

[“Die Regierung muss die Schwächsten schützen”](#) on Südostasien
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Challenges for next-generation leaders in Laos seeking a modernized governance

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Western commentators tend to be critical of Laos’s political regime and express their concerns about governance and human rights. Freedom House, a US-based NGO devoted to the support and defense of democracy worldwide, assesses in its [2023 report on Laos](#) that the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) “dominates all aspects of politics and harshly restricts civil liberties.” It also considers National Assembly elections “not free or fair” and suggests international observers monitor them.

Laos is a one-party communist state under the rule of the LPRP, with the 71-member Central Committee under the leadership of the 13-member Politburo responsible for all major decision-making. During the 11th Party Congress in January 2021, with 768 delegates, the then Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith was elected LPRP’s Secretary-General for its five-year term. New Central Committee members and its 10 alternate members were also elected to serve for their five-year term.

Following the Party Congress, the National Assembly election takes place every five years. The LPRP screens candidates for the election, whose members elect the president and prime minister. In the February 2021 election, the LPRP won 158 of the 164 seats, with the remaining six going to independents. Then, the 9th National Assembly, at its inaugural session, elected Party Secretary-General Thongloun as President and Dr. Phankham Viphavanh as Prime Minister of the Lao P.D.R.

While Laos remains amid economic woes, the country survived economic hardships following the pandemic under the existing political regime and leadership. The economic environment is crawling toward pre-pandemic normalcy, although there remain challenges to address, such as a heavy external debt burden and double-digit inflation. Under such circumstances, a question can be asked: which approach, gradualism or single-mindedly advocating a particular notion of “democracy,” should be adopted to promote a genuinely democratic governance system while maintaining people’s well-being under social stability.

In general terms, gradualism based on local contexts should be a more promising approach to establishing democracy by advancing socio-economic development as a prerequisite. Furthermore, we should understand that democracy can be conceptualized in diverse ways in Southeast Asia and elsewhere because of the cultural, social, and historical diversities in each region or country. Popular sovereignty matters for sure but can take a multitude of institutional arrangements and be assured only through solid steps toward such a goal as “the greatest happiness of the greatest number,” a guiding principle claimed by Jeremy Bentham, a 19th-century British utilitarian philosopher.

From another perspective, political leaders should place emphasis on “human security,” which has been advocated by the United Nations as “an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people” in General Assembly Resolution 66/290

in 2012. The Resolution calls for “people-centered, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people.” The concept of human security may imply that external interference cannot be legitimate unless it is the only option to assure people’s survival, livelihood, and dignity. There are various interpretations of this concept, but what matters most in the context of Laos is people’s survival, livelihood, and dignity to live a decent life.

On the regional front, ten member nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) share the fundamental principles enacted in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 1976. Some of the principles, such as “mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations; the right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion; and non-interference in the internal affairs of one another,” can align with an objection to an alien “democracy” notion without the local context.

On human rights, at [the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Retreat](#) chaired by Lao Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith on January 29, 2024, the ministers confirmed the commitment to the regular convening of the ASEAN Human Rights Dialogue. Before this retreat, ASEAN members adopted during the 43rd ASEAN Summit in September 2023 [the ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on the ASEAN Human Rights Dialogue](#), which includes a commitment to engaging in “constructive discussion, deliberation and exercise of mutual respect and understanding with a view to improving cooperation among ASEAN Member States in enhancing capacity to address current and emerging human rights challenges.”

As long as no significant violation of fundamental human rights is prevalent, ordinary people will likely prefer gains from socio-economic development rather than subordinating themselves to an imported “democracy” notion, which is not their own. Starving to death in support of any alien value theory is not a preferred option for most people.

Social media, supported by ubiquitous information technology, has an increasing influence on governance in negative and positive ways. Concerns are about the risks of spreading disinformation and propaganda by those who rule and are ruled. On the positive front, political leaders may be able to use social media to deliver their messages effectively and to seek to understand public opinion by listening to people’s voices.

In late 2022, rumors of the then Prime Minister Phankham Viphavanh’s resignation surfaced on social media. He eventually submitted a resignation letter, allowing the National Assembly to elect Sonexay Siphandone as the new prime minister. Sonexay’s premiership was widely anticipated because his father, Khamtay Siphandone, was a symbolic figure within the party to keep his clan’s influence over politics. Nevertheless, his premiership reflects accelerated leadership rejuvenation with the consensus of the party’s inner circle. Prime Minister Sonexay is expected to lead emerging party technocrats in crucial cabinet positions as a next-generation leader entrusted by senior party leaders.

Ordinary people in Laos face various challenges to secure their livelihoods. Low-income urban populations without foreign-currency assets have suffered the most from inflation, hitting 41.3% year-on-year in February 2023 at its peak, particularly regarding food items and daily necessities. Conversely, upper-income households may have hedged against double-digit inflation by relying on foreign-currency-denominated assets

and “mattress money.” According to [central bank statistics](#), the consumer price index reached 208 in December 2023 compared to 120 in December 2021. The price level rose by 73% in the two years. In contrast, the total outstanding amount of local-currency-denominated bank deposits increased only 33% from 52.8 trillion kip to 70.0 trillion kip, while that of foreign-currency-denominated bank deposits grew 2.3 times in local currency terms from 75.4 trillion kip to 173.8 trillion kip in the same two-year period. The contrast between the haves and have-nots may have led to strong discontent in the latter, which may have unfavorable political implications.

Freedom House reports that “the dire economic circumstances led to somewhat more open dissent than in the past, with many Laotians expressing anger at the government on social media” amid the economic adversities in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Informed of growing voices of dissent through social media, there is good reason for Prime Minister Sonexay to be responsive in mitigating the risks of growing public discontent, especially among have-nots, by prioritizing social protection measures for the most vulnerable. While the Lao economy avoided collapse despite pandemic-era adversities, the government needs to mobilize budgetary resources to address increasing public discontent and maintain people’s decent lives and social stability. However, fiscal revenues remain below pre-pandemic levels and continue to limit fiscal space, even with tightened expenditures.

Political leaders’ task should be to prioritize policy measures that consider people’s well-being and social stability and, over the medium and long term, establish genuinely democratic and modernized governance with a natural affinity for the cultural, social, and historical context in Laos.

