CHAPTER TEN

Loyalism and anti-communism in the making of the modern monarchy in post-colonial Laos

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The last king of Laos, Savang Vatthana (r. 1959–75), opened the National Assembly on 11 May 1967, Constitution Day in the Royal Lao Government (RLG) era (1945–75). But it was hardly business as usual. For the first time in seven years, parliament was functioning normally. The King had only recently revived democracy after a period (1958–64) when it seemed a dictatorship might arise. Early in his reign, Savang considered supporting ambitious Royal Lao Army officers. He and his father, Sisavang Vong (r. 1904–59), had a complicated relationship with democracy, especially during the Issara independence movement (1945–49). Yet now Savang entered parliament, followed first by Crown Prince Vongsavang and only after by Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma.[1] Savang served a ceremonial but nonetheless crucial role. This was not a given; two decades earlier there had been not a single, but rather several monarchies across Laos. This chapter examines how the modern Lao monarchy was made (and unmade) by partisan struggles. More deeply, it considers questions about what role kings had in a post-colonial democracy and how this was influenced by intellectual, cultural and political tensions.

Monarchy in Laos

Modern Laos, the landlocked nation at the heart of mainland Southeast Asia, derives its name from the ethnic Lao who long inhabited the middle Mekong River. Its central location made it significant to regional contests for centuries. It remains one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the area. The ethnic Lao make up less than half the population, which in 1974 was 3,257,000 (and today has grown to 7,234,171). The old Lao kingdom of Lan Xang has existed since the thirteenth century. Over time, a uniquely Lao monarchy evolved, supported by Buddhism. In the eighteenth century, the kingdom

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broke up into smaller kingdoms before falling under Thai vassalage. In 1893, Auguste Pavie inaugurated the French colonisation of Laos that lasted until the Second World War. Laos nevertheless remained marginal within the French Empire; underdevelopment would be a rallying cry of later independence movements. In 1904, Sisavang Vong took the throne, and during his fifty-five-year reign he worked closely with France; his generation was the first to be French-educated and to travel abroad. In 1959, Savang Vatthana succeeded as king while delaying his coronation until peace returned amid the outbreak of the Second Indochina War (1959–75). Yet, just as monks foretold that Luang Prabang would not fall to the communist-aligned Pathet Lao in 1953, so they prophesied, rightly, that Savang Vatthana was to be the last king of Laos.

There were other royals besides the main line. In the north at Luang Prabang a secondary branch held the post of viceroy or 'second king', who traditionally was next in line for the throne, but who had lost that function in the nineteenth century. In 1893, Viceroy Boun Khong initially resisted French colonisation before deciding to collaborate actively. His sons Phetsarath Rattanavongsa, Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong went on to play leading roles in politics. Phetsarath was the top Lao official in the colonial administration before leading the Issara independence movement to resist French colonialism in September 1945.[2] Both Souvanna and Souphanouvong joined him along with many others across Laos. A democratic government was established that sought Allied recognition and, failing that, resisted French reconquest in 1946 after the Second World War and Japanese occupation. Defeated, the Issara went into exile in Thailand while their followers stoked guerrilla war for years. In 1949, the Issara split over a loyalist offer of amnesty. Souvanna and others returned to work with the French while Souphanouvong joined the North Vietnamese-backed Pathet Lao. Phetsarath, meanwhile, remained in exile before returning to Laos in 1957.

Multiple royal lines complicated the formation of a modern monarchy. Before 1945, Sisavang Vong, ruling the northern Luang Prabang kingdom, was only one of several kings. There were southern kings (the Champassaks), eastern kings at Xieng Khouang (the Phouan), and aristocratic families from the old Vientiane kingdom. Under colonialism Luang Prabang cooperated with France, while Champassak and Xieng Khouang secretly supported ethnic-minority anti-French revolts.[3] By 1941 the French granted Sisavang Vong the Vientiane and Phouan domains to compensate for the loss of Sayabouri (and its royal teak forests) to Thailand. While France favoured Sisavang Vong until 1947, it was not certain that he would become the sole monarch. This

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was only resolved when Champassak Prince Boun Oum renounced his claims, instead becoming 'Inspector of the Kingdom' for life. Luang Prabang kings never matched the Champassaks' popularity in southern Laos. Phouan royals did intermarry with the Luang Prabang dynasty but remained distinct. Ultimately, other royal lines thus limited the monarchy's popularity across post-colonial Laos.

During the 1950s, politics further fragmented into factions: right, left and neutral. Princes Savang Vatthana, Souphanouvong and Souvanna Phouma led opposing factions. Souvanna sought to neutralise Laos to be non-aligned in the Cold War, before leading the RLG in the Second Indochina War. Souphanouvong led the Pathet Lao, which aimed to liberate Laos from foreign rule; it co-opted Issara remnants but was controlled by North Vietnam. Early in his reign, Savang Vatthana quietly supported the Comité pour la Défense des Intérêts Nationaux (CDIN), a virulently anti-communist, nationalist movement loyal to the state.[4] After the collapse of the Geneva Accords all attention turned to the escalating war from 1964 as neutralists and rightists reconciled. In April 1964, Western ambassadors called on Savang to denounce a coup. The King approved but when hearing their draft statement, which included a vow not to interfere in Lao internal affairs, he 'laughed and exclaimed, "*Vraiment*?" [Truly?]'.[5]

The pivotal role of kings in post-colonial Laos has not always been appreciated. Timothy Castle was not alone when he claimed that 'the last sovereign, Savang Vatthana, exercised little power and influence'.[6] However, all sides in the Second Indochina War, even the Pathet Lao, pledged loyalty to the monarchy. This misunderstanding arises partly due to a lack of sources on the monarchy. The most important study has been Grant Evans's *The Last Century of Lao Royalty*,[7] and Evans in particular revealed the many ways the monarchy was modernised. There nevertheless remain unaddressed, but defining, issues: specifically, how loyalism and anti-communism made (and unmade) the monarchy.

Although Lao historiography largely concerns politics, nonetheless the role of partisanship in making the modern monarchy remains obscure. In the period 1945 to 1949 the monarchy was defined by the loyalist movement. (I define a 'loyalist', a label the movement never used, as one who supported France's return to Laos after 1945.) Loyalists were just as ardent nationalists as were the Issara.[8] Since 1953, anti-communism provided a key platform for the monarchy, especially in Savang's early reign (1959–64). Savang indeed expressed personal anti-communist views in 1946 – well before such positions guided US foreign policy in Asia.[9] Two cases illustrate the place of partisanship in the making of the modern Lao monarchy; ultimately

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the monarchy was overthrown in 1975 due to its partisan stance in the Second Indochina War.

First, the late 1940s was a formative time, when Sisavang Vong led the loyalists. He was no mere figurehead but used the movement to cultivate support. He bent the movement to his will, equating loyalty to France with loyalty to himself; this represented a deft political move. He guided the loyalist-dominated Constitutional Assembly that wrote the 1947 constitution – a unique political document in Southeast Asian history that was amended but not replaced until 1975. From his efforts emerged a single monarchy for the whole country, including the south, and Sisavang Vong carefully navigated a regional split among loyalists. The loyalist movement presents a case study of Sisavang Vong's unification of the monarchy and reassertion of precedence over democracy amid his support for the return of colonial France.

In the second case, the chaos of Savang Vatthana's early reign overshadowed his efforts to remake the monarchy. Nevertheless, Savang undertook a programme to instil nationalism and loyalty in the masses. Starting with the youth, he created the Lao Scout movement in 1947,[10] and by 1963 he had also moved to put his stamp on schools. The Scout movement engendered loyalty to the throne, and to the king personally. In a newly independent country, still in the process of unification, politically divided and subject to intensifying foreign meddling, the Scouts constituted an important nation-building force. Yet Savang's youth movement was inextricably linked to earlier Vichy fascist undertakings from the Second World War period.[11] Moreover, his promotion of civics in the school curriculum reveals his uneasiness with democracy to the point that he justified the monarchy by recourse to religion. The Scout movement shows Savang Vatthana's efforts to rally right-wing nationalism even as he negotiated the place of the monarchy in a democracy. This same partisanship led to the unmaking of the monarchy during the revolution of 1975.

Loyalism unifies the monarchy (1945–49)

After the French reconquest of Laos, Sisavang Vong and Savang Vatthana began to negotiate with the colonisers. On 12 May 1946, one day before the French entered the city of Luang Prabang, Prince Savang received a letter in which the former French High Commissioner of Laos, Jean de Raymond, spoke of a renewed alliance in which 'France hoped to see Laos united under the high authority of King Sisavang Vong'.[12] The next day, Sisavang Vong personally welcomed the returning French officials to Luang Prabang in the 'usual manner'.[13] The following day, the King declared that he would accept France's offer

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and establish a democratic constitution.[14] In June, a committee drafted a new *modus vivendi*, signed on 27 August, restoring the colonial bond severed by war. More significant, however, was the rise of loyalism.

Loyalism was a unique movement that appeared nowhere else in the French Empire. Only in Laos did a sizeable indigenous force fight to safeguard French lives and restore French rule. Moreover, a unified monarchy only arose at the height of the loyalist movement. Loyalism is thus vital to understanding the context of the rise of the modern monarchy. Yet what role did Sisavang Vong and Savang Vatthana have in the new movement? Were they active agents or mere bystanders? While many sources attest to the loyalist attitude of the King and Crown Prince, how did they relate to other loyalists, such as Prince Boun Oum of Champassak?

The loyalists emerged after the Japanese coup of 9 March 1945 against Vichy-controlled Indochina, when Lao had to decide whether to aid the French or accept Japanese-mandated independence. Japan, fearing Allied victory, forced out its putative ally, Vichy France. Hundreds of Lao followed the French into the jungles in opposition to the Japanese. The King and Crown Prince gestured to the anti-Japanese movement, delaying the declaration of Lao independence that Japan demanded; as punishment, Savang was taken to Saigon as hostage. But as the Issara movement led Laos onwards to independence, conflict with the King emerged. On 20 October, the Issara dethroned the King, putting him at odds with the nascent democracy, and ultimately the King and Crown Prince were arrested. Negotiations followed, and eventually the 'ex-King' recognised the Issara on 10 November and pledged not to make treaties with France.[15] His support 'willingly or unwillingly' given, he agreed on 20 April 1946 to be re-enthroned in a ceremony held three days later. The following day, Vientiane fell to the Free French forces, by which time it was clear the whole country would be reconquered.

On 15 March 1947, Sisavang Vong convened a constitutional assembly to draft a new constitution that would re-establish the primacy of the monarchy.[16] The monarch was closely involved in the composition of the forty-four-member assembly, of which thirty-five members were officials in an administration dominated by northerners.[17] While the King was not present at deliberations, Crown Prince Savang oversaw the constitutional assembly.[18] One participant noted with irony that the democratic principles enshrined in the preamble of the constitution were ones that most Lao did not understand.[19] The loyalist constitution was distinctly elitist and monarchical compared to the one drafted by the Issara movement. The key passage in the preamble of the new constitution was: 'The populations of Laos affirm their fidelity to the

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monarchy, their attachment to democratic principles, and proclaim as Sovereign of Laos, His Majesty Sisavang Vong.'[20] Democracy was subordinated to the monarchy and the new constitution removed certain democratic elements from the Issara version, raising the King above the National Assembly.

In his message promulgating the constitution on 11 May 1947, Sisavang Vong conflated his own wishes with the 'aspirations of Our Lao People', posing as the people's arbiter, and thus reclaiming the role the Issara wrestled from him. He spoke of modernisation while presiding over a conservative, elitist constitutional monarchy. However, his speech hinted at how the events of 1945 caused 'the people' to become a new political force, entering into the political discourse for the first time:

> On this occasion, *we report to our people that Laos counts on them for its renovation, its stability and its prosperity*. We undertake a difficult and delicate work, we must undertake it with wisdom, with conscience, with energy, with faith. We do not forget that our goal is to make our country, within the great family of the French Union, a place worthy of its glorious past. (Emphasis added)

This passage is striking because the King placed himself in a subordinate position to the people: it is the King who reports to the people and who pledges to work hard, with the people implicitly standing in judgement of his actions. In the previous age, the King, never the people, had been the source of 'renovation', 'stability' and 'prosperity'. By 1947, the world had fundamentally changed, and the King openly acknowledged that change. He could no longer wield absolute power but had to compete with the new forces of politicians and political parties. As a result, he now spoke in a language never used by any previous Lao king. The monarchy was thus in transformation. The 1947 constitution, printed and distributed widely, provided potent propaganda against the Issara and undercut their demands. The text contained an image of the constitution placed on an offering bowl, just as palm leaf manuscripts, the sacred texts of the Lao, had traditionally been depicted. Years later, the elite continued to revere the constitution for having been introduced by the great King.[21]

In drafting a new constitution, southern regionalism remained prominent. Recalling the privileged position enjoyed by Luang Prabang in the colonial era, southerners were loath to cede sovereignty. Agreements made between Luang Prabang and Auguste Pavie had been the pretext for French colonisation in 1893 – even though the Luang Prabang authorities had no authority outside the north of the country. However, in a secret protocol the Champassak dynasty renounced its

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centuries-old claim to central and southern Laos. Luang Prabang's king was being elevated to become sovereign over the whole country. Not all southerners accepted this development easily, despite the secret agreements made by the Champassaks. Southern Lao continued to fear northern domination in a unified kingdom and called on France to remain as a paramount power to serve as neutral arbiter.[22] Boun Oum was a loyalist not solely because of his anti-Japanese and anti-Issara stance, but in order to seek French protection for the south. As the new national government formed, the southern intellectual, Thao Nhouy Abhay, complained of regional favouritism in appointments of ministers, leading him to question the 'promises of equality' regarding selection of officials whose qualifications were supposed to be based 'solely on their merit and not at all on their origin'.[23] But Luang Prabang's long collaboration with the colonial administration and its protectorate governments enabled it to muster more experienced officials than did other regions.

Southerners remained uneasy with incorporation of their region into a unified kingdom. One of the first acts of the new government was to debate regional autonomy. A noted intellectual and *député*, Pierre Somchine Nginn, explained that while Laos had been unified until the eighteenth century, it was subsequently divided for centuries. All Lao, he conceded, could see the need for unification, but how to go about the process was uncertain. The Champassak claim was the source of tension. Nginn put it diplomatically: 'If the necessity of unification was recognized by all, it nonetheless raised some difficulties when the modalities of application were examined.'[24]

Opposing unification, unnamed southern deputies 'requested' that the Champassak line be 'restored'. They wanted to undo a 1935 French decision to abolish any rights for the Champassak ruler (even in the diminished role of 'governor'). *Députés* from the south called for the new government to 'recognise' Prince Boun Oum. They made much of the fact that Boun Oum himself had 'rendered … invaluable services to the French cause' in the Resistance. Supporters of Boun Oum argued, moreover, that he was the real leader of the loyalists, having actually fought for France during reconquest. They again spoke of a 'traditional distrust of the populations of the south [who] fear being led by functionaries [who] come from elsewhere and are ignorant of the country'. 'Country' in the southerners' lexicon still meant the south rather than the unified kingdom as a whole. As the first national government formed, a move was made to decentralise power. Some even proposed a different form of government entirely: a diarchy. Ultimately, the matter was resolved in favour of Sisavang Vong. Boun Oum ceded his rights, as Laos was unified under an unprecedented constitutional monarchy.[25]

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After resolving the crisis, Sisavang Vong exchanged letters with French President Vincent Auriol in November 1947 in which he expressed support for the new Union Française – a kind of commonwealth of France and its overseas territories created in the 1946 constitution of the Fourth Republic, but one in which France effectively retained paramount power in its territories and newly recognised 'associated states' such as Laos – and boasted of RLG delegates' influence over the Union Française. While defending 'the liberty of internal administration', the King approved of common foreign relations and especially defence. He agreed to Lao soldiers serving in Union Française armies, and to the free movement of French forces and retention of French military bases in Laos. In part, the monarch was concerned with the expanding Issara guerrilla movement, though in 1948 he would offer amnesty to Issara 'rebels'. Positioning himself as an early supporter of the Union Française, the King gained a measure of political autonomy and economic and defence aid with comparatively greater ease than what was given by France to the other Indochinese states of Vietnam and Cambodia.[26]

By the time the General Conventions between Paris and Luang Prabang were signed on 19 July 1949, granting Lao autonomy within the Union Française, Sisavang Vong could speak as the unquestioned loyalist leader. To France he proclaimed: 'When, after a year of hardship, We have found, with all the Lao people, the liberty which France contributed to Us, We have loudly proclaimed our fidelity to the friendly nation, hoping that with its help and as part of the Union Française, We could give the necessary satisfaction to the legitimate aspirations of Our people.' He spoke proudly of endowing the kingdom with a constitution, while France recognised 'our internal sovereignty'. For the last three years he had worked 'to fix the basis on which We could set down our sovereignty'. The agreement with France 'sets the stage to permit Us to take our place in the great community of free nations'. Finally, the King hoped the agreement would satisfy the aspirations of all Lao 'of good faith'. As for the Issara, the King stated that he had 'never haggled Our clemency'.[27]

For all their accomplishments, the loyalists might be seen as merely following in the Issara's footsteps. After all, the Issara had been the first to create a parliamentary democracy, write a constitution and establish a unified Laos; their efforts must be regarded as a watershed in modern Lao history. Yet while the loyalists were conservative and monarchical, they nonetheless consolidated the Issara's gains. While the constitution granted wider powers to the monarchy than those contained in the Issara constitution, it did not do away with representative government, nor dispense with the

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fundamental civil and political rights considered the hallmark of Western democracies. As for King Sisavang Vong, he unified the loyalists even as they unified Laos under a monarchy, and he gave the movement potency with his support. He negotiated with France to preserve internal autonomy while making the most of its financial, administrative and technical support. He realised the dangers confronting newly independent post-colonial states as well as the threat of continued insurgency. Though hostile to more radical change and elitist in outlook, the King did not dispense with democracy as he navigated the transformation of the monarchy into an era of constitutions, nationalism and popular sovereignty. Sisavang Vong thereby created the modern monarchy of Laos despite serious opposition from several quarters.

On their return to Laos from exile, the ex-Issara formed political parties that swiftly won the parliamentary elections in 1951. Several ex-Issara prime ministers then dominated politics during the 1950s. But one episode shows the monarchy's political power in the new democracy. An Issara ideologue and future prime minister, Katay Don Sasorith, was forced into 'exile' in Saigon for several years,[28] punished for publishing 'anti-monarchy' pamphlets that mercilessly criticised the monarchy. Prince Savang Vatthana was also mocked in several biting political cartoons. Katay was only able to return after publishing an apology, writing articles praising the political system: 'Finally, Laos has regained its unity and independence … The results obtained are still very important. These results were not obtained without the spirit of abnegation and without the sacrifices of some and others.'[29] While praising Issara soldiers who died on the battlefield, and Prince Boun Oum's own sacrifice, he nonetheless acknowledged national unification by the King's hand.[30]

Aid the king: echoes of fascism in Savang Vatthana's early reign

The chaos of the late 1950s partly derived from anxiety surrounding the transition of the monarchy. Sisavang Vong's long reign had been a source of stability, and when he died, on 29 October 1959, he was reputedly the longest reigning monarch in the world. After capturing the national imagination by steadfastly refusing to evacuate his capital during the March–April 1953 Vietminh invasion, Sisavang Vong faded from public life as his health declined. Savang Vatthana took on more duties, finally becoming regent in August 1959. Sisavang Vong's death nevertheless shocked the nation, and, coming within a month of Prince Phetsarath's death, it signalled the end of a generation. Katay died not

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long afterward, in December, during the first of several military coups which destabilised Laos.

While Savang Vatthana was actively involved with the political right, he undertook a concerted programme to remake the monarchy in the first years of his reign. He remoulded major institutions after his ideas and created several new ones, with the aim of spreading nationalism among the masses and cultivating loyalty to himself. He thereby forged a nationalism which promoted loyalty to the state in order to combat the subversive activities of North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao. His programme included creation of a mass youth movement, a new educational curriculum to disseminate nationalism in the schools and the replacement of French with Lao as the language of instruction. Yet Savang's programme, especially where it targeted youth, ominously mirrored the fascist movements of the Second World War, reviving techniques of authoritarianism in Cold War Laos.

Savang created the Lao Scouts at the height of the loyalist movement, long before he acceded to the throne. The organisation was formed in 1947 at the Luang Prabang royal palace by Savang and two French instructors (the Lao word for scout – *sakut* – is a French loan word).[31] The Lao Scout handbook makes clear that Savang was its leader, employing royal language to denote the Prince's actions: 'Crown Prince Savang Vatthana deigned to be leader of the Lao Scout organization.' The organisation subsequently expanded throughout the country, under the future neutralist Pheng Phongsavane, who stood with Savang and his father in late 1945, as administrative head. French officials, including spymaster Jean Deuve, served as advisers. The scouts then set about 'building goodness and rightness for the nation'.[32]

The new movement held several rallies, culminating in the first national rally at Savannakhet in 1956, and by 1958 it counted 2,385 members. To increase membership further the organisation began accepting girls; membership increased even more dramatically when Savang decreed in July 1963 that every public school student must participate in what was then called the 'youth movement'. Furthermore, the Lao Scouts established training grounds for its members and forged close links to the military; a camp opened in 1953 on the outskirts of Vientiane in an area of military bases included 'drill masters' for the young Scouts. The Scout handbook boasted of a new physical exercise regime devised by Sourith Don Sasorith, a high-ranking military officer.

With the Scouts, Savang succeeded in creating a mass movement loyal to the king, a unique organisation in Laos during the 1950s–60s. Savang had personally observed the French-sponsored mass movement,

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Lao Renovation (1941–45), and the Vichy-era youth movements as well as the anti-colonial Issara, and Lao Pen Lao militias.[33] Symbolising these connections, Savang adopted the Lao Renovation symbol which was prominent in the Scout uniform, especially the pledge insignia. Moreover, the King promoted loyalty, and every new Scout pledged 'to serve the Nation, the King'. The first principle that a 'Lao Scout takes pride in, observes [as an] ideal and defends as long as [he] lives' was 'the Scout respects the King and the Nation'. Illustrations in the Scout handbook pictured youth saluting portraits of Savang.[34]

The King attended the annual mass rallies, at the centre of activities. Moreover, Savang regularly appealed to the youth of Laos in his speeches. Just before the outbreak of war, Savang began to hold 'youth rallies' emphasising national unity – for instance, in February 1959 at Wat Phou in southern Laos.[35] This rally followed an earlier one in Luang Prabang that was said to 'resonate all through the Kingdom and beyond its borders'. Savang's speech was not printed, but the press reported on the rally: 'It had given back courage and a new ideal to the youth, the future elite of the nation, the future of the nation on the move, on the move towards progress, on the move towards grandeur, on the move towards glory, the glory of a Great and New Laos.' Savang personally awarded top prizes to the scouts chosen for 'dress', 'discipline'. and 'team spirit'. The youths who attended the rally were reportedly deeply affected, their 'heart[s] filled with courage, confidence, and enthusiasm'. The rally had awakened them to 'a new spirit, towards a new destiny'.[36]

As Laos descended into war, Savang stirred up the youth, exhorting them directly: 'Lao youth, without apprehension, without reticence, we confide to you the future of our country and our race'[37] Savang's Lao Scouts are comparable to Prince Norodom Sihanouk's own Vichy-era Cambodian youth movement formed in 1941.[38] Both promoted nationalism and martial spirit, complete with uniforms and rallies, while indoctrinating loyalty to the king amid external threats. Anne Raffin notes that youth movements were used to promote monarchy and maintain social order, and as a tool for social control of youth.[39] Savang started modestly, but when the prospect of war loomed, he turned the Scouts into an instrument of government. His efforts recalled Vichy wartime promotion of loyalty and obedience to the state. Just as the French had competed with the Japanese for popular support, now Savang was locked in a struggle with the Pathet Lao and North Vietnam. Finally, as the Second Indochina War escalated in 1964, scouts were told to die for the nation. In a broadcast over Radio Lao on the 'Duties of a Lao Boy Scout', the Scouts were exhorted to heed the call of duty: 'We nation of men, without regret, give [our] lives

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for the restoration of our Lao nation.'[40] The youth were drawn to take sides in the anti-communist struggle by Savang's denunciation of the Pathet Lao as 'traitorous rebels', 'enemies' (*satou*) of the nation.

Savang next implanted the youth movement in the schools. The Department of Youth and Sports moved from the Ministry of Education to Defence in 1958, presaging later developments.[41] By royal order on 30 July 1963, Savang revised the entire public school curriculum so that schools were 'no longer an academic institution but a system in the service of the country's economic and social development'.[42] For every primary school student, five hours per week were designated for 'organisation and activities of the youth movement'. Activities included 'morals in action, religion, practical hygiene and singing'. Another report explained the objectives of the movement: 'the spirit of civic responsibility is encouraged and developed in each class; the pupils elect their own chairman and take turns at filling various offices'.[43] In secondary schools, time for 'youth movement activities' was nevertheless reduced to a still significant three hours and forty-five minutes.[44] For the 1963–64 school year there were 119,986 primary school and 3,226 secondary school students, offering a large pool from which to create a mass movement,[45] and by the 1973–74 school year, numbers had grown to 245,857 primary school students and 9,774 in secondary schools.[46]

Savang's creation of a youth movement overlapped with his project to remake the curriculum by introducing civics instruction to promote nationalism. As one 1960 Ministry of Education report stated: 'The primary [school] syllabuses at present in use were drawn up in 1938 by the educational services of the protectorate … The department has been studying since October 1959 the basic reforms to be made in the content of these syllabuses which are now old.'[47] Elsewhere the report complained of the existing curricula 'which have not been revised for more than twenty years'.[48] Civics was the first secondary school course taught in Lao by Lao instructors. Ethics was also introduced, focusing on Buddhism, 'especially the life of the Buddha'.

Civics instruction was designed not just to promote nationalism, but specifically loyalty to the King. Savang thus co-opted the expanding education system to engender mass loyalty to the monarch across Laos. This allowed the sovereign to project his influence into regions where loyalty to the throne was low, such as the south. The first citizenship textbook appeared in 1960, and further texts for students were produced later, including for years 1, 2 and 4.[49] Included in each was a photograph of Savang. In fact, every classroom had its portrait of the King just as every movie house played the national anthem while the audience saluted an image of the King. Civics texts, too, were designed for more

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than just use in schools, as the Minister of Education, Nhouy Abhay, stated: 'This book is not only a teacher's handbook … [It] may yet be a handbook for the village-head, the district-head and citizens, persons who have a desire to study and know the duties of a citizen.'[50]

The teaching of civics raised deep questions about the place of the monarchy in a democracy. The textbook stated that 'the Lao nation is governed by a democracy with a King, lord of life, as leader of the nation'. This contrasted with republics, which merely had presidents. While noting that the King was 'the supreme leader of the nation' and was 'maintained in a status of being revered [s*akkara*]', a position which none could challenge, nonetheless the King could not exercise authority alone, as 'power of every type derives from the people according to the provisions of the constitution'. The Lao liked the monarchy because they 'respected and worshiped [*bouxa*] and believed [*suathu*] in the King always'.[51]

At this point, the textbook took a religious turn. It continued, with allusions to Hindu as well as Buddhist conceptions of monarchy, that the Lao

> believe [the King] is the venerable lord sitting on the head, that is lord Brahma of the Lao because [the King] has the four perfect states of the god (*phrathai*): compassion, mercy, kindness, [and] equanimity to the Lao people. [He] is the god (*thevada*) of the Lao combined with divine law: shame of demerit and fear of demerit. Stealing, shame, fear, demerit, bad actions – no evil of any kind can be done to the Lao people. [The King] will raise the Lao to the cool shade of peace, in happiness always.

When faced with the quandary over the place of monarchy in a democracy, King Savang was not above invoking religion to justify his rule, even going so far as to claim divine status. Pupils were instructed that they had a duty to know and respect the system of rule and to 'respect, believe, and worship the leader of the state truly'. They had a duty to 'elevate the system of rule to prosper permanently' and to hold it 'sacred [*saksit*]'.[52]

In the final analysis, Savang's partisan stance during the Second Indochinese War, which he viewed as an existential struggle against China and North Vietnam, as much as his strong anti-communism, led to the unmaking of the monarchy after 1975. His polarising stance on the war – despite foreign and Pathet Lao claims that he remained above the conflict – set up an untenable position for the monarchy in post-revolution Laos. There seems little doubt that the monarch would eventually have been pushed aside to make way for new power-holders, but not necessarily sent to a concentration camp to die with his wife and son, as was his fate.[53]

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Unfinished business: diaspora calls for a royal funeral

The monarchy remained a powerful institution even in early 1975, the year in which it was abolished. No one seriously thought the King would be removed, nor did anyone openly call for the overthrow of the monarchy. The revolution was not anti-monarchical, since the Pathet Lao publicly pledged to uphold the monarchy. The most popular leader of the Pathet Lao was a (minor) member of the extended royal family, Souphanouvong, the 'Red Prince', who proved to be a figurehead of the movement, but a very popular one.[54] The monarchy was not swept away in a popular revolution but was destroyed in a calculated move by the Pathet Lao – now unmasked as the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Protests organised by the LPDR against the monarchy began on 12 October 1975 – the thirtieth anniversary of the Issara's promulgation of a Constitution and establishment of a Provisional Assembly – and during these demonstrations the King issued arms to the palace guard. However, in late November 1975 King Savang Vatthana was dethroned at the height of the revolution. His son, Crown Prince Vongsavang, delivered the King's abdication speech, paving the way for the creation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic on 2 December 1975. On 11 March 1977, the King, Queen and Crown Prince were arrested for allegedly contacting the resistance (and seeking rescue) and sent to 're-education' – a concentration camp in Viengxai near the Vietnamese border (Figure 10.1). The royal family was imprisoned with ministers, ambassadors and thirteen top generals, allowing the LPRP to decapitate the RLG in one stroke. Surviving for several years on starvation rations and without medications, the King died in March 1980 and, not long after, the Crown Prince succumbed. Queen Khamphoui died later, in 1982, in a camp for common criminals.

In retrospect, monarchs were key agents who actively shaped postcolonial Laos. The monarchy succeeded in remaking itself in the democratic-era of popular sovereignty after the Second World War as a constitutional monarchy, but it could not survive a communist revolution so closely linked to its enemies, China and North Vietnam. While Sisavang Vong had remade the modern monarchy during the loyalist movement immediately after the war, Savang Vatthana linked it to right-wing nationalism, best exemplified by the Lao Scouts, taking sides in the Second Indochina War and thereby unmaking it after 1975.

In 1960 the RLG had made elaborate arrangements for Sisavang Vong's cremation, but Savang Vatthana, his wife Queen Khamphoui and Crown Prince Vongsavang have never received this final rite, or

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Figure 10.1 King Savang and Queen Khamphoui in internal exile after the overthrow of the Lao monarchy

even had their deaths officially recognised by the Lao government. The King's and Crown Prince's remains were left buried in an unmarked grave north of a re-education camp in Viengxai, though burial rather than cremation is offensive for any Buddhist Lao, much less the King. Nevertheless, the absence of the monarchy has cast a long shadow over the post-1975 period. At times, this tension is voiced explicitly by some Lao, as exiles in the diaspora have called for the proper funeral of King Savang Vatthana. In a speech in 2018, the head of the Royal Lao Government-in-Exile, Khamphoui Sisavady, compared US and Vietnamese efforts to repatriate war dead with that of Laos:

> But what about Laos? For 42 years the bones of RLG Lao leaders … have been left rotting in the jungles all but forgotten. The remains of the Royal family, a 600-year [old] dynasty, including the King, Queen and Crown Prince have never been found, or even searched for, by anyone. Who should be responsible? And who even cares or pays attention to this issue?

Khamphoui concluded by calling on those who believe in justice to challenge 'the ongoing oppression in Laos today'. To some in the diaspora, the monarchy is not gone and buried but remains unfinished

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business. It remains a symbol around which to rally those opposed to the present government, a one-party state ruled by the LPRP.[55]

Notes

All translations by the author, Ryan Wolfson-Ford.

1 '*Pamouanpapkhao*', in *Lokpatchuban*, special edition (1967), 2.
2 Soren Ivarsson and Christopher Goscha, 'Prince Phetsarath (1890–1959): nationalism and royalty in the making of modern Laos', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 38:1 (2007), 55–81.
3 Ian Baird, 'Millenarian movements in southern Laos and northeast Siam (Thailand) at the turn of the twentieth century: reconsidering the involvement of the Champassak Royal House', *South East Asia Research*, 21:2 (2013), 257–79.
4 The fathers of leading CDIN members, Khamphan Panya and Kouprasith Abhay, sat on the Privy Council. Another CDIN member, Prince Sopsaisana, was Palace Secretary.
5 Perry Stieglitz, *In a Little Kingdom* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1990), p. 98.
6 Timothy Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: United States Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955–1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 4.
7 Grant Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History* (Chiang Mai: Silk Worm Books, 2009).
8 Anne Raffin notes that loyalists in Savannakhet and Khammouane welcomed French reconquest because they blamed the Issara 'for essentially turning over the country to the Viet Minh'. See Raffin, *Youth Mobilization in Vichy Indochina and Its Legacies, 1940 to 1970* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), p. 226.
9 Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty*, p. 165.
10 On the Lao Scouts, see Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity and the Making of Modern Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), p. 94.
11 Eric T. Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe and Indochina, 1940–1944* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).
12 Frank Lebar, *Human Relations File 23: Laos* (New Haven, CT: Human Relations Area Files Inc., 1955), p. 41.
13 S. Virasan, *Nangsupavatsatlao* [History Book] (Vientiane: Modern Lao Publishing House, 1957), p. 83.
14 'Proclamation de Sa Majesté Sisavang Vong, Roi du Laos', in Royaume du Laos, *Constitution Lao* (Saigon: Impr. Mai-Linh, 1947).
15 Katay Sasorith, *Le Laos: Son évolution politique, sa place dans l'Union française* (Paris: éditions Berger-Levrault, 1953), p. 61.
16 See Martin Stuart-Fox, 'The Lao constitution of 1947/1949: Creating a nation-state', in Kevin Y. L. Tan and Ngoc Son Bui (eds), *Constitutional Foundings in Southeast Asia* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2019).
17 Lebar, *Human Relations File 23: Laos*, p. 42.
18 Pierre Nginn, 'La Constitution', *Kinnari*, 6 (November 1947), 9.
19 *Ibid.*
20 *Constitution Lao*.
21 *Ibid*.
22 Charles-Henri Duparc, 'Le problème politique laotien', *Politique Etrangère*, 12 (1947), 542–3.
23 Lebar, *Human Relations File 23: Laos*, p. 42.
24 Nginn, 'La Constitution'.
25 *Ibid*.
26 Sasorith, *Le Laos*, p. 112.

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27 'Allocution prononcée par S.M. Sisavang-Vong, roi du Laos, répondant À l'allocution précitée de M. le Président Vincent Auriol', cited in Sasorith, *Le Laos*, p. 129.
28 Mongkhol-Katay Sasorith, 'Les forces politiques et la vie politique au Laos', PhD thesis, Panthéon-Sorbonne University, 1973, p. 161.
29 Katay Sasorith, 'Le Laos depuis l'arrivée des Français', *Sud-Est*, 14 (July 1950), 16.
30 Katay Sasorith, 'L'évolution politique du Laos avant l'occupation française', *Sud-Est*, 13 (June 1950).
31 An earlier Lao Scout Association created in 1941 was small and largely Vietnamese. Raffin, *Youth Mobilization*, pp. 72, 139.
32 See *Phuansakut* [Scout Friends] (n.p., n.d.), pp. 9–16.
33 Søren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The making of a Lao space between Indochina and Siam, 1860–1945* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008).
34 *Scout Friends*, pp. 24–5.
35 Vichy rallies used ancient sites. See Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics*, pp. 149, 195.
36 *Lao Hakxa Sat*, 9/10 (February 1959), 'Succès sans précédent de la "journée de la jeunesse" À wat-phou', p. 1. Hereafter cited as LHXS.
37 *LHXS*, 17 (June 1959), p. 1.
38 Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics*, p. 190.
39 Raffin, *Youth Mobilization*, p. 4.
40 Kingdom of Laos, *Vitthanyuhonghian* [Radio School] (Bangkok: Light of Arts Publishing House, 1964), p. 37.
41 UNESCO, *International Yearbook of Education, Vol. XX 1958* (Paris: UNESCO, 1959), p. 218. Hereafter cited as IYB.
42 *IYB* (1963), pp. 221–2.
43 *IYB* (1964), p. 197.
44 *IYB* (1963), p. 222.
45 *IYB* (1964), p. 196.
46 Service national de la statistique, *Bulletin de Statistique: 1er Semestre 1974* (Vientiane: Kingdom of Laos, 1975), p. 13.
47 UNESCO, *International Yearbook of Education, Vol. XXII 1960* (Paris: UNESCO, 1961), p. 255.
48 *IYB* (1964), p. 196.
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50 Thao Nhouy Abhay, *Khamnamkhongkasouangsuksathikan* [Forward of the Ministry of Education], in *Duties of a Citizen*, p. i.
51 *Duties of a Citizen*, p. 71.
52 *Ibid.*
53 See Christopher Kremmer, *Bamboo Palace: Discovering the Lost Dynasty of Laos* (London: Flamingo, 2003).
54 Ian Baird, 'Secrecy, falsification and information management control: the party and state of the Lao People's Democratic Republic', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 48:5 (2018): 739–60.
55 Khamphoui Sisavady, 3 January 2018. Text in author's possession.

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