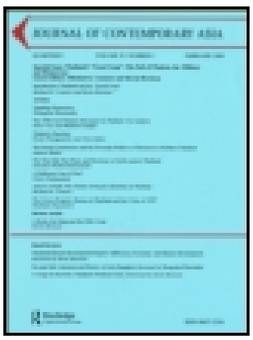

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Legitimation of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party: Socialism, *Chintanakan Mai* (New Thinking) and Reform

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ABSTRACT

To date, scholars of authoritarianism have paid much attention to the use of democratic institutions in dictatorships to mitigate threats from both internal and external ruling elites, to co-opt and divide opposition and to solve commitment problems among the ruling elite. However, there have been no in-depth studies of legitimacy in an authoritarian regime. In communist states, opposition and dissent are addressed not through co-optation but exclusion. By contrast, communist parties attach great value for their survival to obtaining legitimacy from the masses. This article argues that the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) has endeavoured to acquire legitimacy since the foundation of the regime through a dialogical configuration of economic reform and socialist ideology. Economic reform and ideological legitimisation always go together, interacting with each other: economic reform requires ideological modification, and ideology defines the framework of reform. In Laos, this paradoxical configuration is necessary for the LPRP to maintain legitimacy while concurrently pursuing an ideal of socialism and reality of economic reform. In making this argument, this article reassesses the nature and significance of chintanakan mai (new thinking), which was not a formal reform policy, as often assumed, but a temporary slogan for promoting economic reforms.

KEYWORDS

Legitimacy; authoritarianism; socialism; Lao People's Revolutionary Party; *chintanakan mai* (new thinking)

In the past ten years, scholars have paid considerable attention to the importance of institutions usually considered defining of democratic politics, such as legislatures, political parties and elections, in authoritarian regimes. Such institutions are not mere window-dressing but represent important tools for co-opting opposition and solving commitment problems, such as mitigating threats from both inside and outside the regime (Gandhi 2008; Svolik 2012; Magaloni 2006; Morgenbesser 2016). However, any political regime also needs legitimacy in order to exercise political power effectively and stably (see, for example, Lipset 1959; Alagappa 1995; Gilley 2009). Despite this, there have been several equivalent studies of legitimacy in authoritarian regimes (see, for example, Köllner and Kailitz 2013; Gerschewski 2013). As Köllner and Kailitz (2013, 5) point out, "mainstream research on autocracies has largely ignored or at least given short shrift to

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legitimation as an important source of regime stability." Studies of authoritarianism have generally focused on competitive/electoral authoritarian regimes – those states with a multi-party system and competitive elections (Schedler 2006; Levitsky and Way 2010). As Creak and Barney (2018) point out, closed authoritarian states, such as the one-party communist dictatorships of China, Vietnam and Laos have seen less attention, although this is changing.[1] With the notable exception of Yamada (2013, 2015), there have been no studies on the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) in the context of authoritarian durability or resilience. Seeking to address these lacunae, this article examines regime legitimation in the post-socialist authoritarian and single-party state with a focus on Laos, the smallest and least understood of the communist states of Asia.

It is no secret that the communist regimes of China, Vietnam and Laos have survived by implementing economic reforms which have dramatically increased prosperity and, in turn, strengthened regime legitimacy. Paradoxically, however, considering the features of communism, economic reform also requires ideological legitimation. Just as economic reform demands ideological modification, ideology defines the framework of reform. Dimitrov (2013a, 4) argues that the key for communist resilience is "continuous adaptive institutional change"; while the "collapse [of communist regimes] is more likely when adaptive institutional change stagnates." Accordingly, communist regimes use four types of interconnected adaptations to acquire mass support and, ultimately, to extend their longevity: (i) economic development; (ii) inclusion of reform winners and losers; (iii) horizontal and vertical accountability; and (iv) ideology (Dimitrov 2013a, 6).

Taking the LPDR as an example, this article argues that since gaining power in 1975, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) has sought to maintain legitimacy through a particular configuration of socialist ideology and economic reform, in which the shifting language of reform has legitimised a consistent ideology of centralised economic management. Having come to power through socialist revolution, socialism has always provided the LPRP regime with its most fundamental source of political legitimacy. By abandoning socialist ideology, the party would itself lose legitimacy. Nevertheless, the LPRP has constantly had to adapt its interpretation of socialist ideology to the prevailing socio-economic conditions. This unending task of reformulation is essential as socialist ideology continues to define the boundaries of possibility for institutions in Laos, including economic reform. In this context, economic reform alone would lack the capacity to legitimise the regime. In short, the history and survival of the LPRP since 1975 can be described, following Dimitrov, as a process of institutional adaptability.

This perspective contrasts sharply with existing literature on political and economic reform in Laos, particularly the nature and significance of *chintanakan mai* or "new thinking." To date, Lao studies scholars have been united in viewing *chintanakan mai* and the reform policy of 1986 as the keys for understanding present-day Laos.[2] There are two general perspectives on *chintanakan mai*. In a limited sense, it is considered a policy of market-oriented economic reform, also known as the New Economic Mechanism (NEM).[3] In a broader sense, it is sometimes considered to be a comprehensive reform policy that includes social and political reform. In either case, scholars view the year 1986 as a watershed in Lao history, dividing the country's post-1975 history into two periods: a period of socialism before 1986, and a period of reform or market economy after 1986. As a result, they see subsequent changes and reforms as the

consequence or achievement of *chintanakan mai*. However, unlike China's "Reform and Opening Up" and Vietnam's "Doi Moi" – with which it is usually equated – *chintanakan mai* was not the name of a reform policy. Rather, it was a short-lived slogan used to acquire legitimacy through the advancement of post-war reconstruction.[4]

The purpose of this argument is not to diminish the significance of *chintanakan mai* but to reassess its place – and the place of legitimacy and socialist ideology – in the history of the LPDR. As Creak (2014, 151–152; also 2018) argues, political language and rhetoric play an important role in mobilising legitimacy in non-democratic, one-party regimes, including Laos. In the mid-1980s, after a decade of LPRP rule, the rhetoric of "new thinking" served an important function in enunciating a revised interpretation of socialist ideology. In this sense, *chintanakan mai* served as a crucial slogan for mobilising the legitimacy of the LPRP. But it was not, as has been assumed, a formal reform policy, analogous to reform in China and Vietnam, which were written into the constitutions of each country. In Laos, *chintanakan mai* was never written into the constitution or any other government policy or law. Indeed, by the time economic reforms were acknowledged in the LPDR constitution of 1991, the slogan *chintanakan mai* had faded from sight. Rather than 1986, therefore, it is argued that it was 1991 that marked the key turning point in socialist rule. Moreover, the watershed was not from socialism to "market liberalism," as previously argued of *chintankan mai*, but from a period of post-war reconstruction and state building to a new phase of nation-state building.

In developing this argument, this article is in four sections. The first, examining political processes from 1975 to 1985, seeks to understand the political environment before the introduction of *chintanakan mai*. In the second section, political developments after 1986 are analysed, including *chintanakan mai*, and the significance of the year 1986 is reconsidered by placing these developments in the context of post-1975 political processes. The third section examines the development and significance of the constitution, including the ways in which it formalised earlier reforms and marked the shift from post-war reconstruction and state building to a new phase of nation building. The final section reflects on the subsequent adoption of new economic goals and slogans, and the continuing "spell" of socialism. The aim is to understand political legitimacy in post-socialist authoritarian and single-party states, leading to providing a new perspective for understanding Laos in the late 2010s.

Post-War Reconstruction and State Building

Policies after 1975

Two months before the founding of the LPDR in December 1975, at the Third Plenum of the Second Central Committee, the LPRP confirmed a post-war policy that would allow Laos to advance to socialism without going through the capitalist stage.[5] However, as the party viewed collectivisation as a long-term process, it did not immediately abolish the multi-sector economy. It also demonstrated tolerance for capitalist elements of the economy. Kaysone Phomvihane (1987, 19–21), the Secretary-General of the LPRP and Prime Minister of the LPDR, argued that because of peasants'

low level of political and cultural awareness, the lack of capacity in party organisation and the immaturity of the state sector, the institutional infrastructure of the party was insufficient at this stage to directly advance to socialism. In short, there existed a gap between the ideal and reality. In view of this reality, the party proposed two key goals during the transition to socialism: (i) eliminating traces of both colonialism and feudalism, while building a people's democratic regime by extending administrative power from the centre to the "grassroots"; and (ii) normalising people's lives by reconstructing the existing concept of production and establishing new relations of production (Kaysone 1987, 22–23). These two objectives could be understood as post-war reconstruction and state building.

According to Kaysone, the party had to address at least five priorities in order to achieve these goals.[6] The first and most pressing priority was to normalise people's lives in terms of food, clothing and housing, and to build socio-economic infrastructure. The party would repeatedly emphasise this goal of normalising everyday life (see, for example, Kaysone 1976, 14). The second priority was to strengthen the party's rule across the country, an acknowledgement that the LPRP had seized power without having done so (Politburo 1981, 7; Stuart-Fox 1986, 60). In some zones formerly ruled by the Royal Lao Government, known as "white areas," there was no party organisation or members at all (Kaysone 1977a, 202). The third priority, to establish state institutions, went hand-in-hand with the second in that the party needed to create a state administration to implement its policies. The party also aimed to achieve national integration through its party and state organisations.

The fourth priority was to end the wartime regime, acknowledging that this was the first time the party had administered a formal state. As Kaysone (1976, 31) admitted at the First Session of the Supreme People's Assembly in June 1976, the party had no experience in state administration or economic and social management. During the war, most of the leaders lived in mountainous regions and oversaw only small areas with limited resources. After seizing power, they were required to develop organisations, institutions and human resources distinct from those used during the war. Kaysone acknowledged that the party's ideas, perspective and understanding did not yet fit the new situation and tasks (Kaysone 1976, 29–31). The imperative for leaders to change their wartime thinking suggests they were already in need of "new thinking" in 1976. The fifth and final priority was nation building and the integration of minorities following a destructive and society shattering war.

As these priorities show, the party faced a difficult task of building a modern nation-state from a war-ravaged country. Not surprisingly, this process soon foundered on a lack of administrative institutions, capital and human resources. In addition, the lives of the people worsened considerably due to the closing of the Thai border and droughts in 1975 and 1976 (Uehigashi 1990, 151–152; Masuhara and Suzuki 1996, 182–183). At the Fourth Plenum of the Second Central Committee in February 1977, the party nevertheless decided to speed up socialist construction by advancing nationalisation and collectivisation. Kaysone (1977a, 59–60) outlined the party's ambitious goals:

> abolishing feudalistic ownership and exploitation, confiscating the assets of a reactionary feudalist and comprador capitalists … constructing socialist relations of production in the

> state economy based on two forms of primary ownership: ownership by all the people and collective ownership.

This rapid transition to socialism was also based on the historical recognition of the party at that time. At the Third Plenum of the Second Central Committee in October 1975, Kaysone (1987, 17) defined and repeatedly stressed two struggles facing the LPDR: the conflict pitting the Lao nation against American imperialism and its local puppets, and what he identified as a "two-line struggle" between socialism and capitalism. At the Fifth Plenum of the Second Central Committee in 1978 he said that the struggle against imperialism, struggle between us and them, class struggle, and struggle to build a new regime were related to "who is winning over whom" between socialism and capitalism (Kaysone 1978, 5–7). Therefore, Kaysone intended not only to address economic problems, but also to speed up socialist transition so that socialism could emerge victorious over capitalism. However, as the economic situation deteriorated further, his recognition of ideology and the meaning of the two-line struggle would change, eventually leading to the introduction of market economic principles in 1979.

Another important economic policy introduced at the Fourth Plenum aimed to prioritise local economies. This policy involved building the province as the "strategic unit" (*hua nuai nyuthasat*) in an economic and national security sense and building the district as the "basic economic unit" (*hua nuai phunthan sethakit*). In general, Kaysone was against localism or regionalism and believed that national and local economic development proceeded together. However, when considering the slow transition to socialism and the lack of resources at the central level, he indicated that it would be advantageous to focus more energy on economic development at the provincial level (Kaysone 1977a, 121–127; see also Stuart-Fox 1996, 173). In his view, local authorities could develop their economy "independently," as long as they remained under the unified leadership of central authorities.

To achieve both goals simultaneously, Kaysone proposed an economic management mechanism along vertical (sectoral) and horizontal (regional) lines. Known as a "double burden," this meant that sector departments at the local level would be accountable to both the relevant central ministry (the vertical line) and local authorities (the horizontal line). In one sense, this did not represent a significant change to the status quo. While sectoral organisations belonged directly to the local people's administrative committees (the horizontal line), and basically followed the directions of these committees, they were also required to follow the advice of the central ministries in Vientiane, especially in sectors requiring expertise (Supreme People's Assembly 1978). This mechanism was intended to allow the ministry to ensure unified leadership across the country and local authorities to adapt policies to the local realities in terms of economic management (Kaysone 1977a, 61, 121). In practice, however, sectoral departments in the provinces remained more heavily influenced by provincial authorities than the central ministries.

If such institutions were already in place following the foundation of the state, why did the party seek to place a greater priority on local economic development at the Fourth Plenum? Why did it advocate an economic management mechanism along vertical and horizontal lines? As previous studies argue, local authorities maintained much autonomy after 1975; they could even set prices (Kaysone 1977a, 31–38; 1977b, 27–28). As a result, the party lacked the capacity to exert unified control throughout the

country. In short, it felt that if local authorities behaved like independent states, it would struggle to use local resources for post-war reconstruction and nation-state building. Leaders therefore sought to place local authorities under central control by "officially" incorporating them into the economic management mechanism. In other words, although Kaysone putatively prioritised local development, his primary intention was to bind local economic activities to central control.

Introduction of the Market-Oriented Economy

On May 11, 1978, the Politburo issued a resolution for improving and expanding agricultural co-operatives (Kaysone 1979a). Evans (1990, 49–50) observed that the Politburo had two objectives: (i) increasing agricultural production; and (ii) strengthening the party's leadership in villages. However, the co-operatives did not match peasants' experience and the collectivisation of land and other means of production and distribution based on "egalitarianism" provoked considerable peasant opposition. Contrary to leaders' expectations, production decreased and living standards worsened, especially for urban public servants (Kaysone 1979b, 79). The problem became a political issue in the late 1970s, requiring the party to change course.

The external environment, especially in the Socialist Bloc, provided further encouragement for Kaysone to undertake reforms. In the Soviet Union and East European countries, a tidal wave of reform rose from the 1960s and peaked with "Perestroika" in the 1980s (Shiokawa 2010). In addition, China had introduced the "Reform and Opening Up" policy in 1978 and Vietnam introduced its reform policy in 1979, which became "Doi Moi" in 1986. These reforms clearly impacted Lao policy thinking. More directly, on the advice of the Soviet Union and Vietnam, the LPRP suspended the creation of new agricultural co-operatives in 1979 (Stuart-Fox 1997, 182).

In November 1979, at the Seventh Plenum of the Second Central Committee, the party introduced several principles of a market economy. Kaysone (1979b, 167) acknowledged that the transition to socialism was a long process and noted that as Laos was still in an early stage, the party could not abolish capitalism and the private economy overnight. He confirmed that even though the state and collective economy played a major role in the economy, there still were five economic sectors in the LPDR: the state economy, collective economy, state capitalist economy, private economy and individual economy. Kaysone (1979b, 148–239) also announced the utilisation of non-socialist sectors of the economy to increase production and improve living conditions. This reform was undoubtedly an attempt to recover the legitimacy of the party. The new course included: autonomy for state-owned enterprises; private ownership; private profits; development of a price system corresponding to the market and a salary system considering the labour expended; participation in the international division of labour; and expansion of trade relationships with non-socialist countries (Kaysone 1979b, 148–239). These changes amount to what would today be called market-oriented economic reform and liberalisation.

These changes had three important implications. First, socialism lost its substantial meaning and was no longer considered a realistic national goal. While socialism remained the eventual goal of the LPRP, as it does today, the party acknowledged that the transition period would be longer than expected. Even though socialism was not abandoned, the party

was not sure how long the transition would be and when its ultimate goal would be achieved. In other words, socialism became an ideal. In its place, post-war reconstruction and establishing the necessary foundations for state-building became the realistic goal of the state. As a result, the five previously mentioned priorities of the post-war period were no longer considered the means to an end, but the ends in themselves. This was the second implication: as socialism became an ideal, it was necessary for the party to adopt realistic goals. Third, to achieve its new objectives, the LPRP introduced principles of a market economy. In sum, while the LPRP maintained the legitimacy of its revolution by retaining socialism as its idealistic goal, it also started to pursue more realistic, state-building policies according to market-based economic principles.

It was not until the LPRP began encouraging a market-oriented economy that the widening gap between ideal and reality became apparent, allowing observers to understand the implications of 1979 more clearly. In 1979, however, this shift and its implications remained obscure. One reason for this was socialist ideology: it was simply taken for granted, at least until the mid-1980s, that Laos was undergoing socialist construction. Until then, nobody doubted that socialism was the practical as well as the idealistic goal of the party. The terms used to explain the reform policy reinforced this ambiguity. In September 1984, at an enlarged meeting of the Council of Ministers, Kaysone used two terms synonymously to reaffirm the party's economic reforms, first presented in 1979: Socialist Economic Management Mechanism (*konkai khumkhong setthakit sangkhomninyom*) and New Economic Management Mechanism (*konkai khumkhong setthakit mai* or NEMM) (Kaysone 1984). Even though the LPRP had introduced market economy principles, these terms suggested state management was still of central significance. As an LPRP attempt to retain socialist legitimacy, there remained no observable gap between ideal and reality in the 1970s. In the 1980s, however, the NEMM became fixed in party rhetoric, and at the Sixth Party Congress in 1996, the party recognised the Seventh Plenum of the Second Central Committee (in 1979) as the founding of the NEMM (LPRP 1996, 7). The party now required a mechanism to make sense of the apparent gap between ideal and reality.

Yet Kaysone (1980, 252) had already acknowledged this problem in 1980, when he stated that the state economy, collective economy and state capitalism were based on the principle of a planned economy, whereas the private and individual sectors were based on the principle of commodity-money relations. In other words, the socialist economic sector was based on planning, whereas the non-socialist economic sector was dependent on the market. If a multi-sector economy was to be utilised, two principles had to be linked: central planning (ideal) and the market (reality). This is what Kaysone pursued in reforms. However, due to tensions within the party over the reforms, he had to demonstrate the compatibility between central planning and the market in order to legitimise his reform as being in accordance with socialism (Stuart-Fox 1996, 182–183).

These tensions became increasingly apparent in the early 1980s. In December 1980, Kaysone indicated at the Eighth Plenum of the Second Central Committee that the two-line struggle between socialism and capitalism – specifically who is winning over whom – had been changing fiercely in every area: economics, politics, security, thought, culture and so forth. He also mentioned that the struggles between "us" and the enemy, revolution and anti-revolution, old and new, forward and backward and large socialist production and small production of a natural economy had become far more complex

(Kaysone 1980, 155, 166–167). Kaysone reiterated this at the Third LPRP Congress in 1982 (LPRP 1982, 42–43, 48). Although these statements suggested that struggles were being waged inside the party, the principle struggle was not an ideological one between socialism and capitalism; rather, it was over the need for reform. This struggle was waged between those aligned with Kaysone, the reformer or pragmatist, and those ideologues and hardliners aligned with the LPRP number two, Nouhak Phoumsavanh, who adhered to a more orthodox socialism and an old-fashioned system of political patronage (Stuart-Fox 1996, 189–193). As Stuart-Fox (1997, 195) pointed out, although "ideology was not the principal consideration underlying the bitter 'two-line struggle,' it was nevertheless fought out in terms of ideological position." Therefore, Kaysone had to win this struggle in ideological terms in order to promote his reform policy.

Ironically, Kaysone's liberal economic policy *strengthened* the patronage networks of political-economic elites, within which Nouhak and Kaysone's wife, Thongvin Phomvihane, were among the most important "clan leaders" (Stuart-Fox 1996, 185; 2006, 67). In the struggle over ideology, political patronage thus remained intact and even expanded as the basis of the LPDR's political culture, eventually leading to serious corruption (Stuart-Fox 2006). Due to political patronage, personal jealousies and ideological struggles, political tensions inside the party became fierce in the early 1980s, resulting in a series of arrests of mid-level officials (Stuart-Fox 1996, 185–189). At the Supreme People's Assembly in January 1985, Kaysone publicly recognised that the two-line struggle within the LPRP had become more uncompromising (Stuart-Fox 1997, 195). Two months later, recognising the 30th anniversary of the LPRP's founding, he expressed the same recognition and that advancing directly to socialism involved a difficult and complex process; resolving the two-line struggle between socialism and capitalism also became more serious and complicated (Kaysone 1985, 23–24).

On the other hand, Kaysone reiterated the practical aims of the revolution, asserting that these provided the solution for the two-line struggle:

> As the party seized power, developing the economy and culture and improving people's mental and material lives became especially important. These were practical features of the new regime and the basis for resolving the two-line struggle between socialism and capitalism in our country (Kaysone 1985, 39–40).

Nine months later, at a meeting for the Tenth Anniversary of the founding of the state, Kaysone (1986a, 17–18) argued that increased production and the improvement of people's mental and material life were fundamental to strengthening national defence and maintaining domestic order. Although Kaysone had recognised the intensification of the two-line struggle early in 1985, he shared positive opinions about reform later in the year. From this, we can surmise that the situation inside the party gradually became more favourable towards Kaysone. Pressure for reform from Western and international donors and similar reforms in the former Soviet Union and Vietnam also helped to reinforce this policy course. However, he still needed more time to strengthen his position within the party and the Fourth Party Congress was postponed from April to November 1986 (Stuart-Fox 1997, 1995).

Re-thinking Chintanakan Mai

It was against this backdrop that Kaysone introduced the notion of *chintanakan mai* at the Fourth Party Congress in November 1986. As mentioned above, previous studies tend to view contemporary changes in Laos as the outcome or achievement of *chintanakan mai*. Upon examining the Political Report of the Fourth Congress, however, one can find nothing particularly new in the area of economic policy. In particular, the contents of Chapter Four, titled "Altered Economic Management Mechanism," are almost identical to the NEMM presented at the Seventh Plenum in 1979 (LPRP 1986, 124–154). This is because the term *chintanakan mai* was intended not as the name of a policy but as a slogan to promote the NEMM. For example, Kaysone said in the report: "if we want to alter the economic management mechanism … the most important issue is to ensure the quality of management staff; first of all, the staff must have *new thinking*, new knowledge and a new work style along with new circumstances" (LPRP 1986, 151, emphasis added). He explained that as the situation always changed, the party should not be obsessed with old habits and the existing means of production. Instead, it needed to continuously improve the economic management mechanism (LPRP 1986, 153, 210, 227–228).

What exactly were "new thinking" and "new economic thought"? At the Second Plenum of the Fourth Central Committee in November 1986, at which leaders discussed *chintanakan mai*, Kaysone (1986b, 45–47) drew the following contrast:

> Sometimes in the past, they [leaders] did not have the courage to speak frankly about the facts, difficulties and shortcomings of their work with the people, but they were trying to speak about only achievements and victories. That is not a scientific way of thinking, and it is wrong … Speaking in accordance with facts is new thinking … Trusting the people, speaking frankly and talking with people in accordance with facts is the new way of thinking as well as the new work style. The other way around, not trusting the people, distorting the facts, not revealing the difficulties and shortcomings, are the outdated way of thinking and the old way. Old thinking is subjective and impatient.

He continued, speaking of economic thought:

> One example of old thinking is to see only negative aspects of a non-socialist economic sector but not to see any of its advantages in economic development and the improvement of people's lives. Therefore, we think that changing the ownership of the means of production is the key to developing a production force, which will automatically lead to improvement of people's lives (Kaysone 1986b, 50).

He added:

> In economic management, old thinking involves direct planning, strengthening of intervention and inspection of the central authority, a centralised distribution system through national institutions, and a monopoly of the state … New thinking involves actively improving management mechanisms, abolishing the bureaucratic subsidiary mechanism, converting to a socialist independent accounting system, a clear distinction between production management and administrative management and furthering the independence of local and grassroots authorities (Kaysone 1986b, 55).

In summary, old thinking involved bureaucracy, distortion of facts, subjectivism and impatience; by contrast, new thinking required the revealing of objective facts along

with the actual situation and continually acquiring new knowledge (Kaysone 1986b, 27). More to the point, new economic thinking represented a departure from the "bureaucratic subsidiary mechanism" and the construction in its place of the NEMM.

In this sense, *chintanakan mai* is not a specific reform policy but a slogan of socialist legitimation to promote the state-building process through the NEMM. It signified a change to the way that people and leaders were to address national development. In particular, this departure from the old way of thinking was also a means of breaking away from wartime thinking. In that sense, the Fourth Party Congress appeared to be a watershed. However, the NEMM had effectively been in place since 1979. Even before that, the party had started building an economic management mechanism along both vertical and horizontal lines. In this perspective, the Fourth Congress represented one step in the long process of establishing the NEMM; it was one point in the socialist state-building process, which had begun immediately after the foundation of the state in 1975.

This perspective is supported by the fact that the term *chintanakan mai* was used for only a few years. In the early 1990s, the term gradually disappeared from party documents, appearing only twice – in reference to the awareness of the masses and management of human resources – in the Political Report of the Fifth Party Congress in March 1991 (Kaysone 1991, 51–52). Instead, the party adopted the word "renovation" (*kanpian paeng mai*) to refer to comprehensive reform. Subsequently, after the "mechanism of the market economy" was stipulated in the first LPDR constitution in August 1991, usage of *chintanakan mai* faded completely. Even when the leaders describe the history of the party today, *chintanakan mai* is not given a prominent position.

Why then have so many previous studies treated *chintanakan mai* as if it were a comprehensive reform policy marking a watershed in Lao history? Why have scholars seen the Fourth Party Congress as the starting point in the transition to a market-oriented economy? Besides the fact that no in-depth study of *chintanakan mai* has previously been undertaken, there has been neglect of the importance of "management" in the NEMM. As we have seen, the party has consistently used the word "management" in overarching terms referring to economic reforms, for example "Socialist Economic Management Mechanism" or "New Economic Management Mechanism." We can observe that constructing an economic "management" system along vertical and horizontal lines has been at the centre of state-building efforts since 1975. In this context it can be argued that the LPRP has always been committed to socialism. However, previous studies have overlooked "management," tending instead to focus only on the market aspect of reforms. It seems apposite here that *konkai khumkhong setthakit mai* (NEMM) has typically been mistranslated into English as "New Economic Mechanism." As a result, studies tend to divide LPDR history into two periods, before and after 1986, despite the party's ongoing efforts to establish an economic management mechanism along vertical and horizontal lines that has not changed since 1975.

After the Fourth Congress, the reforms initiated in 1979 gradually took shape at the next three Plenums of the Fourth Central Committee. Along with this process, Kaysone's victory over Nouhak or those against the reform became more visible. In 1989, Oraboun published a paper titled, "The Path from People's Democracy to Socialism, Step by Step," in *Alunmai*, the LPRP's journal on political theory, referring to the two-line struggle:

> Previously, we defined the basic struggle in our socialist country as a two-line struggle between socialism and capitalism and argued that with the transition to socialism, we had to resolve this struggle and a struggle between collective ownership and private ownership. This shows a misunderstanding. Although we must distinguish between us and our enemy, as we transition to socialism, based on social conditions in our country, addressing that struggle is not the top priority.
> Considering the current socio-economic situation in our country, the most fundamental struggle that the revolution must resolve is the one between old-fashioned forces of production and increasing production to supply the demand in society that is increasing daily (Oraboun 1989, 43).

In the late 1980s, then, the two-line struggle was no longer between socialism and capitalism; it focused primarily on production. Evidently, as Stuart-Fox has argued (1997, 190), "Kaysone carried the day." However, this did not mean that ideology lost its meaning for the party. As long as the party retains the ideal of socialism as a Marxist-Leninist Party, the leaders would have to legitimise reform in terms of ideology. In that sense, the ideological struggle would continue and capitalism could easily be considered as the enemy. In fact, we can observe a revival of the two-line struggle between socialism and capitalism in the late 1990s.

Reassessing the 1991 Constitution: A Real Turning Point

In this re-examination of *chintanakan mai*, continuity has been demonstrated in building the NEMM before and after 1986. By contrast, the proposition made here is that a new era began when the constitution was promulgated on August 15, 1991. The constitution had two important implications. First, the NEMM was formally constituted in Article 16:

> The economic management system is implemented in accordance with the mechanism of the market economy regulated by the government, rationally implementing the principle of combining the unitary centralised management of central authority with delegation of responsibilities to local authorities (Supreme People's Assembly 1991, 6).

Second, Article 13 stipulated that Laos "is a multi-sectoral economy," while the following article acknowledged and guaranteed protection of five forms of ownership (state, collective, individual, private domestic and private foreign) (Supreme People's Assembly 1991, 5–6). In this way, concepts that had been discussed since the late 1970s were officially recognised.

The principle of the NEMM as well as its means of implementation were solidified by the constitution's definition of the political system. Article 3 stipulated: "The rights of multi-ethnic people to be the master of the country are exercised and ensured through the functioning of the political system, of which the Lao People's Revolutionary Party is the leading nucleus" (Supreme People's Assembly 1991, 1). Although this provision did not fully guarantee the one-party status of the regime, it secured the leading role of the LPRP. Moreover, Article 5 specified that the "National Assembly and all the state institutions are organised in accordance with the principle of democratic centralism" (Supreme People's Assembly 1991, 1–2). In addition, the system of local administration was changed from a horizontal (regional) management system to a vertical (sectoral) management system. The constitution abolished

the Local People's Administrative Committees and the Local People's Assemblies, replacing them with provincial governors appointed by the state president (Article 53) and district chiefs appointed by the prime minister (Article 60). Along with this change, sectoral offices that had previously been under the control of local authorities were placed directly under central ministries (Supreme People's Assembly 1991, 18–20, 23). The centralisation of the administrative system aimed to ensure a unified national administration, which the party had long pursued in order to implement the NEMM.

The constitution also signified a departure from post-war reconstruction and the commencement of a new era of nation-state building. Nouhak, then chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly, spoke about the necessity of the constitution:

> Distinguished guests, comrade, after the period of (?the comprehensive restructuring) in the implementation of the line, plans, and policies, it has clearly been proved to everyone here today that our restructuring line, which has been carried out (?over the past year), has conformed to the practical conditions of our country in the present. Our delegates (?may have now come) to understand the need for us to have a constitution that defines various (?characteristics) of the new system in the political and social fields, defines the basic rights and obligations of the citizens, and defines the organization of state apparatuses in the period of the establishment and development of the popular democratic system (FBIS 1991, 45).[7]

He added:

> The Constitution is the state's fundamental law. It lays the foundation for fulfilling the country's legal system and provides the means to defend the people's democratic rights and the right to mastery, which are indispensable conditions for economic and socio-cultural development and the giving of new life for the people (FBIS 1991, 45).

Nouhak said also that the essential objective of administering the state according to the constitution was to improve public awareness and ethnic harmony, which provided an indispensable foundation for nation building and national defence (*Pasason*, August 16, 1991). According to Nouhak, Laos had already laid the groundwork for a state and moved into a new era of nation-state building. In other words, the constitution provided a symbolic break from the post-war period. In this sense, it was the enactment of the 1991 constitution that marked the key turning point for nation-state building in Laos. This turning point did not however amount to a categorical turn towards market-based liberalisation. Even though Laos then entered a new era of nation-state building, reforms officially remained within the socialist framework.

External Factors Leading to the Constitution

In addition to the internal factors leading to the promulgation of the constitution, there were also external influences, and in particular that of the Soviet Union and East European countries. There are two points to be made on this matter. First, as the Soviet Union significantly reduced aid in the mid- and late 1980s, it was necessary for Laos to obtain assistance from Western countries. Second, debates on democratisation were heightened inside and outside the party because of democratisation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Because of these two factors, the party faced the challenge

of maintaining a one-party regime while responding to calls for liberalisation and democratisation at home and from abroad.

Attempts to appease critics could be observed by comparing the provisional draft of the constitution, published in June 1990 (*Vientiane Mai*, June 6, 1990; also see Stuart-Fox 1991). Initially, the political system was defined in Article 1 as follows: "The Lao People's Democratic Republic is a people's democratic state under the leadership of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party." In the final version, however, the phrase "under the leadership of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party" was replaced by the phrase "the Lao People's Revolutionary Party is the leading nucleus," to avoid the clear expression of control. Moreover, whereas in the first draft, the term "commodity-money relations" and "planning linked to the market" were used in Article 17 on economic management, these were replaced in the final version by "the mechanism of the market economy regulated by the government." In addition, there had been no article in the first draft about the right to education or the right to freedom of movement and residence, but both were clearly delineated in the final version, in Articles 25 and 27, respectively (Supreme People's Assembly 1991).

Further changes were made between the two drafts in the area of local administration. While the party had discussed abolishing local assemblies, which had not functioned effectively, and had for many years aimed to establish a vertical (sector) management system, the first draft retained a horizontal (regional) management system. Presumably, it was not easy for the party to abolish local assemblies since many of the members had participated in the National Congress of People's Representatives in 1975 to legitimise the revolution and abolish the monarchy. In addition, the party may have been wary of criticism from the international community for limiting political participation. In any case, the party was initially hesitant to abolish local assemblies.

However, leaders ultimately chose to strengthen central control as a reaction to democratisation movements in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In May 1990, pro-democracy demonstrations were held by Lao students abroad in Warsaw and Prague, and in August, a social democratic group circulated a letter advocating the introduction of a multi-party system (Stuart-Fox 1996, 215; 1997, 201; also see Baird 2018). These incidents did not evolve into a pro-democracy movement, but they convinced leaders to change their policy on local administration. While the constitution guaranteed a market economy and basic human rights, the party also strengthened centralisation by establishing a vertical (sector) management system and abolishing local institutions. In this respect, the constitution was influenced by both internal and external developments (Stuart-Fox 1991, 317). Nouhak summarised the balance as follows:

> Until now, allies in the world have expressed their interest in human rights, democratic rights of citizens, freedom of religion, commercial freedom of the private sector, the opening-up policy and the foreign policy of our state. I believe that the answer to these concerns is in the Constitution approved at this time (*Pasason*, August 16, 1991).

A New National Goal and the Spell of Socialism

As Laos entered an era of nation-state building, the party needed a new national target to replace the old one of post-war reconstruction. On February 18, 1993, the Sixth Plenum of the Fifth Central Committee set a new objective of pursuing economic

development in order to graduate from the United Nations' list of least-developed countries (Lao Academy of Social Science 2010, 274–277). Later, at the Sixth Party Congress in 1996, the party specified 2020 as the deadline for achieving this goal (LPRP 1996, 29). This "graduation" became the new national goal. Since then, the party has promoted economic development towards this end.

As the economy grew in the 1990s, numerous "negative phenomena" emerged, such as corruption, fraud, economic disparity and inequality, which are still worsening in the 2010s. As several scholars have recognised, the LPRP responded to these new contradictions by bolstering nationalism (see, for example, Stuart-Fox 1996, 244; Yamada 2010, 239). Yet this nationalism took an unusual hybrid royalist-revolutionary form, evident in the construction of new statues of old kings (Amakawa and Yamada 2004; Tappe 2013). Less appreciated, however, are the ways in which the party also reasserted its belief in socialism as a means of dealing with these negative phenomena. At a conference on "Building Political Grassroots and Rural Development" in December 1998, Kaysone's successor as Party Chairman, Khamtay Siphandone (1998, 9), said: "to control the grassroots and people is a serious struggle of 'who will win over whom?' between us and our enemies."[8] This represented a revival of (by then) old-fashioned ideas about the ideological struggle between capitalism and socialism. Such ideas had disappeared in the early 1990s, a time of steady economic development. However, as the differences between the ideal and reality of socialism grew, economic and social problems had become more apparent and the ideological struggle was again emphasised.

At the same conference, Khamtay confirmed that socialism remained a long-term goal to be implemented incrementally and that the transition period was also long (Khamtay 1998, 9). Around the same time, a paper was issued in *Alunmai* supporting Khamtay's position. Chueang (1998, 17) wrote: "In order to prepare for the transition phase, it is necessary to reserve a certain period of time, which means 'transition for transition' or 'indirect transition,' for reaching socialism. Generally, such a transition path is the longest, a complex and difficult route."

In other words, it was claimed that Laos was in transition for transition, or in an ultra-long transition, and that the negative aspects of economic growth were caused by this process. The party used this argument to legitimate their line as well as to trivialise the problems. However, even if such a theory could legitimate the long transition to socialism and its concomitant problems, it did not necessarily resolve the gap between socialism and the market economy. In other words, the party did not have a theoretical measure to deal with the problems, except for socialism. Therefore, the party trivialised problems arising from economic development as an ideological struggle.

However, the more the party depended on ideology, the more the gap widened between socialist ideal and the observable reality. The party had experienced a similar problem after it introduced market-oriented reforms in 1979. Indeed, legitimising the market economy within the framework of socialist ideology has been an ongoing issue. This was not the case in the 1970s and 1980s, because the party clearly did not yet use the term "market economy." In that context, post-war reconstruction was more important than ideology and it was taken for granted that the LPRP remained devoted to socialism. However, after the market features of the economy were stipulated in the constitution, the difference between ideal and reality widened.

The party offered a new response to this problem in 2006. At the Eighth Party Congress, the leaders defined three criteria to judge if the party was acting in line with socialist policy: (i) developing economic power; (ii) strengthening the state and ensuring political stability; and (iii) improving living standards and creating benefits for the people (LPRP 2006a, 36–37). The party's political report said: "in order to achieve the long-term goal defined by the party, we must consider industrialisation and modernisation as the priority in development because socialist transformation has the same target and goal as industrialisation and modernisation" (LPRP 2006b, 50). According to this logic, economic development through a market economy was not in contradiction with socialism. While the party maintained the process of socialist construction as an ideal, it simultaneously sought to undertake nation-state building as a realistic mid-term goal, within the same framework.

This situation has not changed in the late 2010s; the party must still respond to changes in the actual situation and strike a balance between ideal and reality. However, as the gap between ideal and reality widens, the party continues to struggle in its efforts to legitimate economic development in terms of socialist ideology. We can observe this struggle once again at the Ninth Party Congress in 2011. In his political report, Choummaly Sayasone, Khamtay's successor as LPRP secretary-general, argued that the country needed to strengthen political thought and improve theoretical research:

> [We must] continue to adhere firmly to Marxism-Leninism and socialist ideals, pay attention to research and grasp some [of the] basic principles of Marxism-Leninism, then apply them creatively and appropriately to the real situation of our state by adjusting the [party] line to the requirement of national development. In order to provide direction for the party's actual leadership and to solve problems appropriately, we always learn lessons from practice and stick to the renovation line by opposing dogmatism, primordialism, subjectivism, radicalism and thought not grasping the real situation and principle of renovation (LPRP 2011, 42–43).

In other words, while the party retained Marxism-Leninism and socialism as its theoretical foundation, it added "renovation" as a new pillar of political thought.

Adding further details, Choummaly suggested that the party develop a theoretical foundation for the party line and policy, maintain and enhance the nature of a vanguard and ruling party in new circumstances, apply market mechanisms, promote sustainable development in an era of globalisation and regional integration, build a society possessing solidarity, democracy, fairness and civilisation, and enhance democracy within the party and society (LPRP 2011, 43). These suggestions implied that the party considered those issues to be the new pillars of renovation, and that it promoted renovation as a new thought similar in importance to Marxism-Leninism and socialism. While Marxism-Leninism and socialism provided the regime with ideological legitimacy, the notion of renovation provided it with legitimacy as the practical ruler of the state. After the congress, the party established the National Social Science Council under the Politburo to begin work on a new political thought and theory (*Pasason*, August 23, 2011). These were to be presented five years later at the Tenth Party Congress.

At the Tenth Congress in January 2016, the LPRP in turn proposed the framework of "Kaysone Phomvihane Thought" (KPT), which was to serve in parallel to Marxism-

Leninism as the fundamental theory of the party and the people (LPRP 2016, 30, 61). As the most recent rhetorical creation of the party, KPT was again intended to legitimise party rule by adapting socialism to the current socio-economic situation. Significantly, this was the first time that the party had formally constructed a political thought bearing an individual's name. As the first party secretary-general, Kaysone was considered the most important founding father of the LPRP and received great respect from the people. However, while the party sought to establish a Kaysone leadership cult after his death in 1992, it had stopped short of naming a political theory after him (as in the case of Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory in China, or Ho Chi Minh Thought in Vietnam). Theories based on individuals were thought to have a negative impact on party unity and Kaysone himself did not wish to be deified (Sisana 1995, 27). Thus, the introduction of KPT represented a clear change in approach.

Although the party did not clearly explain KPT in its 2016 political report, the term was not entirely new. To celebrate the 85th anniversary of Kaysone's birth in 2005, the party had held a seminar titled "Kaysone Phomvihane Thought in the Construction and Development of the People's Democratic Regime along the Road of Socialism" (Committee for Propaganda and Training 2006). Kaysone was depicted in the seminar as the key thinker and theorist of the party, the initiator of the 1979 reforms, and as an heir to Marx and Lenin who creatively applied Marxism-Leninism to Laos. KPT was in turn defined as a basic theory for the renovation of the party and as a guide for the party and the country. This perspective is supported by the fact that KPT was studied in every session at the broad-ranging seminar covering almost every aspect of theory, policy and administration. In sum, KPT was depicted as a useful theory that could respond to virtually any contemporary problem. With such a vague and malleable definition, the party is able to use KPT to legitimise its rule in terms of ideology and reform.

KPT was also considered able to shape and ultimately realise a new national target. At the Tenth Congress in 2016, the party announced "Vision 2030." As it was likely that Laos will achieve its 2020 target of escaping least-developed status, a new target was for Laos to become an upper-middle-income state by 2030, requiring a four-fold increase in per capita gross national income (LPRP 2016, 35; also see Keola 2017). As it is likely that this ambitious goal will further widen the gap between economic reality and socialist ideal, the LPRP will need a sophisticated political theory to explain this gap and reinforce regime legitimacy. Although KPT may not yet be a sophisticated political theory, the party appears to have adopted it as its latest rhetorical tool to bind socialism and economic reform, and ultimately to legitimise its rule, with the Lao Academy of Social Science beginning a project on KPT in co-operation with the Vietnamese Communist Party (*Pasason*, April 3, 2017).

Conclusion

In this article, two main points have been made by tracing the political process in Laos since 1975. First, *chintanakan mai* was shown to not have been a comprehensive reform policy but a temporary slogan used to promote the legitimacy of the party line to achieve post-war reconstruction. In this sense, 1986 can be understood as one step in

the process of legitimising the party's approach to nation-state building rather than as a watershed marking a socialist period from a period of market reform. Second, as economic reform always requires ideological legitimacy, the two occur dialogically. In this context, we can see the history of Laos since 1975 as a process of legitimation of both socialist ideology and economic reform.

These central findings contain several important implications. While the LPRP has always maintained a socialist ideology, the building of a socialist state shifted from a real objective to an ideal one as early as 1979. Since then, socialism has remained an ideal in that the party is not sure whether it can be achieved. Whether the party is pursuing socialism is not the primary issue, for socialism continues to define the boundaries of possibility for institutions and the party continues to use it as a framework for addressing problems. In addition, as the differences between the ideology and reality of socialism grow, the party emphasises ideological struggle.

While socialism may be considered an unreachable goal, and although party leaders probably cannot clearly define the party's variety of "socialism," it retains fundamental importance. Socialism continues to bestow legitimacy on the LPRP and it serves as a fundamental tool for responding to political, economic and social problems. This explains why the party has extended the transition period: in order to cling tenaciously to socialism. In doing so, the party has effectively given socialism a new universality.

Yet, while the party has upheld a universal ideology, it has also encouraged nationalism and set realistic mid-term transitional goals to promote nation-state building. These goals include the post-war normalisation of people's lives during the 1970s and 1980s, graduation from least-developed country status and becoming an upper-middle-income state by 2030. In light of these objectives, the party asserts that Laos is on track to achieve mid-term economic goals within a longer-term process of socialist construction. This will be an unending process unless (or until) the LPRP regime collapses.

In sum, both processes – the ideal and realistic – are part of the same dialogical and historical process and thus overlap one other. Although the party periodically gives priority to one or the other, it has retained power by maintaining a balance between the two. Today, the party is more obliged than ever to respond to contemporary challenges. For this reason, the party has integrated almost all its policies and ideals into the notions of renovation and KPT, which have emerged as new pillars of political thought equal in significance to Marxism-Leninism and socialism.

This conclusion suggests a need for considerable revision to existing understandings of present-day Laos. Because of recent economic growth and "deregulation," scholars have tended to emphasise Laos' economic reform and its transition to a market economy, typically dating these reforms from *chintanakan mai* in 1986. Some scholars even see a "pulse of democracy" in recent reform, for example in the increasingly active National Assembly (High 2013). As this article argues, however, the party is still trying to bring the economy under state control and to maintain its political control. Just as the party legitimates its economic reforms using a wider socialist ideology, socialist ideology defines the framework of reforms. Socialist ideology is still a key in understanding not only political legitimacy but also reform in the post-socialist authoritarian and single-party state.

Notes

1. Over recent years an increasing number of studies on Vietnam have emerged, including Malesky and Schuler (2008, 2009, 2010), Malesky, Schuler, and Anh Tran (2012), Abrami, Malesky, and Zheng (2013) and Malesky (2014). Works on China include Truex (2014) and Dimitrov (2013b).
2. See, for example, Ljunggren (1993), Otani and Pham (1996), Than and Tan (1997), Suzuki (2002, 2003), Butler-Diaz (1997), Bourdet (2000), Amakawa and Yamada (2005), Rigg (2005), Rehbein (2007), and Iinuma (2009). Ljunggren (1993) and Otani and Pham (1996) indicate that economic reform began in 1979. However, both consider 1986 as a watershed because the Lao government began to implement the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) seriously at that time. Generally, it is thought that NEM was first introduced in 1986 although Otani and Pham (1996) say 1985, but do not offer substantial evidence for this dating. Rehbein (2007) argues that institutional transition in 1986 was caused not only by the introduction of a market-oriented economy but also by deepening globalisation. Based on this observation, he argues that we cannot understand present-day Laos without considering the influence of globalisation.
3. According to Suzuki (2002, 259), for example, NEM included: (i) relaxing controls on prices with the exception of utilities; (ii) agricultural liberalisation and abolition of the state monopoly on rice distribution; (iii) reform of state-owned enterprises; (iv) tax reform; (v) trade liberalisation; (vi) unification of the foreign exchange rate; (vii) separation of the central bank and commercial banks; (viii) development of the legal system; and (ix) introduction of foreign direct investment.
4. While Stuart-Fox (2008, 57) accurately identifies the meaning of *chintanakan mai*, he does not explain how it came about or its historical significance. He writes: "*chintanakan mai* was never intended, as was 'glasnost' ('openness') in the Soviet Union, to lead to greater political freedom. It has thus been more of a political slogan than a liberal policy."
5. The Plenum of the Central Committee is held twice a year to discuss basic issues and plans of the country.
6. This section refers to statements by Kaysone at the Third Plenum of the Second Central Committee (Kaysone 1987), the First Session of the Supreme People's Assembly First Legislature of June 1976 (Kaysone 1976), the Fourth Plenum of the Second Central Committee convened in February 1977 (Kaysone 1977a), and a meeting between the Supreme People's Assembly and the Council of Government in February 1977 (Kaysone 1977b).
7. The quote reproduces uncertainties that are noted in the FBIS report of the meeting.
8. At the Fifth Congress of the Party in 1991, the title of Party Secretary was changed to Chairman, and then, back to Secretary-General at the Eight Congress of the Party in 2006.

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