. No path to social prestige and influence could be tolerated in the society other than that offered by the party and its mass organizations.⁴⁷

The ultimate destruction of the sangha hierarchy was achieved symbolically by smashing the large ivory-handled ceremonial fans which the higher grades of monks carried as emblems of their rank. The elaborately embroidered fan of the Sangha-rāja was among those broken.⁴⁸ The sangha was restructured under close party control as the Lao United Buddhists Association, and the sectarian division between the Mahā-nikai and Thammayut-nikai was abolished. All executive positions of any power were filled by party appointees. At all levels elected committees took the place of individual leaders. All high-ranking monks had to attend regular month-long indoctrination courses to make certain they were ideologically sound. The *pātimokha*, the fortnightly recitation in Pali of the 227 precepts a monk must live by, was transformed into a confessional in Lao, in which the faults of monks, in particular any failures to follow the party line, were aired and criticized.⁴⁹ Not surprisingly monks began leaving the sangha or fleeing to Thailand. Those who remained toed the party line, while pro-PL monks attempted to outdo one another to gain official approval.⁵⁰ Thus the way was prepared for the consolidation of "official" Buddhism in Laos.

⁴⁶ Mahacanla, op. cit., pp. 48-49. It must be noted that Mahacanla is not an objective witness. However, his observations have generally been borne out by other refugee monks.

⁴⁷ Destruction of the sangha as an independent hierarchy was all the more important in the Lao context since the sangha represented the only barrier to imposition of a Marxist-Leninist social structure. The sangha was "the *only* hierarchy within a weakly structured society", see Boutsavath and Chapelier, op. cit., p. 2.

⁴⁸ Mahacanla, op. cit., pp. 58-59. The importance of reorganizing the sangha hierarchy as a means of imposing PL control was emphasized by Bhikkhu Sathukhamfan. (Interview, Bangkok, 19 Nov. 1978)

⁴⁹ Interview with Bhikkhu Vanna Buaphaphong, formerly of Wat Nongbong, in Khong, Champassak province. (Nong Khai refugee camp, northeast Thailand, 18 Nov. 1978).

⁵⁰ For the qualities the PL looked for in monks, see Mahacanla, pp. 51-53. Many monks undoubtedly did cooperate with the PL, owing partly to conviction of the need for social change, or for recovery of traditional values, especially during 1975. Some monks may have had a sense of importance engendered by their role as teachers in the new society. Such a response to altered conditions can be seen as an attempt to recover lost status by associating with the new leaders of society.

Not all of the anti-Buddhist measures taken by the LPRP during 1975 were immediately effective. The reorganization of the sangha was complete by 1976; but efforts to destroy the traditional place of Buddhism in Lao society by undermining individual faith, changing psychological attitudes, and discrediting all but "official" monks, were longer term policies. Some evidence, however, for the effectiveness of the LPRP's Buddhist policies during the year of their transition to power can be seen in changing popular attitudes towards dhamma and sangha. There is evidence of a definite decline in religious practices: at least as far as the less rational aspects of belief were concerned, party cadres were beginning to be believed.⁵¹ The sangha was clearly suffering from poor morale and a crisis of identity, while the lay population was becoming increasingly cynical about monks. Finally, the care with which the LPRP implemented its Buddhist policy spared it the kind of deep popular resentment on these grounds that might have focused unrest against it in a genuine popular movement of dissent. In fact, it can be argued that the effectiveness of PL Buddhist policy was an important factor in enabling the PL by the end of 1975 to formalize their seizure of power with the proclamation of the People's Democratic Republic of Laos (PDRL).⁵²

Mention is made of the sangha in two documents from the Congress of People's Representatives that met in Vientiane in December 1975 to ratify the proclamation of the new regime. One of these, the new government's action programme, stated that "Buddhist monks and novices, as well as monks of other clergy,⁵³ [sic] must have the freedom to follow the teachings of their religion". However, it also stipulated that monastic and other private schools were to be properly controlled and "given directives whereby they will function in conformity with the orientation of national education".⁵⁴ In other words, the teaching of religion was to be as decreed by the state.

A clearer indication of the shape of things to come was given by Kaysone Phomvihane, secretary-general to the LPRP and prime minister in the new government. In his political report to the Congress, Kaysone appealed to monks, novices, and other clergy

to contribute actively to reviving the spirit of patriotic unity, to encourage the population to activate production and economize, to help the people in their education in order to raise their cultural level and contribute to persuading, educating and correcting those who take the wrong path or who do not behave properly so that they may become good citizens.⁵⁵

Thus the role which the new government foresaw for the sangha consisted in producing good citizens in a socialist state. The sangha was to become an arm of the government in building socialism; and it could be inferred that all activities deemed to lie outside this purpose were to be curtailed. The transformation foreshadowed by Kaysone has been systematically promoted in subsequent years.

⁵¹This came out in several interviews with refugee Lao monks in Bangkok and Nong Khai in Nov. 1978. These interviews, with groups as well as individuals, presented a consistent picture of PL-sangha relations.

⁵²"In my view the fall of Laos to the communists was partly the fault of the sangha, because the sangha had many weak points which made it an easy target for the communists' attack...", Mahacarla, op. cit., p. 70.

⁵³The reference is presumably to Christian denominations.

⁵⁴*Documents du Congrès National des Représentants du Peuple* (n.p.: Editions Lao Hak Sat, 1976), p. 77.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 25.

1976 to the Present: Official Buddhism

During the first eight months of the new regime — December 1975 to July 1976 — a hard line was in force in Laos. When this resulted in “an alarming loss of public confidence” the government relaxed certain measures.⁵⁶ Initially the PL banned all Buddhist festivals as wasteful, which led to a number of confrontations between villagers and the young, highly indoctrinated soldiers of the Liberation Army, many of whom were non-Buddhist hill tribesmen. In one such incident, a typical Lao compromise was arrived at: the troops withdrew from around the wat, while in return the men of the village stayed away from the celebrations, leaving only women and children to enter the wat grounds.⁵⁷ Another incident reportedly occurred at Luang Prabang when it was rumoured that the PL were about to remove the Phra Bang, the Buddha image from which the town takes its name.⁵⁸ In April the government issued new regulations on the performance of Buddhist festivals. Thrift was emphasized, but the most notable provision banned large popular gatherings — clearly an indication of the political insecurity of the new regime.⁵⁹ As from July 1976 the authorities accepted that the singing and dancing that traditionally took place during Buddhist festivals were true expressions of Lao folk culture and as such were, after all, permissible in the new Laos. However, festivals had to be properly conducted, purged of backward and degrading superstitions. The official government newspaper, *Sieng Pasasonh*, carried accounts of the Rocket Festival (*boun bang fay*) but noted that it took place “without the unpleasant forms as in the old regime” — a reference to the elimination of its often bawdy phallic aspects.⁶⁰

Even during this period, however, certain conventions of respect for the sangha were retained. Thus the official photograph of the National Congress of People’s Representatives in plenary session showed six monks in places of honour at the right-hand end of the front row of delegates. The Resolution of the May Day rally in Vientiane on 1 May 1976 began with the words: “Greetings to Buddhist monks, comrades and dear brothers and sisters”.⁶¹ Buddhist monks still officiated at funerals. Later for the state funeral of Sithone Kommadam (vice-president of the Supreme People’s Assembly), a contingent of monks took their place in the procession immediately before the family and hearse, that is, according to the traditional order.⁶²

Since the founding of the PDRL, monks have been invited to attend all secular state occasions, for example, the National Day celebrations. Conversely, official government delegations have attended major Buddhist festivals; that to the That Luang festival in 1976 was led by Nouhak Phoumsavanh, vice-premier and second-ranking member of the LPRP.⁶³ Official government publications have carried occasional news reports about

⁵⁶ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 19 Nov. 1976.

⁵⁷ Personal communication from John Everingham, last Western correspondent based in Laos to be expelled from the country, Sept. 1977. The village in question is some 40 km east of Vientiane.

⁵⁸ Prince Mangra Souvannaphouma, *L’Agonie du Laos* (Paris: Plon, 1976), pp. 203-204. See also Amphay Doré, *Le Partage du Mékong* (Paris: Encre, 1980), p. 208, where the Phra Bang is said to have “disappeared” by 1978.

⁵⁹ Vientiane Radio, 6 Apr. 1976. Joint Publications Research Service, *Translations on South and East Asia*, no. 638, 10 May 1976, pp. 10-12.

⁶⁰ *Sieng Pasasonh* (Vientiane), 17 May 1977. It seems, however, that all the “bawdy” aspects may not have been eliminated!

⁶¹ Radio Vientiane, 1 May 1976 (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 8 May 1976).

⁶² *Sieng Pasasonh*, 4 May 1977.

⁶³ Norman Peagam, “Buddhism Retaining Major Role in Laos”, *New York Times*, 26 Apr. 1977.

Buddhism and the sangha. Apart from account of Buddhist festivals, these have usually concerned practical assistance provided by monks in the cause of national development or social welfare. However, *Sieng Pasasonh* did report that, in addition to teaching the people to read and write and using traditional herbal remedies to cure the sick, the monks of Luang Prabang were preaching the Buddha's dhamma and its moral precepts.⁶⁴ One article even recounted how the Savannakhet Provincial Administration assisted a building programme at Wat Sayaphoum by transporting logs and sawing them to make a new door for the monk's eating hall.⁶⁵

Such examples were cited by party officials to support the government's contention that its line on Buddhism had remained unchanged. As Sisane, Minister of Information, Propaganda, Culture and Tourism, told the *New York Times*: "Our party's policy is very clear. One can believe freely in religion. We consider such beliefs to be an integral part of the people's life and not an obstacle, unless they are used as a political instrument against our new regime."⁶⁶

Two documents spell out most clearly the role the LPRP intends that Buddhism should play in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The 1976 action programme of the Lao United Buddhists Association laid stress upon education, but stipulated that it "must always be constantly improved and strengthened so as to catch up with social progress".⁶⁷ In addition superstitions were to be suppressed, together with "the unclean, unhealthy, depraved and pernicious way of life [of the former regime]". Propaganda, national development and health were the fundamental enterprises the sangha should undertake as part of a policy

to contribute effectively ... to the national task, to participate in the progressive mass movement and be determined to wipe out all traces of the former backward regime and thwart all of the enemy's undermining maneuvers with respect to the fatherland and religion.⁶⁸

In a major speech at the close of a Buddhist teacher's training course for monks held in Vientiane in October 1976, Minister of Education, Sports and Religious Affairs, Phoumi Vongvichit, elaborated on how the government conceived the role of the sangha in the following terms:

Buddhist monks [should] study politics to consolidate their political background and make it conform to progressive revolutionary politics. This will enable them to more easily integrate themselves into the revolutionary ranks alongside the revolutionary cadres

...revolutionary politics and the politics practised by the Lord Buddha have the same goals. They differ only in organization and practice....

In certain countries, Buddhist monks may not become involved in or study politics. I hold such prohibitions to be a deprivation of the rights of Buddhist monks. Buddhist monks are regarded as potential cadres of the Lord Buddha who are fighting injustice in the world....

...Buddhist monks assigned to teach the people in rural areas must understand the people who attend their sermons. They must select an appropriate sermon to give the people in order to change their line of thinking. If they use only Buddhist

⁶⁴ *Sieng Pasasonh*, 18 Apr. 1977.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 19 May 1977.

⁶⁶ Peagam, *op.cit.*

⁶⁷ Action Plan of the Lao United Buddhists Association, *op.cit.*, p. 18. .

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

politics coupled with examples from ancient times, it may be difficult for the people to understand them, and the people may not be able to relate the example to present reality. Therefore, they should mix the themes of current politics and Buddhist politics in giving sermons and use current examples.

...the policy of this party and government is... to request Buddhist monks to give sermons to teach the people and encourage them to understand that all policies and lines of the party and government are in line with the teachings of the Lord Buddha so that the people will be willing to follow them. Thus, there will be no lazy people, thieves, or liars in our country. Instead, there will be only diligent people working for the prosperity of the country. If our Buddhist monks can do this, it means that they are contributing to economic construction.⁶⁹

However, it appears that some monks were slow to appreciate the new policy: re-education seminars for monks continued unabated. Typical was a week-long course held in April 1977 for thirty-five monks at Wat Yai Panod, near Vientiane. This, according to the official report, was a training session in political and religious morality, whose aim was "the awakening of a gradually improved Buddhist spirit" in order that the monks could "catch up" with the present situation.⁷⁰ Other seminars concentrated on practical teaching, with instruction on how to carry out social welfare activities, courses for adult literacy, and social regeneration programmes aimed at destroying lingering Western influence. Thus the role of Buddhism has continued to be exercised strictly in accordance with the directives of the party.

This was made clear in a speech by the Venerable Khamtan Thepbuali, previously the most powerful figure in official Buddhism and now head of the government's Department of Religious Affairs, at a welcoming ceremony for a visiting Vietnamese Buddhist delegation at That Luang, Vientiane in December 1978, when he stressed the sangha's role in modern Laos of contributing to the socialist construction and transformation of the country.⁷¹ Earlier he had written that "the Buddhist monk has the capacity to become a revolutionary, sharing in the tasks of the nation and people, and having the same rights and duties as any citizen".⁷²

In addition to propagating the political line of the LPRL, official Buddhism is of use to the new regime as a further means of maintaining diplomatic contact between states, and advancing foreign policies. Khamtan Thepbuali led the Lao delegation to the Moscow conference on World Religions for Peace in June 1977. There he proclaimed: "Buddhist morality is ... part of our national customs and traditions", but went on to say that the important role of monks in the new Laos consisted in "blending Buddhist and revolutionary moralities".⁷³ A Lao Buddhist delegation attended the That Phnom fete in Northeastern Thailand in March 1979 as part of the government's fence-building with Bangkok.⁷⁴ In October 1979 the Lao Organization of Asian Buddhists for Peace held a meeting to mark Disarmament Week. At this meeting, according to the government news agency, the President of the Lao United Buddhists Association, Thongkhoun Anantasounthone, "energetically denounced the American imperialists

⁶⁹ Phoumi Vongvichit, Speech to Buddhist Teachers, op. cit., pp. 11-16.

⁷⁰ *Sieng Pasasonh*, 10 May 1977.

⁷¹ *Khaosan Pathet Lao, Bulletin Quotidien*, 21 Dec. 1978.

⁷² Khamtan, p. 71.

⁷³ *Sieng Pasasonh*, 11 June 1977.

⁷⁴ *Khaosan Pathet Lao, Bulletin Quotidien*, 27 Mar. 1979.

and the [Chinese] international reactionaries” for the threat they posed to peace in Southeast Asia.⁷⁵

Despite the political controls exercised over the sangha in Laos, the government maintains an official policy of freedom of belief. The seventh point in the action programme of the Lao Front for National Construction, formed in 1979 to replace the Lao Patriotic Front, states that the Front will

use every effort to explain to the multiethnic population how they may understand and consistently apply the right of freedom of belief; [the Front will] safeguard faith and the right of freedom of religious practice of the clergy and believers of different religions; look after pagodas, temples and churches which are used by the different practising believers and which constitute a heritage of national culture ... while resolutely countering all attempts to use religions to oppose the national interest or destroy the socialist regime.⁷⁶

As if to confirm the state of Buddhism in Laos, the government reported that 305 student novices had completed the school year 1978-79 in Vientiane at the monastic school. But it revealed that of the teaching staff only twelve were monks, while thirty-five were laymen.⁷⁷ A ranking official of the Ministry of Religious Affairs put the government's 1977 budget for official activities of the sangha and repair of wats at US \$200,000; and he claimed that the sangha then numbered 17,000 monks in 2,400 wats, up 3,000 from 1974 figures.⁷⁸

A less favourable picture of the state of Buddhism in the Lao People's Democratic Republic emerges from interviews with refugee Lao monks in Thailand, and from the rare reports of those who have accompanied anti-government insurgents to see for themselves.⁷⁹ These indicate that pressures against the sangha if anything increased between 1976 and 1979. One monk who left Vientiane in December 1976 stated that most of the pressures on both monks and lay people were, at the time of his departure, still only subtle and indirect. Discipline was administered, where necessary, through the sangha; monks were sent on re-education courses, but not arrested; and to his knowledge none had been executed.⁸⁰ Another monk who fled southern Laos in May 1978 reported more heavy-handed methods. On the evening before any religious festival it was the practice to call a political meeting at the wat, during which monks were denounced, and the people were urged not to attend on the morrow; monks were openly intimidated, and some were arrested; and he claimed that in May 1978 just before he fled Laos, twenty monks had been shot in Champassak province for protesting against government policies.⁸¹ Two highly respected monks practising solitary meditation in southern Laos were

⁷⁵ *Khaosan Pathet Lao, Bulletin Quotidien*, 30 Oct. 1979.

⁷⁶ *Khaosan Pathet Lao, Bulletin Quotidien*, 7 Mar. 1979.

⁷⁷ *Khaosan Pathet Lao, Bulletin Quotidien*, 3 July 1979.

⁷⁸ Peagam, *op. cit.* In 1969 the sangha had 17,598 members (Boutsavath and Chapelier, p.4), but of these almost 43% were under the age of 25 and would therefore probably be serving a temporary novitiate of less than three months. Given the pressures on young monks to leave the sangha being applied by the new regime, this figure of 17,000 is almost certainly exaggerated. See below for reports of a severe decline in sangha numbers.

⁷⁹ For conditions in southern Laos seen from an anti-government angle, see the anonymous report "Vietnam's rebellious 'colony'", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 Aug. 1978, which mentions popular reaction to PL Buddhist policy.

⁸⁰ Interview with Bhikkhu Mahābunkong Singsuwan, formerly of Wat Mixayaramé, Vientiane (Wat Phukhau Thong, Bangkok, 13 Nov. 1978).

⁸¹ Interview with Bhikkhu Vanna (Nong Khai, 18 Nov. 1978).

arrested and “disappeared”.⁸² While these differences in pressure on the sangha may reflect differences in policy in the capital (where government actions might be observed by foreign diplomats) as against the provinces, it is clear that officially promoted sanctions against the sangha continued during this period.⁸³ In March 1979 the Venerable Thammayano, the eighty-seven-year-old Sangha-rāja of Laos, fled the country by floating across the Mekong on a raft of inflated car tubes. His secretary, who engineered the escape, reported that in Luang Prabang the Sangha-rāja was confined to his monastery and was not permitted to preach. He confirmed that youths were discouraged from joining the sangha, and that monks taught only what the government prescribed.⁸⁴

One important result of this has been, despite official claims to the contrary, a serious decrease in the number of monks in the Lao sangha. The diminished privileges and comforts of monkhood have caused many monks to leave the sangha; many more have fled the country, a number dying in the attempt; others are reported to be in labour camps. Young monks have been attracted out of the sangha by government offers of training and education, special vocational training schools having been set up for ex-novices.⁸⁵ The actual decline in sangha numbers is hard to estimate. A refugee monk from Vientiane reported that by the end of 1976 the number of monks in wats in the capital had fallen to about one-third;⁸⁶ another monk from the south of the country reported that by mid-1978 numbers were down to about one-twentieth or less.⁸⁷ In early 1979, according to the secretary of the Sangha-rāja, there were only 1,700 monks in the country, down from 20,000 when the PL took power.⁸⁸ Wats left with no monks have been taken over as schools. Some are even said to have been used on occasion as barracks and storage barns. Buddha images and other ritual objects from these monasteries have been consigned to museums.

Monks are not directly ordered to work. Though the practice is discouraged, they can, and usually still do, go out with a bowl on the morning almsround — at least in Vientiane. They receive little, however, because the people usually have little left over from their rations, and are afraid of being branded religious. Some lay followers still take almsfood to the wat, but this is not enough to feed the monks who are encouraged to grow their own vegetables. Also, a monk is not eligible for the government rice ration unless he works, by gardening or engaging in some other productive task — teaching handicrafts, for example, or addressing seminars and meetings on behalf of the government. Another item which monks no longer receive from the people is yellow

⁸² Mahacanla, op. cit., pp. 75-76. Meditation, and the attitude of detachment (*upekkha*) which it engenders, have been consistently denounced by the PL. Adopting a position of *upekkha* is “equivalent to perpetuating the old regime and condoning oppression by the privileged class — which would betray the true aims of Buddhism and the true nature of the sangha”. Khamtan, op.cit., p. 76.

⁸³ Amphay Doré claims that an attempt was made in Muong Nane district, Luang Prabang province, in 1978 to stamp out Buddhism altogether, but that this “pilot project” was defeated through popular resistance. Doré, pp. 243-44.

⁸⁴ *New York Times*, 15 Mar. 1979. Since Thammayano’s flight, Bouakham Voraphet has been Honorary President of the Lao United Buddhists Association with Thongkhoun Anantasounthone as President. However it appears that both of these are figureheads while Khamtan Thepbuali remains the real power within the sangha.

⁸⁵ For pressures on members to leave the sangha see Mahacanla, op.cit., pp. 64-66.

⁸⁶ Mahabunkong, Bangkok, 13 Nov. 1978.

⁸⁷ Vanna, Nong Khai, 18 Nov. 1978.

⁸⁸ *New York Times*, 15 Mar. 1979.

cloth for robes. But if the aim of the LPRP was to convert monasteries into small work brigades operating within a socialist system, it has not been entirely successful. Monks in Vientiane do not devote all their time to productive labour. Much time is also spent studying or in conversation.

However, an important overall effect of government measures has been to break down the key relationship between monks and the lay community that sustained the position of the sangha in traditional lay society. Monks do continue to preach the Buddhist dhamma, but, as one monk put it, "they are always expected to throw in a bit of communist ideology too".⁸⁹ Refugees claim that monks comply out of fear: even if there is no known PL official present, it is taken for granted that there will be some informer in the audience. The traditional Pali formula of homage to Buddha, dhamma, and sangha has all but been replaced by repetition of the five ideals of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.⁹⁰ Since the people have little spare time, visits to the wat, especially in rural areas, are made only on officially sanctioned occasions.

The reports of monks being executed, if reliable, may indicate that some monks are still prepared to take a stand against the government. That these reported executions occurred in southern Laos suggests that the government is determined to suppress any anti-government sentiments which might provide encouragement for insurgents operating from Thailand.⁹¹ But apart from these few faint signs of resistance, it is clear that the Lao sangha has been effectively converted into an instrument of government policy.⁹²

In December 1979, the LPRP Central Committee approved Kaysone's report, known as the Seventh Resolution, outlining a liberalization of economic policy. Although this document made no specific mention of Buddhism, it ushered in more relaxed government attitudes towards the practice of religious observances.⁹³ This was illustrated by remarks made by Khamtan Thepbuali in an interview in December 1980. After pointing out that Buddhism and Marxism-Leninism were only superficially at variance (though monks could not be members of the LPRP), he went on to maintain that, just as there is religion in the Soviet Union after sixty years of socialism, so Buddhism would always continue to be practised in Laos. Buddhists in the future, he said, would understand the accommodations which were being made better than anyone

⁸⁹ Mahabunkong, Bangkok, 13 Nov. 1978.

⁹⁰ This point was made by a layman named Visay who fled Vientiane on 16 Nov. 1978. (Interview, Nong Khai camp, 18 Nov. 1978.) Visay reported that some people still took offerings of rice to the wats, but that many monks were away on long indoctrination courses. He confirmed that some monks in Vientiane had been arrested.

⁹¹ For an account of anti-government insurgency, particularly in southern Laos, see Nayan Chanda, "The Sound of Distant Gunfire", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8 Dec. 1978. The agreement between Laos and Thailand that each would prevent the use of their territory as bases for guerrilla attacks against the other led to a reduction of insurgent activity during 1979. Relations between the two countries have since deteriorated.

⁹² It seems most unlikely that, as Doré has suggested (p. 137), Lao Buddhism will be influenced by "revolutionary heroism" to evolve a Mahayanist doctrine of the *bodhisattva*. There would seem to be little opportunity for Buddhist heroics in the new Laos, except in upholding traditional Theravada values against Vietnamese Communism.

⁹³ In part the reason may be that the government is actively involving the sangha in its pro-Vietnamese, anti-Chinese propaganda campaign, which it sees as a matter of national survival. See Phoumi Vongvichit, Speech to the annual conference of Buddhist monks held in Vientiane in Jan. 1980, broadcast over Vientiane Radio, 16 Jan. 1980. (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 18 Jan. 1980, pp. 134-35.)

could at present. And he implied that it was unthinkable that Laos should ever cease to be Buddhist.⁹⁴

Conclusion

During the two decades leading up to the 1975 transfer of political power in Laos, both the Lao government and the Pathet Lao followed a policy towards the Buddhist sangha which consisted in manipulating it for their own political ends. This had the effect not only of politicizing the sangha and of reducing its independence, but also of weakening its cohesion as a result of internal polarization and of undermining its status in Lao society. For this the United States and the Pathet Lao were both responsible. From May to December 1975, as the PL moved to consolidate their political power base, the sangha was increasingly used as a vehicle for the promotion of socialism. During this period and subsequently, the PL appear to have pursued a twofold strategy designed (1) to subordinate Buddhist dhamma to the socio-political ideology of the LPRP, and (2) to reduce the independence of the sangha in order to enable the party to monopolize social and political influence. This dual strategy operated by utilizing the sangha's traditional high status in Lao society to propagate the principles of socialism, which in turn reduced the sangha's prestige in the eyes of the lay population. The effectiveness of this strategy during 1975 materially aided the PL in consolidating power.

From 1976 to 1979 a steady campaign was conducted to minimize Theravada Buddhism as a social and cultural presence that could in any way compete with the official orthodoxy of Marxism-Leninism. The personal disorientation, the loss of sense of cultural continuity and Lao identity, and the reduction of socio-political cohesion that resulted from this campaign assisted the LPRP in its efforts to implant an alternative, party-centred social structure in Laos. The tactical liberalization introduced in 1980 does nothing to modify this goal. Indeed official Buddhism has been reduced to an organizational adjunct to this endeavour: politicization of the sangha is complete.

⁹⁴ Interview with Khamtan Thepbuali, Vientiane, 6 Dec. 1980.