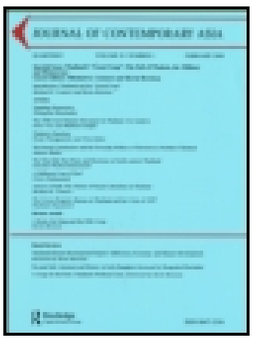

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# Party, State and the Control of Information in the Lao People's Democratic Republic: Secrecy, Falsification and Denial

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# Party, State and the Control of Information in the Lao People's Democratic Republic: Secrecy, Falsification and Denial

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**ABSTRACT**

Since taking control of Laos in 1975, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) have relied heavily on secrecy, denial and information management and control to govern. These tools have been used for presenting the Party and state as united in support of the country's one-party communist political system and as being the only real political option. This article presents a number of examples of the particular ways the Party and state have done this. The following are discussed: the little-known rift between the "Red Prince" Chao Souphanouvong and Kaysone Phomvihane; conflict between the Lao PDR and Vietnam and China; the anti-Lao PDR insurgency; calls for political change via the "Social Democratic Club" in 1990; unsuccessful student protests for political change in 1999 and 2009; the forced disappearance of Sombath Somphone; and recent attempts to control social media to publicise anti-government viewpoints. Secrecy, falsification and information management and control have important implications, both with regard to conducting research about Laos and in relation to how outsiders tend to analytically frame the study of Party and state.

**KEYWORDS**

Secrecy; falsification; information management; information control; Laos

It has been over 40 years since the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) was officially established on December 2, 1975, as a single-party communist government – with a political system with similarities to the Soviet Union, but especially modelled on the Socialist Republic of Vietnam – under the guidance of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (the Party). Although the coalition government agreed upon in February 1973 was unilaterally disbanded to establish the Lao PDR (Stuart-Fox 1977, 284), it must be acknowledged that the Party espoused various lofty objectives at the time that it gradually gained control over the country. It wanted to end the rampant corruption and nepotism that characterised previous governments supported by the US and it hoped to work in support of the peasantry, including ethnic minorities (*Radio Pathet Lao*, April 5, 1975; Souphanouvong 1976, 109). These were groups which provided crucial support to the Party during the conflict that raged almost continuously

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from the moment France was forced to grant Laos independence in 1954, following its Dien Bien Phu defeat in Vietnam (Goscha 2003; Gunn 1988, 288; Brown and Zasloff 1986). The Party and the Lao PDR state did realise some modest successes, such as expanding education opportunities to remote areas, but tended to grossly exaggerate the government's ability (Evans 2000, 211). Yet various problems and obstacles soon became evident, and over the years, state secrecy, falsification, and information management and control have often been employed by the Party and state to govern.

Not surprisingly, state secrecy, falsification, and information management and control are, for an authoritarian country, crucial in the Lao PDR. The argument of this article is that it is important to understand how these characteristics play out in particular political jurisdictions, in this case in relation to the Party and state (*phak lat*) of the Lao PDR. Indeed, these elements need to be better understood, not least because they make the scholarly study of the Party and state difficult. Laos is not the first communist-inspired country to rely heavily on secrecy, falsification and information management and control to govern (see, for example, Macrakis 2008). It is nevertheless crucial to examine the ways that these tools have been applied in the particular circumstances of Laos.

Even before the Soviet Union was established, Vladimir Lenin argued that, while secrecy was undemocratic, it was necessary. He also believed that an effective secret revolutionary leadership would eventually lead to more participation in governance (Lenin 1902). The Lao secret police were most likely never as efficient as the Stasi (East German Agency for State Security), which provided training to many other communist bloc countries (Macrakis 2008), such as Cuba (Robins 2003), and from whom Lao security personnel are rumoured to have received training. However, even if the Stasi did not provide such support, the Lao Party and state would certainly have been able to have developed a secret police, probably with the support of Vietnam. Indeed, high-level Lao government officials, including military and police, generally go to Vietnam to study politics before taking up key middle- and high-level positions.

Probably the most comprehensive study of Soviet secrecy and the way it worked was Hutchings' *Soviet Secrecy and Non-Secrecy*. Hutchings (1987, 11) defined secrecy as the "…non-disclosure of information: deliberate; selective in two respects: what is kept secret, and to whom it may be disclosed; apprehensive of penetration of the secret, and possibly also of the consequences of having even tried to keep it." Essentially, Hutchings includes falsification, the intentional falsification of information and overall information management and control within his definition of secrecy. He added, "secrecy involves deliberately keeping in ignorance individuals, groups or nations; this amounts to an interference with their independent judgment, and comprises an exercise of power which is frequently (and, by intention, normally) to their disadvantage" (Hutchings 1987, 4). Hutchings posited that secrecy in the Soviet Union was unlike secrecy in other countries and particularly that in Western democracies. As he put it, "[Soviet] attitudes to secrecy are definably different from those of a number of other countries. Soviet secrecy is intense and its scope is broad. It has considerable influence upon how individuals and countries view the USSR" (Hutchings 1987, 3). Crucially, Hutchings does not argue that information management and control is always bad. In fact, he correctly states that some level of secrecy is necessary for various reasons, even for "life and liberty" (Hutchings 1987, 4). He writes, however, that because secrecy is a

product of a desire to mislead, including falsifying and otherwise managing and controlling information, it must be considered unethical, even though he acknowledges that under certain circumstances, the result of keeping secrets can have an ethical value that outweighs the attempt to unethically mislead (Hutchings 1987, 4). Crucially, while the Soviet Union and the Lao PDR held similar political systems, there are certainly differences between the two.

Hutchings, as with this article, is primarily interested in national rather than individual information management and control. He writes that secrecy is especially prevalent within the seats of power and that countries with high levels of centralisation tend to be more secretive, with the greatest levels of secrecy being at the highest levels of the state. Indeed, in Laos it is especially difficult to gain reliable information about the highest levels of Party and state. Hutchings (1987, 1, 4) also states that particular varieties of Soviet state information management and control were institutionalised. This article similarly demonstrates how this is the case for Laos. Hutchings (1987, 8) writes that Soviet leaders primarily believed that "time was on their side" when it came to international affairs. That is, they felt that delaying the release of information was frequently in their strategic interest and that this resulted in the tendency to withhold information rather than to falsify it (Snyder 2010, 111), although some falsification also undoubtedly occurred. It is true for the Lao PDR as well. This should be of little surprise considering that the political system in Laos was modelled on the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which was itself greatly inspired by the Soviet Union (Stuart-Fox 1986, 77–79). It is also argued here, however, that the long-standing tendency of many Lao people to avoid conflict has made it particularly easy to adopt practices that tend to promote state secrecy; as such practices also help to reduce the chances of face-to-face disagreements and conflict. Thus, the political system adopted in Laos is undoubtedly part of the reason for state secrecy, falsification and information management and control. Indeed, while the Lao PDR state has implemented important economic reforms since the mid-1980s, the political system has itself hardly changed since then. This is not to say that the Lao system is stagnant and that Lao people always react in the same ways, but when a political system combines with a cultural tendency to avoid direct confrontation, the result should not come as much of a surprise. This makes secrecy, falsification and information management and control particularly important in the Lao context. The following sections endeavour to flesh out the article's argument, providing specific examples of the particular ways that secrecy, falsification and information control have been utilised by the Party and state.

In putting together this article, the author has relied on personal observations based on many years of living and working in Laos since the early 1990s, interviews with people originally from Laos critical of the Party and state, including former refugees living in the US and France, but also people living inside Laos, and a smaller number of leading figures in Thailand. These interviews have been combined with reviews and analysis of the English and Lao language media.

## Secrecy and the Myth of Unity

Even amongst the strongest critics of the Lao PDR Party and state, it is generally recognised that the Lao PDR leadership has been quite successful in presenting a

united front. Referred to by the state-controlled *Khaosan Pathet Lao* newspaper (November 28, 1976) as the Lao people's "tradition of unity" – especially amongst the most senior members of the Party and the state – it is something that those on the political right have been much less successful in doing, both before 1975 and since. Indeed, the Party and state have been able to convey the impression of exceptional unity since taking full control over the government in 1975, and this seems to be an important part of the image that the Party and state desire to convey. Laos is not, however, the only country to do this (see Abrams 1988). Still, as Singh (2012, 6) points out, the "enduring public unity of the Lao state limits the space for organized opposition and also enhances its position as the only legitimate leader for the Lao Nation." In fact, for the most part the same group that dominates the Politburo and Central Committee today has been working together continuously since 1975, and it is hard to clearly discern any particular alliances or factions, since those in power never publically mention them. One sometimes hears vague references to "conservatives" and "reformers" within the government but there is hardly ever any good analysis of who the so-called conservatives and reformers actually are, and how the specific positions of these groups might differ (*Stratfor*, February 5, 2016; Stuart-Fox 2007). Even the prominent rift between Kaysone Phomvihane, the former Secretary General of the Lao Party and *Chao* Souphanouvong, known as "the Red Prince", elaborated below, is little known by those who study Laos.[1] For example, Gunn's (1992) important article about Souphanouvong makes no mention of the rift. Nor is it easy to learn much about the details of any debates within the Party or state, outside of recently in the National Assembly.[2] For the most part rumours circulate widely but unevenly and are frequently left unconfirmed. The uncertainty of rumour further has an impact on the ways the population, and regional and international observers, view the country. So many things remain a secret or tightly managed and observers are largely left to speculate. As Baird and Le Billon (2012, 298) noted, many things are simply "spoken of in the shadows." The most important debates related to the future of the country are largely unknown to all but a small number of the political elite. Secrecy and information management and control thus function as a means for maintaining the illusion of unity. As Stuart-Fox (2006, 68) points out:

> In terms of operation, the Pathet Lao enforced a high level of secrecy. Information was communicated on a strictly need-to-know basis, and cadres were required to accept and act upon instructions without question. Non-transparent, top-down decision-making and obsessive secrecy were two elements that the Pathet Lao brought with them into government.

Singh (2012, 9) has also pointed out that, "[T]he Party seems to derive a greater sense of authority from its secrecy – or 'illegibility' – than from its propaganda." But certainly, propaganda and other forms of information management have been crucial for maintaining state power as well (Creak 2010; Vatthana 2006).

The veil of secrecy that is so prevalent is effective in giving most the impression that there is little if any division within the Party or state and that despite the fact that the Party was founded in the early 1950s on revolutionary values, there are in fact no real options for the status quo. In other words, while the Party espouses continual revolution in theory (Lao PDR National Assembly 2003), in practice a somewhat contradictory conservative

tendency is actually more frequently evident, especially in relation to trying to give the impression of unity.

The Foucauldian notion of "governmentality" emphasises the ways that governments produce citizens to achieve government policy objectives (Foucault 1991). He also carefully considered organising practices adopted to govern subjects. As Foucault (1979, 27) put it,

> Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies… There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.

Indeed, omissions are frequently as important as what is said, especially when presenting the normative options available. In addition, the discursive circumstances lead many to see the state as monolithic, as singular, which is exactly what many within the Party and state want. Division is seen as generally bad by the Party and the state, unity is almost always good.

## Political Development in Laos

Although the Lao Party and state have generally been successful in projecting unity, there is evidence that this has not always been the case, even if that evidence is generally not available to most. Therefore, it is worth explaining some of the political events that Laos has experienced, both before and since 1975, that demonstrate disunity.

One of the most important books for understanding how the *Lao Issala* (Free Lao) movement was taken over from the nationalists by the communists is Nakhonkham Bouphanouvong's *Sixteen Years in the Land of Death: Revolution and Reeducation in Laos*, which was translated and published in English in 2003. Nakhonkham – himself an early member of the *Lao Issala* – provides an intriguing account of disunity and factionalism as Vietnamese-aligned communists took control of the *Lao Issala*. The communists were led by Kaysone Phomvihane, who emerged from being little known within the rank-and-file *Lao Issala* to becoming the leader of the movement.

There is no doubt that Vietnam has long been the most important mentor of the Lao communist movement (Stuart-Fox 1977, 280; Gunn 1983, 218). This included during the 1940s and upon the creation of the Lao Party in the early 1950s. In 1954 – following the first Geneva Accords – when Houaphanh (Sam Neua) and Phongsaly Provinces, in northern Laos, were designated as territory to be administered by the Neo Lao Hak Xat/Pathet Lao, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam provided support at all levels, whether political, military, financial or technical (Gunn 1988, 277). The same was true during the 1960s and early 1970s, and after the Lao PDR was established in 1975. Indeed, even though Pathet Lao leaders such as Souphanouvong played down the importance of Vietnamese military support in Laos (Limqueco 1970, 66–67), in reality the Vietnamese provided the main fighting force in Laos during the "Secret War" in the 1960s and early 1970s, with tens of thousands of Vietnamese troops fighting in Laos (Brown and Zasloff 1986, 96). While the Soviet Union provided both important financial and political

support to the Pathet Laos, both before and after 1975, and provided the political model for both the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Pathet Lao, Vietnam was key to the way that the Lao Party and state developed. Thus, a Soviet-style political system was indigenised in Laos through Vietnamese mentoring. But while the Lao system closely resembles the political system in Vietnam, it is not exactly the same, as it developed through a complex assemblage of political and military events involving right-wing, neutralist and communist political groups.

There has been little written about the enigmatic rift that emerged between Kaysone and the crucial figurehead of the *Lao Issala* before the emergence of Kayone, Souphanouvong (see Mothana 2011). Although Souphanouvong has long been recognised as never being more than the "titular leader" of the Lao communists, the rift was significant (Langer and Zasloff 1969, 202). While it is difficult to discern the exact reasons for this division, it may have resulted because Souphanouvong was less opposed to China, taking a more neutralist communist position, than Kaysone and his hard-line pro-Vietnamese faction, in the late 1970s and early 1980s (see Evans and Rowley 1984, 74–78). Latsami Khamphoui, who was in the inner circle of the Lao PDR government before 1984, believes that Souphanouvong realised that Kaysone was using him to gain support in northern Laos even before 1975, at the time they were together in the liberated area in Sam Neua, but that he had no choice but to work with Kaysone. Latsami believes that Souphanouvong had only limited power, but that he dared not admit that he had underestimated the power of Kaysone, for fear of losing face, something particularly important within the Lao cultural context (Latsami Khamphoui, personal communication, June 6, 2010). Similarly, Mothana (2011, 479) reports that Kaysone politically outmanoeuvred Souphanouvong and left him with little power. Khamphouk Phandouangsy, who was once engaged to Souphanouvong's daughter, Yotekeomany and was sent to a re-education camp in Vieng Xai in 1977 due to a dispute with Souphanouvong's Vietnamese wife, Viengkham (Nguyen Thi Ky Nam). He claims that Souphanouvong felt betrayed and was very upset about the special co-operation agreement between Laos and Vietnam signed on July 18, 1977, as it did not stipulate the return of land along the northern border between Laos and Vietnam that Ho Chi Minh had apparently promised would occur when he was alive (personal communication, August 18, 2013).

Whatever the circumstances, tensions between Souphanouvong and Kaysone apparently escalated, and in 1984 Phansay and Vietvanh Souphanouvong, two of Souphanouvong's sons, were incarcerated by the government for allegedly illegally selling gold and heroin.[3] Arrested in a Vientiane market, they were publically beaten and humiliated before being taken into custody. The charges were apparently false and politically motivated, and ten days after the arrests Souphanouvong went to see Kaysone to plead for their release. Kaysone refused, claiming that the situation was complicated and that the government needed time to work. Souphanouvong's wife, Viengkham, complained bitterly about the arrests. She cried out in public that Kaysone and Nouhak Phoumsouvanh – another key Lao PDR leader – were always afraid that Souphanouvong was "above them," and therefore tried to control him and keep him down. Viengkham was sent by the Lao government to Sam Neua to live for a time. Souphanouvong, however, kept quiet (Latsami Khamphoui, personal communication, June 6, 2010). These circumstances are believed by some to have contributed to

Souphanouvong's stroke and subsequent de facto retirement in 1986; even though he officially held the position of president of the Lao PDR until 1991 (Stuart-Fox 2008, 318–320). It is hard to know to what extent the Lao public ever knew about these tensions, but if some did, few dared to openly discuss the rift and Souphanouvong's ouster. Instead, in order to maintain "unity," both men are honoured on their birthdays and both are considered central to the history of the Lao PDR, with museums and memorials honouring them both (Evans 1998, 32; Tappe 2011, 619). Latsami Khamphoui, however, called the 100th birthday celebrations for Souphanouvong in 2009 an "acting performance" (personal communication, June 6, 2010; see National Social Sciences Institute 2009).

Of relevance to the rift between Souphanouvong and Kaysone, some years ago an ethnic Brao war veteran waiting for public transportation at the side of a road in rural southern Laos explained to the author that he was in a difficult financial situation. He explained that he used to be a Pathet Lao soldier, and that before 1975 he had fought for the Pathet Lao in northern Laos. After 1975 he also fought against right-wing insurgents near the border with Thailand on the west side of the Mekong River in Champasak District, Champasak Province. He claimed, however, that despite his years of loyal military service, he was not given even a small military pension when he retired. He asserted that he was not receiving a pension because he was a "Souphanouvong soldier." That is, he was in a military unit that was recognised by the military to have been particularly loyal to Souphanouvong. One of the best known Souphanouvong Pathet Lao military units was the Second Pathat Lao Battalion, which famously refused to integrate with the Royal Lao Army in May 1958 (Evans 2000, 113). Despite these links, this Brao man did not seem to know many details about the Souphanouvong-Kaysone rift. Why would he, since he had just been a low-level foot soldier? Yet he was aware of the implications of the split for him and his compatriots. He claimed that while all those who served in "Kaysone military units" received pensions, those in Souphanouvong units did not. He was certain that he was not getting a pension because he had been a "Souphanouvong soldier."

Related to the same type of rift, in August 2003, a group of Hmong apparently associated with a messianic movement took up arms against the government in Houaphanh Province in the north of the country (Baird 2004). Government programmes for resettlement from the uplands and opium eradication had been vigorously implemented in Houaphanh and may have contributed to dissatisfaction and rebellion (see Baird 2004, 2005). But another important factor leading to the revolt was the largely Hmong military unit *Kong Phanh Pachay*, named after early-twentieth-century Hmong rebel leader, Pachay Vue (see Lee 2015). Rumours said some Hmong decided to rebel against the government – even though they had long been part of a key Pathet Lao military unit – because some in the unit were convinced that they had been passed over for promotion because they were Hmong. Others suggested that they were also discriminated against because *Kong Phanh Pachay* was a "Souphanouvong military unit." Such rumours are always difficult to confirm in a secretive country and it is especially difficult when it comes to sensitive topics such as this one. Of course, there were no media reports, but it does appear that the Kaysone-Souphanouvong rift was important and that the particular information management and control associated with it were

politically important for maintaining Kaysone's power and for the political decline of those associated with Souphanouvong.

In 2000, Souphanouvong's second son,[4] Khamsay (Saysavath) Souphanouvong, a minister in the prime minister's office in charge of state enterprises, was given political asylum in New Zealand.[5] Although his defection was not reported by the state media or by New Zealand media. Personal communications in 2009 and 2010 from a number of Lao dissidents reported, in 2009 and 2010, having previous met Khamsay in New Zealand. His defection followed his declining status within the Lao political hierarchy. He had been removed as minister of planning, commerce and finance in early 1995 and in 1999 he was dropped from the Central Committee (*The Nation*, May 5, 2000). Academic Sayalath Soulatha (2013) believes Khamsay may have been at least partially motivated to leave due to a perceived lesser amount of honours given to his father compared to Kaysone. There are also rumours amongst the Lao overseas community regarding another possible explanation for his departure: being exposed for involvement in corruption. In any case, the defection was thought to have caused serious embarrassment for the Lao government, considering the important place of Souphanouvong in the country's political history (*Agence France Presse*, November 6, 2000). Crucially, the defection constituted one of the few times in recent Lao history that a high-level member of the Party had broken away, thus exposing disunity; something that the Party has long tried to prevent, as part of its organised practices for governing its subjects. Not surprisingly, the Lao government initially denied that Khamsay had defected (*Agence France Presse*, November 6, 2000). Later it chose not to comment at all.[6] Both falsification and secrecy were a part of the particular kind of governmentality adopted in Laos for managing and controlling information.

## China's Conflict with Vietnam (and Laos)

One of the most internationally visible splits within the Party and state occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s after China and Vietnam became embroiled in conflict, particularly due to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and the ousting of the Khmer Rouge, but also because of the perceived mistreatment of ethnic Chinese in southern Vietnam (Chanda 1986, 255–256). This led to a bloody month-long border war that began in February 1979. China wanted to "teach Vietnam a lesson" by invading and temporarily occupying part of northern Vietnam (*Tass*, April 6, 1979). They did not, however, anticipate stiff resistance from the battle-hardened Vietnamese. When the Chinese finally withdrew from northern Vietnam it was far from clear who had taught who a lesson, as both sides suffered heavy losses (see Evans and Rowley 1984, 129–131).

Because Laos chose to side with Vietnam, its key long-time ally and mentor, relations between China and Laos deteriorated (Gunn 1988, 291; *BBC*, March 14, 1979; *BBC*, June 21, 1979). Large numbers of Chinese troops were positioned along the China-Laos border in early 1979, possibly in preparation for a Chinese invasion (*BBC*, March 14, 1979). Sisana Sisane, a senior Lao politician and Central Committee member, stated that 50,000 Chinese troops were massed along the Lao border (*BBC*, December 11, 1979). The *Los Angeles Times* (September 7, 1979) reported that large numbers of Pathet Lao and Vietnamese troops had taken up positions on the Lao side of the

border. The Chinese government accused Moscow and Hanoi of poisoning the long-standing good relationship between China and Laos (Evans and Rowley 1984, 276). Indicative of the serious tensions, the Lao and Vietnamese presses typically referred to China as "international reactionaries" (*patikan sakon* in Lao) or the "big hegemonist" (*BBC*, February 17, 1983; *BBC*, March 27, 1984). Meanwhile, the Chinese press called Laos a Vietnamese "puppet," and Vietnam was labelled a "colonial power" or "small hegemonist" (*BBC*, December 11, 1980; *BBC*, October 16, 1981). Increasing pressure on the Lao regime, the Chinese were training and arming thousands of anti-government insurgents (see Baird 2013, 133–134; *BBC*, December 11, 1979).

During this period of strained relations, some members of the Lao Party and government chose to flee the country. One of the highest profile defectors was Dr Khamsengkeo Sengsathit, director of the health bureau of the Ministry of Health and secretary-general of the Lao Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Committee. He fled due to being "discontented with the control of Vietnam's Le Duan clique over Laos" (Khamsengkeo 1981). Another high-profile defector was the editor of the Lao PDR state-owned *Siang Paxaxon* newspaper, Sisanan Senyanouvong.[7] Other prominent officials who fled to China were Bountiem Vongsa, head of Commerce in Vientiane Municipality and Bounlop Pholsena, head of the Department of Finance within the Ministry of Planning and Investment (Latsami Khamphoui, personal communication, June 6, 2010). The Lao media adopted a particular strategy related to the rift: total silence on the defections.

Soon after arriving in China, Khamsengkeo – with the support and encouragement of China – set up a China-based anti-Lao PDR government resistance organisation, the Lao Socialist Party (*Phak Sangkhom Niyom Lao*). Khamsengkeo also co-operated with a small group of left-leaning Lao political dissidents in France, including the intellectual and historian Dr Chou Norindr (Khampheo Phiphak, personal communication, June 8, 2009), who defected from the Pathet Lao prior to 1975. Not surprisingly, the government and its media had nothing to say about these activities and the public knew little. Thus, the impression of unity with the Party and state was maintained.

In recent years, as relations between China and Laos have been restored and improved, the past rift is never mentioned, despite the fact that ambassadorial links were severed in 1979 and only restored in 1987 (Gunn 1988, 291). Instead, "continuous" diplomatic relations between Laos and China since 1961 are celebrated (*Lao Voices*, March 26, 2013). This type of denial of past conflict represents another example of the governing strategy for Laos linked to information management related to historical events and intended to set sensitive past conflict aside for the sake of contemporary economic and political benefits.

## Anti-Government Insurgency Activities

In mid-1975, as the Pathet Lao gradually took over the government, many of those opposed to communist rule fled to Thailand. In addition, between 10,000 and 40,000 right-wing and neutralists were sent to remote areas for "re-education" (euphemistically *semana* or "seminar"). The most notorious camps – which resembled hard labour camps – were located in remote parts of Vieng Xai District, in Houaphanh Province (Nakhonkham 2003; Kremmer 2003; Bounsang 2006). Other harsh camps were located

elsewhere in the country, including eastern Savannakhet and Attapeu Provinces (Mothana 1983; Singto 2010). These camps were kept secret and not reported on by the media, although by the late 1980s many in the public knew of them. Initially, the media only made references to the need for "social rehabilitation" (*Vientiane Domestic Service*, April 12, 1976), without mentioning the camps. Even families of those imprisoned knew little of the fate of their relatives until the early 1980s when some information started to be provided to them (Vongprachanh 1993).

Some of those who fled to Thailand had no intention of giving up their country to the communists, with many taking up arms and operating from small bases located in Thailand (Baird 2012, 670). In addition, over time some political prisoners managed to escape from the re-education camps while others were released and some joined the ranks of insurgents in Thailand (Baird 2012). Thailand's military and security services, concerned that the "fall" of Laos could lead to a communist takeover in Thailand (General Saiyud Kerdphol, personal communication, July 31, 2013), supported Lao dissidents including intelligence operations within Laos (Baird 2012, 2013, 2014). Other dissidents operated inside Laos with little or no Thai support, including Boualien Vannasay, himself a former Pathet Lao fighter in southern Laos before changing sides in 1969 (see Singto 2010; Baird 2012, 656).

As military resistance against the government increased, security in many parts of the country deteriorated (Dwyer 2013; Seto 2013). However, soon after the signing of the 25-year special co-operation agreement between Laos and Vietnam of July 18, 1977, approximately 50,000 Vietnamese troops, many stationed in the country from before 1975, began aggressively assisting the Lao government to gain control in insurgent areas (Baird 2013, 133). While successful in some areas, security worsened in other areas after the relationship between Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia deteriorated in 1977 and 1978 as China and the Khmer Rouge, seeking to destabilise Vietnam and its allies, provided training, weapons and other supplies to anti-Lao PDR insurgents (Chanda 1986, 380; High 2014, 58; Baird 2013, 133–134).

By 1979 China was providing training and equipment to neutralist and right-wing Lao insurgents at camps in southern China. The Ethnic Liberation Organisation of Laos (typically known as the *Chao Fa*, under the Hmong leader, Captain Pa Kao Her), and the *Le Mouvement de la Resistance Revolutionnaires du Peuple Lao Neutralist* led by General Kong Le were amongst the main beneficiaries of Chinese support (see Baird 2013, 134; Hillmer 2009 Gunn 1983; Kong Le Sibounheuang, personal communication, June 25, 2009). Meanwhile, in southern Laos, the Chinese provided resistance groups with arms and supplies via the Khmer Rouge (*BBC*, January 9, 1981; *BBC*, July 30, 1981). One of the resistance leaders, General Phoumi Nosavan, the former right-wing military leader and one-time favourite of the US CIA, even met with Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot in 1980.[8] The Chinese continued to support insurgents at least until 1984–85, when they began cutting ties (Baird 2013).

General Vang Pao, the Hmong military leader in northeastern Laos before 1975, also collaborated with seven other senior politicians and military leaders (all with the title *Phagna*, a high-level honorific title) from the pre-1975 Royal Lao Government to create the United Lao National Liberated Front (*Neo Hom Pot Poi Xat* or *Neo Hom*) in 1981

(ULNLF 1981). By the mid-1980s the *Neo Hom* had become the main insurgent group fighting against the Lao government (Vang 2011, 12).

Although the Thai government supported Lao insurgent groups during the latter part of the 1970s and throughout most of the 1980s, this began to change in 1988 during Chatchai Choonhavan's prime ministership due to his declared policy of turning "battlefields to marketplace" (*New York Times*, April 30, 1989; Kraisak Choonhavan, personal communication, November 5, 2016). The Thai military also suffered terrible losses during a short border war with Laos at Ban Rom Klao, on the border between Thailand's Phitsanulok Province and Xayaboury Province in Laos, in 1987–1988 (Savada and Whitaker 1995, 285). This probably also pushed Thailand to seek a more conciliatory policy in Laos and reduce support for the Lao insurgency. Indeed, it became increasingly difficult for Lao insurgents to conduct military operations against the government from Thai soil (Baird 2012, 656). While some local-level military figures and local government officials in Thailand continued to secretly assist the insurgency, this support gradually declined, and by the early 1990s most insurgent groups were forced to either shut down operations in Thailand or greatly scale them back, and relied mainly on support from overseas Laos, especially from the US and France. Thus, the insurgents generally became much less effective although limited resistance continued in some parts of the country, especially in areas populated by Hmong people, but the insurgency was clearly losing steam. This made it that much easier for the government to deny that any Lao people were politically opposed to their rule.

In 2000, a group of ethnic Lao self-proclaimed "freedom fighters" whose leader had close links to Lao in the US, made a high-profile attack from Thailand against the Vang Tao-Chong Mek border crossing between Ubon Ratchathani Province in Thailand and Champasak Province in Laos. The on-the-ground leader of the attack was a Lao refugee in Thailand named Suang Saengsura; the mastermind, however, was a Lao American from California named Sisouk Sayaseng (*Reuters*, April 7, 2000; *Associated Press*, August 7, 2000). There were also a number of unexplained bomb attacks in Vientiane during the early 2000s and there were periodic attacks on vehicles in northern Laos (US Government 2004; *Associated Press*, August 7, 2000). But for the most part the armed resistance was withering by this time without the state sponsors of earlier years.

My point in summarising the history of militant resistance to the Lao PDR government after 1975 is that although sustained political resistance against the Lao PDR government continued for many years and involved a number of different organisations and probably thousands of fighters over time, the government has rarely acknowledged the resistance's political goals. It had its own strategy for dealing with the insurgency, combining secrecy, falsification and information management and control, typically referring to anti-government groups as "bandits, robbers or thieves" or as foreigners or under the control of foreigners (*Vientiane Domestic Service*, December 24, 1976; October 17, 1979; March 6, 1980; July 9, 1980; December 3, 1988; Gunn 1988, 291). In the late 1970s and early 1980s the narrative was harsh due to the split between the Soviet Union and China and then between China and Vietnam and Laos. For example, The *BBC* (March 14, 1979) also reported that Vietnam's *Nhan Dan* newspaper wrote that, "The Peking [Chinese] reactionaries have also made use of the Vang Pao bandits by nurturing and training them in China and infiltrating them into Laos to join forces

with other imperialist henchmen in causing unrest in the country." Later, a spokesman at Laos' Ministry of Foreign Affairs was quoted in late 1996 as saying: "They are nothing more than bandits… We think they still get a little money from overseas, from the US, but hardly anything these days. They have to rob to survive. Their activities remain minor in scale and organisation. Our country remains a quiet, safe place" (*South China Morning Post*, December 27, 1996). In fact, the discussion and fear of "reactionaries" (*patikan*) has been used widely within Laos to refer to the enemy since resistance arose in 1975 and the Party has worked hard to control the narrative to protect their reputation.

The *Vientiane Domestic Service* (December 24, 1976) referred to insurgents as "CIA spies… trying to plunder the people's property." Moreover, insurgents that crossed over from Thailand were frequently not described as Lao but as "Thai," as "robbers," and as being supported by Thailand (see, for example, *Vientiane Domestic Service*, July 9, 1980). In one case, insurgents were referred to as "robbers and spies" (*Vientiane Domestic Service*, December 3, 1988). Illustrative of how the government has relied on "bandit" imagery, in 1996 the French businessman and long-time resident, Claude Vincent, was killed along with a number of his Lao colleagues when their van was shot at as they were travelling from Vientiane to Luang Phrabang. The attack apparently involved Hmong with automatic weapons, and occurred near the town of Kasy, a hotbed of Hmong insurgent activity in the past. According to the *South China Morning Post* (December 27, 1996), "His [Claude's] closest friends say his death remains shrouded in mystery, with internal security one of the most sensitive issues for Vientiane's secretive communist rulers."

In February 2003, after an ethnic Hmong insurgent group attacked a bus near Vang Vieng in Vientiane Province, killing at least ten people, including two Western tourists, Deputy Foreign Minister Phongsavath Boupha claimed that officials had arrested suspects who may have been motivated by "robbery, burglary, smuggling and drug trafficking" (*BBC*, February 13, 2003), thus ruling out the possibility that the attacks were politically motivated. *Deutsche Presse-Agentur* (July 8, 2004) also reported that the Lao Ambassador to Thailand at the time stated during a *Radio Vientiane* interview, in relation to the 16 Lao nationals involved in the 2000 Vang Tao-Chong Mek border attack, "Laos always considered the 16 just bandits."

One can see from the above examples that the government's consistent strategy has been to promote narratives claiming that only "bandits," "robbers" or "spies" motivated by the prospect of personal gain – not politics – were fighting the government. The other frequently used government strategy has been to blame other countries – especially Thailand, China and the US – for supporting "reactionary" insurgents, implying that only those who have sold out to foreigners are fighting against the government or that those opposed to the Party and state are not Lao at all. While a large part of the population knew that these labels did not represent reality, the government continued to represent insurgents in this way, presumably to try to influence the part of the population that had no contact with anti-government elements and might be inclined to believe government propaganda. Still, this strategy must have discredited the Party amongst many who could see that the propaganda did not fit with reality.

With all the secrecy, information distortion and information management and control in Laos, it is almost never possible for the international news media to independently

confirm the veracity of reports. In villages, however, the insurgency was sometimes openly discussed by officials and village leaders seen as representatives of the state, especially when it has not been possible to deny that such activities were occurring (see High 2014, 60–63). Thus, Laos' state strategies took on various forms, including referring to insurgents as foreign agents, bandits or robbers, or as reactionaries. These strategies were frequently employed in rural villages from the mid-1970s up until recent years, although their use gradually declined as the insurgency weakened.

## The "Social Democratic Club" Movement

Beginning in early 1990 some 40 senior government officials and politicians – including many Party members – began to meet regularly at their houses in Vientiane to discuss the possibility of significant political change. The Berlin Wall had fallen, the Soviet bloc was disintegrating and many in this informal group thought it was time for political change in Laos. The group became known by some as the "Social Democratic Club," although this term was not regularly used by those within the group (Khamphouk Phandouangsy, personal communication, August 18, 2013; see Evans 2000, 200). All those involved were previously loyal supporters of the revolution that brought the Pathet Lao to power.

One member of the group, Latsami Khamphoui, had already fallen from power some years earlier. He had been vice-minister of agriculture and forestry from 1978 to 1981, before becoming the deputy head of the Government Planning Department from 1981 to 1984. On April 15, 1984, he was arrested and imprisoned without trial for authoring a report stating that the socialist economic system was not working properly in any of the Soviet bloc countries and was unlikely to be successful in Laos. He recommended major changes in the economic system, but not changes to the political system. The fact that Kaysone had appointed Latsami to lead the economic study did not prevent Latsami from being arrested just three days after submitting his report. He was taken to a detention facility at Phonthanh, in Vientiane Province, where he remained for 10 months. Later he was moved to Vientiane's Sam Khe prison for another four months. He was finally sent to Camp No. 7 at Sop Hao in Sop Bao District, Houaphanh Province, where he stayed until 1988 (Latsami Khamphoui, personal communication, December 16–17, 2009; June 6, 2010). One gets a sense of the Laos PDR's oppressive governing strategy from this case.

On August 10, 1990 a major meeting about "opening up for democracy" (*peut kouang paxathipatai*) was organised in Vientiane by the Party at their headquarters at Kilometre 6, the Party's main leadership headquarters. Hundreds attended, and during the meeting Thongsouk Saysangkhi, Vice-Minister of Science and Technology and a key member of the Social Democratic Club, spoke out against the poor results of the political system and about the Party and the state covering up past bad behaviour. He also criticised the government for ruling by decree. Kaysone was reportedly red-faced and livid. He apparently could not even sit down. After a few others spoke out in a similar vein, the meeting was abruptly shut down. Latsami Khamphoui met with Thongsouk both before and after the meeting but he could not attend as his previous imprisonment made this impossible. But others who were there did narrate to Latsami what occurred at the meeting (Latsami Khamphoui, personal communication, December 16–17, 2009).

On August 26, 1990, following the meeting at Kilometre 6, Thongsouk submitted his resignation from the government and Party. He also declared that he was returning all the medals he received from the Lao PDR government, since "they had no meaning." In his letter, Thongsouk referred to the government as a "communist monarchy," and called for a multi-party political system (Thongsouk 1990, 1–2). Feng Sakchittapong, a high-level official in the Ministry of Justice and another member of the Social Democratic Club, also wrote a letter criticising the development of the draft of Lao PDR's first constitution, which was finally adopted in 1991. Latsami sent his own letter directly to Kaysone, calling for more than just economic reforms; by then, he demanded real democratic change. Thus, Latsami was arrested with Thongsouk and Feng, just nine days after Thongsouk had spoken out at the Kilometre 6 meeting. The three were sent to Sam Khe prison in Vientiane for two months, then to Camp No. 7 in Sop Bao District, Houaphanh Province where Latsami had been imprisoned between 1984 and late 1988 (Latsami Khamphoui, personal communication, December 16, 2009). None of these political moves and arrests have ever been reported in the media or to the people.

Finally, in late 1992, the three were each tried and sentenced to 14 years imprisonment. Conditions were very poor at Camp No. 7, and Thongsouk's condition deteriorated, as he was a diabetic. He died on February 12, 1998, apparently due to a lack of medical care (Dommen 2001, 954). The government, however, were secretive about the death, and took several weeks after to even confirm Thongsouk's death to his family (Amnesty International 2000, 2). Feng and Latsami were only released on September 10, 2004, after completing their prison terms (*Radio Free Asia*, November 5, 2004).

In commenting on the treatment of these and other political prisoners, Amnesty International (2000, 6) stated:

> In the past, Amnesty International has made many appeals to the Lao authorities, on behalf of prisoners of conscience, including Latsami Khamphoui, Feng Sakchittapong, the late Thongsouk Saysangkhi, and others. These appeals have gone unanswered in almost every case. The Lao authorities state publicly that there are no political prisoners in Laos, and that people are only imprisoned for breaking Lao laws. But the Lao penal code criminalizes the exercise of some fundamental human rights, including the right to peaceful association and assembly, and the right to freedom of expression. Under such laws, anyone who seeks to express ideas which run counter to official government policy risks being arrested and imprisoned, in conditions which are often appalling.

State secrecy of a particular variety prevailed, as did falsification and a particular type of information management and control. State impunity prevailed.

## The 1999 Student Protests

On October 26, 1999, approximately 30 young people assembled in front of Vientiane's Presidential Palace and tried to unfurl posters calling for political change. They were quickly surrounded by police. Thongpaseuth Keuakoun, a 39-year-old lecturer and founder of the Lao Students Movement for Democracy, the sponsor of the attempted protests, was among at least five people arrested. He had founded the group in February 1998. Others who had intended to participate in the protests aborted plans when it became clear that the authorities knew their intentions. In the aftermath, Amnesty

International (2000, 4) believes that between dozens and over several hundred people were imprisoned.

A leaflet from the protest was outlined in *The Irrawaddy* (June 1, 2000). It demanded: "political reform; the release of all political prisoners; and a return to the 1974 coalition government, which included communist as well as neutralist forces." News about the attempted protest was first published in the English-language Bangkok-based newspaper, *the Nation*. Almost immediately the Lao government denied that the protest had occurred, despite the detailed information published by the newspaper. Then, on November 5, 1999, a spokesman for the Foreign Ministry also claimed that the attempted protest had never occurred stating:

> I have checked the report thoroughly and stand firm that there was no protest or arrest of anyone in the past two weeks. There might have been some drunken people scuffling or making a noise that caused outsiders visiting Vientiane to think they were protesting (Amnesty International 2000, 5).

In response, Amnesty International (2000, 5–6) wrote,

> Amnesty International has interviewed eye-witnesses who were at the attempted demonstration and who were involved in planning the protest. There is no doubt that the Lao Students Movement for Democracy existed and that the group attempted to hold a peaceful demonstration in Vientiane on 26 October 1999, in support of their non-violent political beliefs.

When national unity has been questioned, the government has frequently chosen, even when faced with significant evidence, the path of denial and to keep what happened secret. Six of those involved in organising the protests later fled to Thailand and eventually were granted political asylum in the US (Oudong Saysana, personal communication, April 17, 2011). The events have always been denied by the government, both within the country and in communications to those outside of Laos. Few people in Laos appear to even be aware that this protest occurred.

## The 2009 Attempted Protest

On November 2, 2009, just a few days after the 10th anniversary of the 1999 student protest, another protest was organised. According to *Radio Free Asia* (November 3, 2009), a pick-up truck (*songtheo*) taxi attempted to travel from near the Nam Ngum dam at Thalat town to the capital city of Vientiane, but was intercepted by authorities en route. A number of people were reportedly briefly detained and released. Five members of the group were apparently imprisoned for a longer period. Meanwhile, two buses had departed from southern Laos with about 75 students in each of them, intending to rendezvous with hundreds of other students in Vientiane at the Patouxay monument. They were, however, stopped by authorities at Pak Kading, in Bolikhamxay Province, about 70 kilometres from Vientiane. Four members of the group were detained for an extended period. Later, family members confirmed the arrests when interviewed by a reporter from *Radio Free Asia* (November 3, 2009). That news report stated that the protesters were associated with the students and lecturers who protested in 1999. Shortly afterwards, *Media-Newswire* (November 5, 2009) reported that 346

people had been arrested in the lead up to the planned protest, acknowledging that most had been quickly released.

As might have been expected, however, the government relied on the same strategy that it has frequently adopted: state secrecy, falsification and information management and control. It denied that the protest was ever attempted (*Radio Free Asia*, November 6, 2009). The state-controlled *Vientiane Times* (November 9, 2009) reported:

> A *Radio Free Asia* report that said the Lao government arrested protesters in Vientiane and Bolikhamxay Provinces and the capital on November 2 is groundless, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman.
> Mr. Khenthong Nouanthasing made the statement on Friday, reaffirming that the report was made up by a group of ill-intentioned people whose aim was to discredit the Lao PDR as it prepares to celebrate National Day on December 2 and host the 25th SEA [Southeast Asian] Games (*Vientiane Times*, November 9 2009).

This explanation was made to link the reports to foreign elements, despite considerable evidence that Kingkeo Phongsaly, a 39-year-old school teacher, was one of the nine imprisoned for leading the protest. Having never lived outside of Laos, she started an underground group called "Social-Economic Laos United" to support the rights of women and children. She was apparently especially active in working to stop human trafficking from Laos (human rights researcher, personal communication, October 8, 2010).

Illustrating the influence of such state propaganda, a female student studying in Vientiane but who was visiting her family in Pakse reported, in 2009, that the "protest" was a "misunderstanding." She stated that some Thai journalists had confused students walking down the street as part of a celebration in Vientiane as a protest (interview, November 10, 2009). This is in line with other efforts to blame foreign elements for misinformation. The student reported that all Vientiane university and college students had been unexpectedly let out of school shortly after the alleged protest. She claimed the students were released because of the 25th Southeast Asian Games, being hosted in Vientiane. The fact was that the Games were not scheduled to begin until almost a month later, in early December. It seems plausible that the government had chosen to send students home early – many lived in the provinces, and returned there – shortly after the attempted protests in order to prevent any potential follow-up actions by students. Again, as indicated by the interviewed student, few in Laos know that such events even occurred. The familiar pattern of denial, secrecy and control was again in evidence.

## Forced Disappearance of Sombath Somphone

On December 15, 2012, civil society development leader and Ramon Magsaysay Award recipient Sombath Somphone, was forcibly disappeared in Vientiane (Human Rights Watch 2016). He has not been seen since. Sombath had never been explicitly involved in politics or any anti-government activities inside or outside of Laos. Instead, according to Lao people who worked closely with Sombath, his disappearance is likely to have been a result of events that transpired at the Ninth Asia-Europe People's Forum, held in Vientiane in November 2012 and which Sombath chaired (various personal communications, 2013–2014). That Forum included calls for people's empowerment and

criticisms of the existing development paradigm and of large-scale land concessions given to foreign investors in various parts of the country (AEPF9 2012).

In Sombath's case, the government has maintained its position based on secrecy, falsification and information management and control. Despite the fact that video footage showed police apprehending Sombath and taking him away in a pick-up truck, the government had little to say, probably hoping that secrecy would be sufficient. However, the international and diplomatic community's response was loud and unprecedented and international pressure mounted. Finally, when it was clear that secrecy alone would not work, the government reverted to falsification, management and control. On January 4, 2013, the Ambassador and Permanent Representative at the United Nations in Geneva, Yong Chanthalangsy, sent a letter to the United Nations denying that the government was at all involved in Sombath's disappearance. The letter, published in the *Vientiane Times* (January 4, 2013) stated:

> Following the preliminary assessment of the incident from the CCTV footage, the authorities concerned viewed that it may be possible Mr. Sombath has been kidnapped perhaps because of a personal conflict or a conflict in business or some other reasons and at this stage the authorities are not in a position to say exactly what has actually happened, why Mr Sombath has gone missing and who might have been involved in the incident.

The problem with this explanation was that it did not align with the evidence. Sombath was not engaged in any business and is not known to have had any serious personal conflicts. In addition, the government appeared to spread false rumours that Sombath was a "bad person" who was somehow "against the government." Sombath's case remains unsolved and shrouded in secrecy, with the government having refused to provide any clear commentary regarding the events. Interestingly, some Lao internet users report having read foreign reports or seen video footage of Sombath's arrest. Some of these individuals have privately expressed serious concerns about these events (personal communications 2014, 2015).

## Arrests for Political Activities on Social Media

In the past, when electronic communications within the country remained rudimentary, the government was able to manage the flow of information relatively easily, through its monopolisation and tight control of the media. However, as radios, televisions and then access to the internet became more widely available, control became more complicated. Despite this, the government has attempted to control political content, especially when in the Lao language. For example, in 2000 the regime issued regulations prohibiting the publishing of political materials online (*Newsbytes*, October 26, 2000). By the 2010s, however, and as the use of mobile phones and especially smartphones, video devices and social media increased, challenges have arisen. In 2012, there were reportedly only 707,871 internet users in the country, making up just 10.7% of the population (International Telecommunications Union 2013). However, since then the number of internet users has dramatically increased. In 2012, the US Department of State (2013) reported that the government did not have the ability to

block websites although the government continues to seek to prevent Lao citizens from criticising the government via social media, domestically and internationally.

To demonstrate its will and ability to prevent criticism via social media, in March 2016 police arrested three Lao citizens who had been working in Thailand and who had returned to Laos to renew their passports: Somphone Phimmasone, 29, his girlfriend Lot Thammavong, 30, and Soukanh Chaithath, 32. They were arrested for spreading anti-Party and anti-state propaganda on Facebook while in Thailand, charged under a 2014 decree prohibiting online criticism of Party and state. The decree set stiff penalties for internet users and service providers who violated the government's efforts to control the sharing of political criticism (*Radio Free Asia*, May 8, 2016). The arrests were meant to demonstrate the government's ability to enforce its rule, including against critical Lao citizens living outside of Laos.[9]

Initially, the arrests were shrouded in secrecy, but soon after the three were seen on state television. Their heads hung low, they quietly apologised for betraying the country through anti-government Facebook posts. One said, "From now on I will behave well, change my attitude and stop all activities that betray the nation" (*Aljazeera News*, June 6, 2016). Flanked by a row of straight-backed police officers, their confessions were claimed to be voluntary. Lao National TV announced: "Everyone who uses social media such as Facebook should be careful. Don't believe untrue propaganda, it only slows down the country's development." A uniformed police officer then warned that anyone "who derogates the country will be prosecuted" (*Aljazeera News*, June 6, 2016). The message was clear. Do not criticize the Party or the state on social media, either in Laos or elsewhere, or you will pay the price.

In this case, the Party and state were demonstrating their ability to adapt with the times and to use the media to fight against those using social media to undermine them. The government is using information management as a key tool for maintaining power and authority. It is unclear whether the state will be able to control political content on the internet, but it remains determined to try.

## Conclusions

The primary purpose of this article has been to emphasise that information management and control are key to Party and state authority in the Lao PDR. To do this, the government uses secrecy, falsification and/or denial as its preferred tools. Indeed, it is important to carefully consider the role of these tools in governance when assessing the country. While Singh (2012, 159) is correct in asserting that "the potential of the state is founded partly on a sense of mutual interest rather than the exclusive application of fear and coercion," secrecy, misinformation and information management and control are also crucial and need to be emphasised alongside Singh's observation. The importance of the "mentality of secrecy and paranoia," as Vatthana Pholsena (2006, 141) called it, should also not be underestimated.

A particular style of information management and control within the Party and state have greatly impacted the ways that observers have tended to see and describe the Lao PDR, as these strategies have considerably constrained the ability to understand the internal debates and differences of opinions that inevitably exist between individuals within the Party and state. It also makes it difficult to understand the darker side of governance, including the process that apparently led to Sombath Somphone's forced disappearance.

It is true that recent increased activity within the National Assembly, including the use of a "hotline" that has allowed average people to express their concerns, suggests more differences of opinion in Laos than have been acknowledged in the past (SIDA 2008, 6). It might be argued that the sometimes critical concerns articulated by politicians in the National Assembly have served to domesticate potential dissent, even though free speech remains highly constrained. Indeed, concerns related to particular land and environmental issues and appeals via the hotline have sometimes resulted in good outcomes for the users (UNDP 2017). Yet the hotline is not intended to receive criticisms about core political concerns, such as those related to the political system or particular laws. While Thongloun Sisoulith, who became prime minister in January 2016, has gained the reputation as a "reformer," he has not enacted new rules or laws that allow for free speech. Nor has his administration made it easier for civil society organisations, foreign or domestic, to operate in the country (*The Diplomat*, April 26, 2017). Indeed, even though there have been important changes over the years, particularly in relation to economic reform, Laos still has a relatively closed and non-transparent political system that may not be challenged. Moreover, gaining high-quality and verifiable information about the inner workings of either the Party or the state – whether at lower or higher levels – remains extremely difficult.

As has been outlined, the regime has been quite successful in maintaining a particular kind of image of unity, both within the Party and state, and more generally in the country. This has been achieved partially by projecting a sense of mutual interest and joint symbolism, but it has also been achieved through blunt measures, such as controlling and managing the media and information flow in the country. Still, with the rise and increasing prevalence of the internet, the government has demonstrated its intent to maintain control. Laos is not unusual in this in Southeast Asia where several governments have sought to gain increased control over the internet (Liu 2014).

## Notes

1. Souphanouvong was the son of Bounkhong, an *Ouparat*, or vice-king. He studied engineering in France, and later, after returning to Laos, joined the *Lao Issala* movement in 1945 against the return of French colonial rule. However, he became increasingly sympathetic to the views of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, and eventually became one of the leading figures in the Vietnam-allied communist *Neo Lao Hak Xat* (Stuart-Fox 2008, 318–320).
2. For an important attempt to say more about debates, see Yamada (2018).
3. Latsami Khamphoui states they were arrested just three days after his own arrest (personal communication, June 6, 2010).
4. Souphanouvong's first son, Ariya, was mysteriously murdered in 1967/1968, with some believing that the North Vietnamese killed him because of his support for Chinese communism (Mothana 2011). It has also been reported that the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and those under General Vang Pao killed him (Gunn 1992, 96), although this seems less likely to have been the case.
5. Timeline Laos. http://www.timelines.ws/countries/LAOS.HTML, retrieved July 8, 2017.
6. More recently, however, another Souphanouvong son, Douangsavat, was appointed as minister in the prime minister's office, indicating that not all members of Souphanouvong's family have been black-listed from high positions (*The Nation*, July 4, 2007).

7. Sisanan later worked as a Lao expert for China Radio International in Beijing (*China People's Daily*, September 29, 2000). He apparently died there in 2004 (Latsami Khamphoui, personal communication, June 6, 2010).
8. The author has a photograph of the two meeting in a Khmer Rouge camp.
9. In closely allied Vietnam, the government has also been struggling to gain control of political content found on the internet (Wilkey 2002; MacLean 2012), with the Vietnam government's efforts to monitor, regulate and oversee the internet having been referred to as a "Bamboo Firewall" (Wilkey 2002).

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