

Asian Studies Review

ISSN: 1035-7823 (Print) 1467-8403 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/casr20

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To cite this article: Ian G. Baird (2025) Nationalism First: Late Cold War Politics and the 'Really Secret War' in Laos, Asian Studies Review, 49:3, 560-579, DOI: 10.1080/10357823.2024.2443156

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2024.2443156

Published online: 20 Jan 2025.

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ASIAN STUDIES REVIEW
2025, VOL. 49, NO. 3, 560–579
https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2024.2443156

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Nationalism First: Late Cold War Politics and the 'Really Secret War' in Laos

Ian G. Baird

University of Wisconsin-Madison

ABSTRACT

In 1975, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) was established by the communist Pathet Lao, with strong support from Vietnam. A wave of both political and military resistance to the new government emerged, although little is known about the ideology behind this resistance. This article assesses the ideological landscape of the resistance, which I refer to as the 'Really Secret War', since it is even less well known than the 'Secret War' that preceded it in the 1960s and early 1970s. In particular, I consider the ideological diversity of post-1975 anti-Lao PDR groups located in Laos and among the Lao diaspora. Many involved with the resistance self-identified as 'right-wing', 'left-wing', and 'neutralist', but the movement was driven more by nationalism than anything else. The resistance movement was highly diverse, and included royalists, republicans, neutralists, socialists, and former communists, all of whom feature to some degree in the complex and little-known political history of modern Laos.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 3 June 2024
Accepted 7 September 2024

KEYWORDS
Laos; Vietnam; Thailand; Cold War; politics; ideology

Introduction

The Vientiane Treaty was signed in February 1973, thereby creating a coalition government between the Pathet Lao communists and the Royal Lao Government. In May 1975, a little over two years later, the Pathet Lao orchestrated a takeover of Laos, with strong political and military guidance from Vietnam. After the King of Laos abdicated, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) was formally established on 2 December 1975. The Pathet Lao adopted a one-party socialist state, with a political system modelled on the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Soviet Union (Goldston, 2009). Political turmoil ensued, and large numbers of politicians, government officials, soldiers, and police officers associated with the Royal Government were manipulated and coerced into attending 're-education' programmes (Los Angeles Times, 1975; Stone, 1980, 262). Some of these officials were sent to re-education camps, where thousands were imprisoned without charge or trial, sometimes for more than a decade (Bouphanouvong, 2003; Central Intelligence Agency, 1981; Kremmer, 2003; Praxayavong et al., 1992). Consequently, many people fled Laos, across the border to Thailand, as political refugees (Thompson, 2010; Van-es-Beeck, 1982).

CONTACT Ian G. Baird ibaird@wisc.edu
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While 1975 marked the end of the Second Indochina War in Laos, for some it was the beginning of another conflict, one led by opponents of the new Lao PDR – and possibly more importantly, as this article shows, the Vietnamese (Baird, 2012; Gunn, 1983; Hillmer, 2010). These opponents started taking up arms against the new communist regime, both inside Laos and on Thailand's side of the border (Central Intelligence Agency, 1975). Early on, many supported armed resistance. The resistance gradually expanded (Bangkok Post, 1976; Central Intelligence Agency, 1976c; Far Eastern Economic Review, 1976), especially after 1979 when the People's Republic of China (PRC) started training and arming the insurgents, leading to what has been referred to as the Third Indochina War (Baird, 2018; Chanda, 1986; Funston, 1979). Crucially, 1979 saw major realignments of different armed groups in the region.

With limited support from the government of Thailand, and more explicit support from the PRC (Baird, 2013; 2014; 2022; BBC, 1979d; 1982; McBeth, 1981), the Lao insurgency grew along the border, from the far north to the deep south, especially during the 1980s. The resistance remained active even after China stopped arming it in the mid-1980s. In 1987, many of those held in re-education camps were finally released (Amnesty International, 1987), and in late 1988 Vietnam withdrew most of its troops from Laos (Agence France-Presse, 1988; 1989). This also coincided with Thailand's adoption of the 'battlefields to marketplaces' foreign policy (The Nation, 1988), which resulted in the gradual withdrawal of support for the Lao insurgency. Insurgents could no longer use Thai territory to launch missions into Laos, even though Thailand had always denied supporting the insurgency (Bangkok Post, 1982). As part of Thailand's efforts to improve relations with Laos, in the 1990s it closed refugee camps to people from Laos. The resistance shrank but continued inside Laos through the 1990s, declining further in the 2000s.

This article considers the little-known period following 1975 and especially after 1979. The Lao PDR government frequently referred to the insurgency as consisting of 'ultra-right Thai reactionaries' (BBC, 1980), but the political and military opposition was diverse and included some quite surprising alliances. Anti-Lao PDR groups identified as 'right-wing', 'left-wing', and 'neutralist', but nationalism was the key motivation for most insurgents.

In other words, the political and armed resistance was united not by their explicit opposition to socialism, but by their belief that Laos had effectively been colonised by Vietnam (BBC, 1979b; Beijing Radio, 1980c) and was at risk of being assimilated into an 'Indochina Federation' (Sengsathit, n.d.) or 'Indochina Confederation' (Agence France-Presse, 1982). This idea had also been prevalent among Pathet Lao sceptics before 1975, when the idea of 'communist imperialists' was sometimes invoked (see Goscha, 2012). Gunn (1983), in his article about the Lao resistance, had little access to the type of information that is now available. Thus, more than 40 years after that article was written, it is worth reviewing the post-1975 political landscape anew, with the goal of better understanding that era.

First, the 'special' relationship agreement between the Lao PDR and Vietnam in July 1977 was criticised for being part of the process to colonise Laos (Beijing Radio, 1980d). The agreement justified Vietnam's increased military presence in Laos, although the Vietnamese had already been working with Pathet Lao forces for decades and did not

leave in 1975. Indeed, the Vietnamese were still operating in Laos in 1976 (Central Intelligence Agency, 1976b).

Second, the government of Thailand, not surprisingly, was concerned that Thailand could become the next domino to fall to communism. The removal of the Khmer Rouge from power in Cambodia by the Vietnamese, and the subsequent border war between China and Vietnam, represented an escalation of the Sino–Soviet communist ideological split. So, despite increased Vietnamese support for the Lao PDR government, the resistance grew stronger after 1979 (Dawson, 1981). This is partly because of the material support provided to the resistance by the PRC.

Crucially, the increased role of Vietnam in Laos left many Lao believing that their country had been taken over. Thus, the ideological orientation of the opposition can be better characterised as 'nationalist' than 'anti-communist' per se.

Methods

In 2008, I started investigating the Lao resistance. I had previously lived in Laos for 15 years, and spoke Lao fluently, but I did not know much about the politics of this movement. Nor did the Lao government encourage study of it. But after I left Laos and moved to North America, I wanted to learn more about the movement without becoming involved in it. To do so, I needed to gain enough familiarity with these political players to learn about their views and efforts, but I needed to remain separated from them enough to not be linked to any one group. I received ethics approval from the University of Wisconsin-Madison for continuing this research after becoming a professor there in 2010.

I have conducted well over 800 interviews with people involved in the Lao resistance between 1975 and the present, in the United States, Canada, France, Australia, Germany, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. I mainly interviewed ethnic Lao, Hmong, and Kmhmu people who were originally from Laos, as well as Thais, Americans, and others who had relevant knowledge. Most interviews were conducted in the Lao language, but some were in Thai or English. Most interviews were conducted in person, but a significant number were conducted by telephone.

There are both limitations and advantages associated with relying heavily on oral histories. On the one hand, people reported on things that occurred decades ago, making it certain that they had forgotten or distorted some details. The topic is political, making it likely that some information provided in the interviews was biased, one-sided, or misleading. On the other hand, interviewing people decades after events had occurred often made it much easier for them to talk about what happened because they had some distance from these events. They would not have been willing to discuss these events at the time or soon after. In any case, care was taken to corroborate the results of interviews. This is one of the reasons the research has taken so long, and so many interviews had to be conducted. There may well still be some mistakes, but I tried to rigorously corroborate what I learned, as much as possible, and I conducted follow-up interviews to improve the quality of the information. Over time, I also became better at assessing the quality of that information.

I conducted literature searches and archival investigations, and I have examined thousands of letters, reports, and other documents, in Lao, Thai, French, and English.

But the backbone of the research has been the qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted over many years, with some people being interviewed multiple times. Indeed, I relied partly on developing close long-term relationships with specific individuals, who often introduced me to other informants. Some of these people also became important interlocutors (Baird, 2023). Crucially, this article is based on sustained long-term research with a wide range of people and organisations with differing ideological positionalities.

Laos before 1975

Before delving into the political and military resistance to the Lao PDR government and its Vietnamese allies, it is necessary to provide some background about the political situation in Laos before 1975. The circumstances of that period are crucial for understanding the ideological make-up of the resistance that emerged later.

First, there was considerable armed conflict in Laos from the late 1950s until 1973 (Conboy, 1995), but the political system was relatively open and democratic (Wolfson-Ford, 2024). Although Kong Le orchestrated a successful *coup d'état* in August 1960, in the name of neutralism, by the end of the year he had been removed from power by General Phoumi Nosavan's Thai and US-backed right-wing forces (Dommen, 2001; Sidwell, 2020). From the early 1960s until 1973, the Royal Lao Government oversaw a liberal democratic political system, with the neutralist Souvanna Phouma as prime minister. Laos had many different political parties (Stern, 1985), even if the far-left Pathet Lao chose not to participate in elections in 1965 and 1967.

Under pressure from the United States, the Royal Lao Government agreed to sign a treaty to end armed conflict with the Pathet Lao and its Vietnamese allies in February 1973. The treaty allowed for a coalition government to be formed with representation at its highest levels from both the 'Vientiane government' side and the 'Pathet Lao' side. This included representation in all ministries and a shared security role. During the two years that followed, the government of Laos continued to allow various types of political parties to operate.

The Diversity of the Political and Military Opposition related to Laos

This section reviews the ideological landscape associated with the military and political resistance in Laos and along its borders after 1975. While the insurgency was united against the Lao PDR government and especially the Vietnamese, its core political ideologies and convictions were diverse. The categories used below to capture that diversity are those used by the Lao people themselves rather than ones developed outside the country: 'right-wing', 'left-wing', and 'neutralist'. Even in Laos the meaning of these categories has shifted over time, however, and each has its own sub-categories. We should be careful not to ascribe too much meaning to these terms, but they are a starting point for considering the diversity of views within the resistance.

The right

Before 1975, the term 'right-wing' was rarely used in Lao politics, since it was too general to reflect the country's diversity of ideological views. Royalists were, to a large extent, the

main rightists in Laos. After 1975, the term 'right-wing' became more common and the 'political right' made up the majority of those who resisted the Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese. These activists offered the strongest political opposition to the Lao PDR government and had been on opposing sides to it during the Second Indochina War. Indeed, in 1975, some of the former officers in the Royal Lao Army – especially the self-defined right-wing soldiers – were among the first to take up arms against the new regime (Bounneuang Pouyphanhvongxay, personal communication, May 2009; Saveng Vongsavath, personal communication, May 2009).

One of the early right-wing insurgent groups was supported and led by members of the Na Champassak royal family, and from 1976 it operated along the border Laos shared with Thailand. Initially, Chao Iang Na Champassak helped fund various insurgent groups, including some led by members of his family, such as Chao Sak Na Champassak, Chao Pangkeo Nakhone Champassak, and Phakdy Sengchanh. These groups operated along the border between Ubon Ratchathani Province in northeastern Thailand, where they had political influence, and Champassak Province in southern Laos. In 1981, after Chao Sith Na Champassak escaped from re-education in Laos, he took over the leadership of the resistance from Chao Iang, who was ageing and had depleted his funds (Baird, 2022, 2025a).

Chao Sith established the Front for Lao Revolution, or the Movement for the Liberation of the Lao Nation (FLR, *khabouankan hom lao pot poi xath*), whose members included monarchists and right-wingers. A commonality among them was their strong opposition to communism, although some right-wingers also opposed the monarchy in Laos, and preferred a republic such as France or the United States. In any case, Chao Sith convinced the Thai government to allow him exclusive control over the Lao resistance in Ubon Ratchathani Province (Pangkeo Nakhone Champassak, personal communication, November 2016). Other groups, including those that were not ideologically aligned with Chao Sith, other monarchists, right-wing republicans, right-wing democrats, and neutralist or left-wing anti-communists, were forced to join the FLR. Those who did not risked imprisonment and were not allowed by Thai authorities to use Thailand as a base for their insurgent activities (Somphone Khounbolibounsak, personal communication, August 2009). Therefore, many in the FLR were neither right-wing nor monarchist, but found it convenient to join the organisation due to its opposition to Vietnam.

Those resistance fighters who were previously aligned with the Pathet Lao, such as Boualiene Vannaxay, Thit Tanh Douangmala, Bouasay Senthip, and Syfong Kongkeo, did not support the royal family of Luang Prabang or the southern Champassak Royal House. In the late 1970s, they had their own armed resistance groups, but after 1981, when Chao Sith Na Champassak took control of the insurgency in Ubon Ratchathani, they were compelled to cooperate with him to some extent. However, Syfong reported that he did not cooperate with Chao Sith (Syfong Kongkeo, personal communication, August 2009), a point that I was able to corroborate. Boualiene explained that he tried to keep his distance from the Na Champassak royals, who he felt could not sufficiently inspire rural villagers: Chao Sith believed that he was above other people, due to his royalist mind-set (Boualiene Vannaxay, personal communication, July 2012). Despite some concerns by other insurgents, Chao Sith organised a fully functioning armed resistance front with Thai logistical support and financial backing from Lao people living in France.

Major General Vang Pao was one of the most important resistance leaders, at least at the political level, until he was arrested by the US government for plotting to overthrow the Lao PDR government in 2007. His arrest, along with 10 others, sent shockwaves through the ethnic Hmong community in Laos, with many fearing that the US government might target them for their involvement in Vang Pao's organisation, the United Laos National Liberation Front (ULNLF, the *neo hom pot poi xath*, commonly referred to as the *neo hom*). Eventually the charges were dropped, but the incident made clear that the US government would no longer turn a blind eye to violations of the US Neutrality Act, which specifies that it is illegal for US citizens to attempt to overthrow a government that has diplomatic relations with the United States. Unlike Vietnam and Cambodia, the US never totally severed diplomatic ties with the Lao PDR government after 1975, even though relations were significantly downgraded.

General Phoumi Nosavan was another leader who became heavily involved after 1975 in supporting the insurgency from his base in Bangkok. Like others, he was more a nationalist than a right-winger per se. While Nosavan has generally been characterised as strongly right-wing, his profile was more complex: he was forced out of Laos for trying to orchestrate a *coup d'état* in 1965 (Phoumano Nosavan, personal communication, October 2016). This was plausible given that the US did not approve of his efforts to negotiate peace with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the PRC (Phoumano Nosavan, personal communication, October 2016). Moreover, he had been a member of the *Lao Issara* (Free Lao), an anti-French group of nationalist revolutionaries who did not want the French to return to power after the Japanese surrendered at the end of World War II. After 1945, his allies included nationalist neutralists and left-wing leaders, including the 'Red Prince', the Luang Prabang royal communist leader, Tiao Souphanouvong. After 1975, Phoumi Nosavan was a key political leader of the insurgency, especially in southern Laos. He was also one of the initial founders of the ULNLF, but he soon broke off and established his own government in exile and anti-Lao PDR military resistance.

The Union of Lao Organizations (ULO, *neo houam phalang lao*) was nominally a right-wing organisation established in the United States in 1980, but many of its members were more nationalistic and anti-Vietnamese than explicitly right-wing. It was formed by four independent anti-Lao PDR organisations in the United States. Later, the ULO was expanded to become the International Union of Lao Organizations (IULO): branches were established in France, Australia, and Canada. Although most of the IULO's members were living outside Laos and Thailand, they developed a small military force along the border with Thailand in the early 1980s, called the Lao Liberation Front (LLF). It was first commanded by Colonel Bounleuth Saycocie and later by Lieutenant Colonel Saveng Vongsavath. Although many of the IULO's leaders were self-declared right-wingers, some were falsely accused of being 'communists'. Among those accused was Khamphoui Sisavatdy, because he had courted rural Pathet Lao support during his 1972 election campaign for a seat in the National Assembly for Sithandone Province (now Khong District) when the Pathet Lao boycotted the election. Khamphoui was elected, even though he considered himself to be 'far-right' (*khoua chat*) (Baird, 2025b).[1]

The IULO's main objective was to liberate Laos from Vietnamese control. It adopted a 19-point policy and advocated for multiparty democracy and justice for all. The group

promoted Lao nationalism and pledged to support all patriotic people from Laos. The IULO was particularly focused on Vietnamese withdrawal from Laos and unifying the people from all over Laos. Many of its leaders self-identified as 'right-wing', but its broad populist-type platform demonstrated that the group was quite progressive in its ideology and social beliefs. It also promoted freedom of religion, travel, and settlement, and wanted to develop the national economy. The IULO believed that all confiscated property should be returned to its original owners. It wanted more development in Laos, including irrigation and hydroelectric dams, fair labour practices, and higher levels of foreign investment. The group advocated for making Buddhism the national religion, as it had been during the Royal Lao Government period. The IULO also advocated for educating the people from elementary school to university age, as well as promoting the arts. It wanted to help the poor with improved public welfare programmes and the group advocated for establishing diplomatic relations with all nations, particularly Laos' neighbours. The group also advocated respect for the 1954 and 1962 neutralist Geneva Accords. It also hoped to promote foreign investment in industrial development. It was willing to cooperate with all political parties and patriotic movements to organise a provisional government once the Pathet Lao were removed from power. Once the Vietnamese were gone, the IULO hoped that there would then be free and fair national elections (Union of Lao Organizations, n.d.).

Crucially, the group stipulated that it would 'coordinate with Lao people of every ethnicity, political ideology, sex, and age', if they resisted the Pathet Lao and the 'Vietnamese colonialist forces in Laos'. It agreed to accept aid from all countries, including potentially Socialist countries (i.e., China), if there were no obligations attached to the aid (Union of Lao Organizations, n.d.). The IULO thereby illustrated the diversity of ideological views among those opposed to the Lao PDR government. Indeed, the Royal Lao Government had maintained diplomatic relations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and the PRC.

Captain Oudone Rattanasengchanh, who considered himself to be right-wing and was aligned with the IULO, refused to come under Chao Sith's command in the early 1980s. He was apprehended by the Thai military and jailed for three months in Sikhieo District, Nakorn Ratchasima Province, to try to pressure him to join Chao Sith. Eventually, he was released, and by 1984 he was again leading a group of insurgents, although now under the nominal command of Chao Sith (Oudone Rattanasengchanh, personal communication, October 2009). Lieutenant Colonel Saveng Vongsavath, who was with the IULO, was also compelled by the Thai military to join with Chao Sith (Saveng Vongsavath, personal communication, May 2009). Insurgent leaders often had different political or ideological views, but they were frequently compelled by circumstances to work together.

Illustrative of the ideological diversity of the resistance, on 5 October 1986, Outhong Souvannavong, the President of the *neo hom*, wrote to Mr Saly, the President of the ULO in Australia. The letter revealed that Outhong did not view the ULNLF as right-wing: the policy of the *neo hom* was simply to expel the Vietnamese from Laos, and the group was not fighting against communism as such. He emphasised that the two groups had different policies, and that the *neo hom* was not anti-communist, just anti-Vietnamese. The goal was to save the nation, not advance one Lao ideology over another (Souvannavong, 1986). This is telling, since Outhong worked closely with General Vang Pao, the military leader of the *neo hom*, who identified as right-wing and anti-

communist. Similarly, an article in the *Washington Post* about the *neo hom*'s insurgency characterised the resistance as 'multi-faceted' and as comprising 'an unlikely grouping of Hmong tribesmen, lowland Laotians, pro-American rebels, pro-Chinese rebels, rightists, royalists, and representatives of some of the country's 102 ethnic groups' (Richburg, 1990).

In 1986, the IULO, with the support of anti-communists in the United States, particularly Major General John Singlaub, the leader of the US branch of the Anti-Communist League, tried to bring all the anti-Lao PDR political groups under one umbrella so that they could maintain a united front. The *neo hom* had previously tried to do this in the early 1980s. However, in his official response to this invitation, Vang Pao politely congratulated the organisers for hosting the meeting but proceeded to say that he could not attend because the board of his organisation had agreed that outsiders (foreigners) should not play a role in resolving the differences between Lao groups and that the Lao should instead resolve their differences by themselves (Vang, 1986). Khamphoui Sisavatdy felt insulted by this stance and heavily criticised Vang Pao in response (Sisavatdy, 1986).

Later, however, the Lao People's National Liberation Front (LPNLF), which grew out of the 1987 meeting to try to bring all the anti-Lao PDR political groups together in late 1986, cooperated with the *neo hom*. On 27 June 1989, the LPNLF and the *neo hom* agreed that they would cooperate to 'chase the Vietnamese out of Laos' and bring down the Pathet Lao, who were described as the henchmen of the Vietnamese. It was also suggested that members of the LPNLF could become members of the larger anti-communist forces of the *neo hom* (LPNLF & ULNLF, 1989).

The neutralists

The political idea of neutralism emerged in Laos after the first Geneva Accords of 1954 had made the country officially neutral. The hope was that Laos could stay out of Cold War conflict, but this did not eventuate. After 1975, some opponents of the Lao PDR and the Vietnamese were neutralists, including General Kong Le, who was already in exile in France. Kong Le and his allies established the Mouvement Révolutionaire de la Résistance de Peuple Lao Neutralistes (MORREPLAN) in France (MORREPLAN, 1980). He also developed a frontline military presence inside Laos, with support from China.

Colonel Khambou Phimmasene was one of the first and most important insurgent leaders in southern Laos. He was particularly active in Phalanxay District and surrounding areas in Savannakhet Province (Metayo, 2009), where Kong Le was born and spent his childhood. Khambou organised a significant resistance force.

In northern Laos, the ethnic Kmhmu insurgent leader, Chanh Souk, became aligned with Kong Le, operating in what are now Bokeo and Luang Namtha Provinces. Chanh Souk had been an officer in the Royal Lao Army, but in 1974 and 1975 he temporarily aligned with the communist Pathet Lao, before having a major falling-out with the communists. He adamantly opposed the newly established Lao PDR government and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

The neutralists were strengthened in 1979 when the PRC recruited Kong Le in France to come to China to oversee military and political resistance against the Lao PDR government and its Vietnamese allies. Large numbers of Kong Le-

aligned resistance soldiers from northern Laos travelled overland to China, through either Laos or Burma, to receive military training in camps in southern Yunnan Province. They were given AK-47 automatic weapons, Maoist uniforms, and other arms and equipment (Baird, 2012; 2013; 2014). The primary enemy of those trained in China were the Vietnamese, not the Lao: the insurgents were expected to return to Laos to fight primarily against Vietnam (Beijing Radio, 1980a; 1980b).

Meanwhile, Lao insurgents in the south also received support from the PRC, via the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge, which provided arms (Baird, 2012; 2018; BBC, 1979c). China supported Kong Le and MORREPLAN until 1983, when it withdrew its backing because Kong Le did not want socialists such as Dr Khamsengkeo Sengsathit (see below) to gain more political influence over the insurgency (Khamphoui Sisavatdy, personal communication, October 2008).

Kong Le did not support Laos' far-right politicians. In fact, he referred to them as 'rotten and bad smelling' (Sibounheuang, 1979). He was especially unhappy with the right-wing leaders before 1975 because he was forced to give up his military position and leave the country in 1966. Kong Le supported a neutral or non-aligned and independent Laos, much as had been imagined in the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962. His organisation was firmly against the Lao PDR, but he would not cooperate with right-wing organisations either. Kong Le did not support communism, but he was willing to work with the People's Republic of China.

Veth Chantharangsy was responsible for the foreign affairs of the neutralists in the 1980s. Originally from Savannakhet Province, he became a soldier under General Phoumi Nosavan in 1959 and ironically, in late 1960, he fought against Kong Le's forces in Vientiane. This is another example of the changing alliances and flexibility of Lao actors involved in fighting the Lao PDR government. Later, Veth was hired by the teachers' college in Vientiane, and in 1962 he undertook military training at Fort Lee in Virginia. However, he left the military in 1963 and started working for USAID. He also worked with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Vientiane to support the Royal Lao Army: some CIA agents were operating under the cover of USAID. Veth continued with USAID until 1975, after joining the Neutralist Party a year earlier. He ended up in Nong Khai Refugee Camp in 1977, where he contacted Kong Le. He also contacted Thanome Soknoi, a former teacher in Vientiane, and Soulang Dejvongsa, the former Director General of the Royal Lao Academy in France. They were key deputies of Kong Le. Thanome was responsible for the group's operations in France. In November 1977, Veth arrived in Esconidido, California, after spending two weeks in San Diego. Kong Le did not have a representative in the United States at the time, so he appointed Veth (Veth Chantharangsy, personal communication, September 2009).

In the early 1980s, Khambang Sibounheuang, a relative of Kong Le and a former Royal Lao Army soldier, became one of MORREPLAN's representatives in the United States. However, Kong Le and Khambang had a dispute, and Khambang lost his position in MORREPLAN. Khambang established a new neutralist party not associated with Kong Le, which further demonstrates the diversity of parties involved in the resistance: not even these two neutralist parties were cooperating. Thanome Soknoi, who was also estranged from Kong Le by this time, helped Khambang establish the new party. Their first big meeting was in June 1987, when Khambang was elected leader. Khambang fell

out with Veth about the new party: Veth apparently thought that Khambang did not want him to be leader, although Khambang denies this (Khambang Sibounheuang, personal communication, July 2009).

Vong Kham, another ethnic Kmhmu insurgent leader, disagreed with Chanh Souk about the group's strategy in Vieng Phou Kha and Na Le Districts in the late 1980s, and this was one of the reasons that Chanh Souk sought political asylum in the United States in 1990. Vong Kham took over from Chanh Souk and refused to join the ULNLF (*neo hom*). The Kmhmu in his group continued to consider themselves to be neutralists. Vong Kham was loyal to Kong Le, but he reportedly accepted support from the *neo hom*, especially in the absence of other support. He received money from the *neo hom* to buy supplies in Thailand (Kong Kham & Dawm, personal communication, April 2017). Once again, anti-Lao PDR insurgents were flexible in their efforts to defeat the Vietnamese and protect the Lao nation.

The left

There were a surprising number of self-identified leftists involved in the insurgency, and they can be divided into two major groups. The first included former Pathet Lao soldiers who had defected to the Royal Lao Government in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These soldiers were not anti-communist, but they opposed the Lao PDR and especially Vietnam (see Douangmala, 1978a; 1978b). They defected because they believed that the Vietnamese had too much influence over the Pathet Lao, not because the Pathet Lao was communist. In southern Laos, the leaders of a key group, the *Lao Is Lao* movement (Douangmala, 1977a; 1977b), were Boualiene Vannaxay, Thit Tanh Douangmala, and Bouasay Senthip (Senthip, 1978). They established the most powerful alliance of insurgents in that region in the late 1970s (Na Champassak, 2010). The *Lao Is Lao* was a mass political movement created by the anti-French Lao Issara in the 1940s. Boualiene mainly operated on the Bolaven Plateau in Champassak and Attapeu Provinces, while Thit Tanh was based in Salavan Province. Bouasay stayed south of Thit Tanh. They spent most of their time near villages in forests so that they could interact with supportive locals. They worked to build up their political position by winning villagers over politically.

Other former Pathet Lao soldiers defected to the Royal Lao Government before 1975, mainly because they were unhappy with Vietnam's influence over the Pathet Lao, and some of these became anti-Lao PDR insurgent leaders. They included Syfong Kongkeo, who worked closely with the Khmer Rouge along the Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand tri-borderlands in the early 1980s. Syfong was among the first Lao insurgents to cooperate with the Khmer Rouge in 1979 (Oudone Rattanasengchanh, personal communication, June 2022).

The second major group of leftists was established by Lao dissidents in France. The Lao Socialist Party was one of the first French-based anti-Lao PDR political organisations. In 1976, it brought in important new members, including Dr Chou Norindr, an academic and former Pathet Lao member. Khampheo Phiphak, another early member of the group, told me in 2009 that the naming of the organisation was strategic: 'to attack the Lao PDR from the inside, but that its leaders were right-wing' (Khampheo Phiphak, personal communication, June 2009; Khamphoui Sisavatdy, personal communication, May 2009), meaning that the group wanted

the Lao PDR government to be discredited through attacks from other leftists. In 2013, however, he said that the party was generally left leaning, but that it wanted freedom and democracy for Laos (Khampheo Phiphak & Sengdao Chanthapanya, personal communication, August 2013).

The Lao Socialist Party did not initially have a military presence in Laos, but it was an important political organisation in France and supported the resistance against the Lao PDR government. After senior Lao PDR official Dr Khamsengkeo Sengsathit defected to the PRC in 1979 (Agence France-Presse, 1979; BBC, 1979a; Sengsathit, 1981), he became aligned with the Lao Socialist Party (Moscow in Lao Radio, 1979) despite being based in China. This alliance gave the Lao Socialist Party a military presence, at least indirectly via the Chinese support provided to Lao insurgents. China wanted to liberate Laos from Vietnamese control (Stuart–Fox, 1997), as it had become upset with Vietnam due to its toppling of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. This resulted in an intense month-long border war in February 1979.

The Lao Socialist Party was not anti-communist, and most of its members were sympathetic to the communist ideology promoted by the PRC, but the party was critical of the Lao PDR government and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. After China stopped supporting the insurgency in the mid-1980s, however, the party signed a partnership agreement with right-wing organisations (LPNLF & Lao Socialist Party, 1987).

Other political groups and interactions

Other viewpoints were also represented in the Lao resistance movement. For example, the *21 ongkan* ('21 Organisations'), under its Administrative President (*pathan khanakamakan borihan*) Sameu Mouthalay, included people with diverse political views. According to Sameu, the group's only objective was to pressure the third coalition government in Vientiane before 1975 to follow the 11-point peace plan.[2] Furthermore, he claimed, *21 ongkan* did not support the takeover of the country by the communist Pathet Lao: it wanted a democratic government, but one that supported the people and was less corrupt. Many in *21 ongkan* were shocked when the Pathet Lao gained control of the country in 1975 and started to send its political opponents to re-education camps in Viengxay District in Houaphanh Province and other remote parts of Laos.

Sameu was reluctant to admit that he had been an unwitting tool of the Lao PDR government in 1975, but that seems to be what happened (Sameu Mouthalay, personal communication, July 2009). When Sameu realised that *21 ongkan* had been infiltrated and influenced by the Pathet Lao, and that the result was quite different from what he had advocated, he fled Laos and eventually immigrated to France. There he became politically active and a vocal critic of the Lao PDR government (Mouthalay, 2003).

Dr Somphou Oudomvilay was the Deputy Minister of Finance in Laos in 1975. He had been the Director of Dong Dok College before the third coalition government in 1973 and had also been the Director General of the Teacher Training Department (Somnuk Phongsouvanh, personal communication, September 2009; Sith Dongdok, personal communication, August 2023). Sameu Mouthalay was one of his students, but they had different ideologies, and so Somphou did not join *21 ongkan*. However, he became politically active against the Lao PDR government after he became a political refugee in

Australia. He did not, however, identify as right-wing (Somphou Oudomvilay, personal communication, September 2017).

Another former member of *21 ongkan* was Somnuk Phongsouvanh (Sameu Mouthalay, personal communication, July 2009), the President of the Student Council (*pathan sapha nak seuksa*) (Khamphoui Sisavatdy, personal communication, April 2023). After the Pathet Lao gained control of the country, Somnuk was sent to a re-education camp, despite having indirectly helped bring the communists to power. According to Somnuk, he was a leader of the student protests against the Royal Lao Government's misuse of student aid. He asked about this issue at the Ministry, and later reported on the scandal in a newspaper. In 1975, Amone, the wife of Phao Bounnaphon, who was a senior politician with the Pathet Lao, reportedly turned against Somnuk, and accused him of not following the ways of the ruling party. So Somnuk was sent for re-education. Looking back, Somnuk told me that he thought *21 ongkan* had been incited to protest by the Pathet Lao, who later offered positions in government to student leaders. Somnuk believed that it was not so much that people were unhappy with the government. He did not think of himself as being ideologically left or right: he just wanted Laos to be free (Somnuk Phongsouvanh, personal communication, September 2009).

After Somnuk was released from re-education and escaped to Thailand and later the United States, he helped establish the Liberal Democratic Party (*phak seripasathipatai*), an anti-Lao PDR organisation based in Sacramento, California. The party was led by Khamsay Sayaseng and Somnuk (Soknoi, 2000), who followed the ideology of Bong Souvannavong, a senior Lao politician who was sent to one of Houaphanh Province's notorious re-education camps. Bong was a Buddhist neutralist (see also Sidwell, 2020; Somnuk Phongsouvanh, personal communication, September 2009) and was part of the Peace and Neutrality Party (*phak santiphap pen kang*) (Khamphoui Sisavatdy, personal communication, April 2023). He did not want his party to have a military faction, but he died while undergoing re-education after 1975 (Thammakhanty, 2004). Khamsay felt that having a security force was necessary in the 1980s, so the Liberal Democratic Party established one in the United States. Some of its members trained as security officers and conducted operations in Thailand (Khamsay Sayaseng, personal communication, September 2009).

In the United States, Somnuk and Khamsay found the Republican Party to be the most willing to support political efforts against the Lao PDR government. They joined the party despite not being right-wingers before their arrival in the United States (Somnuk Phongsouvanh, personal communication, September 2009). Many other neutralists from Laos also supported the Republican Party, thus giving the impression that they had always been right-wing, when in fact they had been neutralists. Crucially, they evaluated US politicians largely based on their foreign policy related to Laos, since many had limited understanding of English and were focused on the politics of their homeland. They generally felt that the Republicans were more supportive than the Democrats of their cause to free Laos.

Vongdeuane (Richard) Saisomorn is a good example of a former neutralist who strongly supported the Republican Party in the United States. After immigrating as a political refugee in 1985, he moved to Hawai'i in 1988 to join Kong Le's neutralists (Vongdeuane Saisomorn, personal communication, December 2012). Vongdeuane became the leader of the local branch of the Neutralist Party, which he registered in

Hawai'i. Eventually, he became a key administrator for the neutralists throughout the United States. Vongdeuane sought assistance from different governments and organisations, including the United Nations and the European Union, and organised events to highlight human rights abuses in Laos.

There was also the Chao Fa, which was based mainly in Laos and Thailand, led by Zong Zoua Her and Pa Kao Her. Founded on millenarian ideas (Baird, 2013; 2014), it was perceived as not being as right-wing as Vang Pao's followers, and many Hmong were attracted to the group due to this difference (Lyblong Lynhiavu, personal communication, October 2009). However, the messianic nature of the movement was crucial. The Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos (ELOL, *ongkan pot poi thouk sonxat nai lao*) was focused on supporting Laos' various ethnic groups. It was ethnonationalist in character. China supported the Chao Fa (Stuart-Fox, 1997) and encouraged it to adopt the name of ELOL. The PRC reportedly appreciated the group's lack of hierarchy. In early 1979, China started providing training, arms, and supplies to the ELOL, which did not declare itself to be either right-wing, neutralist, or left-wing. It supported a neutral Laos, but in 1984–1985, the PRC provided the group with an extra shipment of arms and said there would be no further support (Oudone Rattanasengchanh, personal communication, October 2009).

Somboun Thoranin, a senior Royal Lao Government official before 1975, is also worthy of mention. He became a political refugee in France, and is considered by some to be a republican, in the truest sense of the term: Somboun did not support the Lao monarchy (Keuakoun Na Champassak, personal communication, August 2013), despite many of his allies being monarchists.

Other people operated with a more magical orientation. For example, Achan Kong, a former Pathet Lao leader, supported an insurgent group that operated in Khammouane Province in Central Laos. Soldiers working with him wore red scarves, which were sacralised through magic and were said to protect the insurgents in battle. They became known as *kho deng*, or 'rednecks' (Somxay, personal communication, June 2012). These soldiers had no clear political orientation but opposed the Vietnamese, who they believed were colonising Laos.

A strong critic of the Lao PDR government was Dr Bounthone Chanthalavong-Wiese, a Lao university student who studied in Czechoslovakia in the late 1980s. She became a leader of the student protests in favour of democratic reform in Laos in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and eventually applied for political asylum in Germany. In the 2000s, Bounthone established and became the President of the Alliance for Democracy in Laos, an international organisation with Lao members from many countries. Like other Lao politicians outside the country, Bounthone has cooperated with refugees who self-identify as right-wing, but she does not identify as such: Bounthone is a self-proclaimed nationalist (Markus Wiese, personal communication, September 2019).

Lao Nationalism and Anti-Vietnamese Sentiment

As this extensive review has illustrated, there was considerable ideological diversity within the Lao resistance to the Lao PDR government and its Vietnamese backers. Regardless of their ideology, many refugees from Laos opposed the Lao PDR government and its Vietnamese allies because of the role of Vietnam in the history of Indochina. The

Lao and especially the Khmer have generally seen Vietnam as an existential threat, partly due to its gradual expansion of influence south to the Mekong, at the expense of the Cham and the Khmers (Baird, 2020; Chanda, 1986; Coedès, 1968), and to the west into areas previously under Lao influence (Goscha, 2012; Nakhone Champassak, 2016).

Furthermore, during the French colonial period, a particular relationship developed between the Vietnamese and the Lao. Vietnam was colonised by the French decades before Laos: much of present-day Laos, except for territories west of the Mekong River, came under French control in 1893. Therefore, the French brought in Vietnamese officials to help them govern Laos. Moreover, France created an Indochina Federation, with the Governor General located in Hanoi. The most important decisions relating to the governance of Laos were therefore made in Hanoi, and many of those given responsibility for implementing these orders were ethnic Kinh government officials from Vietnam (Evans, 2002; Goscha, 2012; Goscha & Ivarsson, 2003; Nakhone Champassak, 2016, 159–160). More recently, during the Second Indochina War, Vietnamese advisors had considerable influence over the communist Lao (Goscha, 2005), which continued after 1975 (Brown & Zasloff, 1986; Dommen, 2001). For many, the signing of the Special Relationship treaty between Laos and Vietnam in July 1977 indicated that Vietnam had colonised Laos (Sengsathit, n.d.).

These factors caused particular concern about Vietnamese domination, since it was widely believed that Vietnam intended to recreate the Indochinese Federation of the French colonial period, even though that Federation was officially dissolved in 1954 when the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos gained independence (Evans, 2002; Goscha, 2012; Tully, 2003).

After 1975, and especially after the 1979 Sino–Vietnam border war, the political landscape shifted. It was not just anti-communists fighting communists: some communists (those aligned with Vietnam and the Soviet Union) were fighting other communists (those aligned with China). For example, the communist Vietnam battled hard against the communist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (Baird, 2020; Chanda, 1986; Dommen, 2001). China was particularly pragmatic: the enemies of its enemies became China's friends, even if these allies were sometimes divided politically. This political shift characterised the Third Indochina War (Chanda, 1986).

The election of President Ronald Reagan in the United States in 1980, however, reshaped the political identities of Lao dissidents. Reagan emphasised the communist versus anti-communist divide, and the 'free world' versus the 'communist world', rather than the more complex ideological alignments that were prevalent in mainland Southeast Asia at the time. He heralded the so-called 'freedom fighters' who were battling against communists, often implying that they were right-wing opponents of communism, even though many had more diverse views. In Laos, these 'freedom fighters' were mainly Lao nationalists concerned about Vietnamese colonisation. To increase their chances of gaining political and material support from the United States and their allies, these dissidents emphasised their right-wing credentials, since Reagan was a right-wing Republican. For example, Khamphoui Sisavatdy told me that he was 'far-right', and that Reagan was 'like a father' to him because he opposed communism (Khamphoui Sisavatdy, personal communication, October 2008).

Private right-wing organisations in the United States also gained influence due to the Reagan Doctrine, which was framed in terms of bringing down communism globally. The most important of these groups was led by a retired US soldier, General John Singlaub, who

was fired from his military position in South Korea due to a public dispute with then-President Jimmy Carter. In 1981, after Reagan was elected, Singlaub founded the US chapter of the World Anti-Communist League, the United States Council for World Freedom. This group emerged from the Asian People's Anti-Communist League, which had been strongly supported by Chang Kai-Shek of the Republic of China (Taiwan) and Syngman Rhee from the Republic of Korea (John Singlaub, personal communication, January 2010). His group tended to perpetuate the simplified communist/anti-communist political division, especially in the United States but also elsewhere (see Singlaub, 1986). Other pro-Reagan US private institutions, such as the Heritage Foundation, also helped advance the 'freedom fighter' anti-communist narrative, such as by providing platforms for leaders such as Vang Pao (see Vang, 1987).

This is also why many Lao refugees in the United States favoured the Republican Party even if they were neutralists, as mentioned earlier. Moreover, the left in the United States was more involved in protesting against the Vietnam War and therefore more inclined to be sceptical about those aligned with the United States during the war. Some even chose to advance this inaccurate narrative themselves, for political expediency, to fit better with the American political narrative at the time. Khambang Sibounheuang, who was a neutralist and a relative of Kong Le, exemplifies this tendency: he said he supported 'freedom fighters' and was right-wing, even though he was a neutralist leader.

In most political movements there is one person who becomes the public face of an organisation. For the insurgency in Laos, that person, whether at home (see Baird, 2010) or in the United States or Europe, was the ethnic Hmong military leader, Major General Vang Pao, who was closely aligned with the CIA during the Second Indochina War (Conboy, 1995). Vang Pao continued to ally himself closely with the United States during the Third Indochina War, as by then he was living in the United States. For example, he did not want to receive Chinese support, for fear that his American allies might not support him if they found out that he was getting military aid from the PRC (Saveng Vongsavath, personal communication, May 2009). So Vang Pao positioned himself as explicitly right-wing and was aligned with the right even before leaving Laos in 1975. He also found it strategically useful to align with the Reagan administration and Reagan's right-wing supporters. Since he led the ULNLF (the *neo hom*), the largest insurgent group in Laos during the 1980s, Vang Pao perpetuated this image, even though, as mentioned above, the organisation welcomed all Lao nationalists, not just anti-communist rightists. Crucially, and as explained earlier, there were many people from different ethnic groups who played important military and political roles in the resistance to the Lao PDR, but none had Vang Pao's name recognition. This made him the obvious public face of the insurgency, and since he was right-wing, that reinforced the idea that the whole movement was as right-wing as he was. The fact that the Lao PDR government was communist solidified this narrative.

Furthermore, the Lao PDR government found it useful to refer to the insurgents, including Vang Pao, as *Meo*, a term that the Hmong strongly opposed (Yang, 1981). It had negative connotations, although the term was more accepted among the Hmong before the 1970s. The government used the term to marginalise the Hmong (and the insurgency more generally) by implying that they were the main or only insurgents and that they were fighting the Lao and other ethnic groups. Illustrative of this strategy, in February 1976, Sisana Sisan, the Minister of Information, stated that 'Meo rebels and bandits' were shooting at trucks and other vehicles used by Pathet Lao soldiers (Central

Intelligence Agency, 1976a). The Pathet Lao was concerned about Hmong resistance and tried to simplify and essentialise the insurgents and thereby reduce their agency. This tactic had initial success, both in Laos (see Baird, 2010) and elsewhere. It further marginalised the anti-Lao PDR political movement by giving the impression that the insurgency was not so much a struggle to save the Lao nation as an ethnic conflict between one ethnic minority and the rest of the population.

In addition to falsely depicting the insurgents as Hmong, the Lao PDR government influenced the narrative by characterising them as 'foreigners' and 'bandits'. Becker (1979), for example, reported that the government frequently referred to insurgents as 'bandits'. In June 1992, a group of insurgents attacked a village in Sanakham District, Vientiane Province. The Lao press reported that a group of 'foreign-based bandits' had killed one person, torched scores of houses, and destroyed other property. Three other villages in the district were reportedly attacked in the same month (United Press International, 1992). Vietnam adopted the same rhetoric to discredit and pigeon-hole the insurgency. For example, in November 1977, Nguyễn Trọng Dần, the Political Commissar of Vietnam's 324th Division, which operated in Laos, told one of his colleagues that 'The job of eliminating the bandits [Hmong insurgents] is now going to be a very ferocious task' (Lê Huy Mai, 2021a; see also Lê Huy Mai, 2021b). The Lao government's labelling of the insurgents as 'bandits' denied them political motives or legitimacy and depicted them as simply criminals.

Conclusion

The post-1975 political and military resistance to the communist Lao PDR government and its Vietnamese allies, which I refer to as the Really Secret War because it is less known than the Secret War between the early 1960s and 1975, was not publicly acknowledged by any of the national governments involved in the conflict in Asia. It was much more ideologically diverse than either the Lao PDR government or non-Lao observers tended to admit. I have argued that a wide range of groups with different ideologies and convictions were united in their desire to expel the Vietnamese from Laos, but beyond that goal, the political and military resistance was often incohesive. This was at least partly because of the different self-identified ideologies and policy preferences of the actors involved. Indeed, their ideological diversity contributed to these groups' inability to unite and overthrow the Lao PDR government.

I have demonstrated how historical factors associated with the expansion of Vietnamese influence to the south and to a lesser extent to the west left the Lao with the impression that Vietnam was intent on colonising and dominating the subregion and turning it into an Indochinese Federation. It would be modelled on what the French had established during the first half of the twentieth century but dominated by the Vietnamese communists. The Lao insurgency was thus primarily motivated by anti-Vietnamese nationalism.

Notes

1. He was accused by Chao Sisagna (Khamphoui Sisavatdy, personal communication, October 2008; April 2023).

2. The 11-point peace plan was the basis of the ceasefire and establishment of a coalition government involving the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao following the signing of the Vientiane Treaty on 21 February 1973.

Acknowledgements

Thanks for the comment on earlier versions of the paper to Nathan Badenoch, Paul Carter, James Chamberlain, Simon Creak, David Lawitts, Phimmasone (Mike) Rattanasengchanh, Oliver Tappe, and Ryan Wolfson-Ford, and two anonymous reviewers selected by the journal editors. Any remaining deficiencies are my own.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflicts of interest are reported by the author.

ORCID

Ian G. Baird http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7747-2485

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