

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020

Laos

14
/100

NOT FREE

<u>Political Rights</u>	2 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	12 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

14 /100 ● Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)



Overview

Laos is a one-party state in which the ruling Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) dominates all aspects of politics and harshly restricts civil liberties. There is no organized opposition and no truly independent civil society. News coverage of the country is limited by the remoteness of some areas, repression of domestic media, and the opaque nature of the regime. Economic development has led to a rising tide of disputes over land and environmental issues. In recent years, a wide-ranging anticorruption campaign has had some positive impact.

Key Developments in 2019

- Laotian authorities continued their anticorruption drive during the year, reportedly targeting over one thousand officials and state employees with punishments ranging from party discipline to reeducation. Few of the accused individuals faced judicial trials, however.
- In November, police detained eight prodemocracy activists who planned a protest in Vientiane. The activists reportedly cancelled their event after participants came under surveillance in advance of the demonstration.
- Prodemocracy activists and protesters went missing during the year; in August, Laotian activist Od Sayavong disappeared in Bangkok, while a Laotian citizen who protested in front of the Lao embassy in Bangkok disappeared after returning to Laos in November. Dozens of participants who aimed to attend the cancelled Vientiane rally in November were also reported missing at year’s end.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

0/4

Laos is a one-party communist state and the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP)'s 61-member Central Committee, under the leadership of the 11-member Politburo, makes all major decisions. The LPRP vets all candidates for election to the National Assembly, whose members elect the president and prime minister.

The LPRP selected new leaders through an opaque process at a party congress in 2016. After that year's tightly controlled National Assembly elections, lawmakers chose Bounhang Vorachith to serve as president, and Thongloun Sisoulith to serve as prime minister.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

0/4

National Assembly elections are held every five years, but are not free or fair, and international observers are not permitted to monitor them. The LPRP won 144 of 149 seats in the 2016 legislative elections, with the remainder going to carefully vetted independents.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

0/4

The electoral laws and framework are designed to ensure that the LPRP, the only legal party, dominates every election and controls the political system.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

0/4

The constitution makes the ruling LPRP the sole legal political party, and grants it a leading role at all levels of government.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

0/4

Although the LPRP is the only legal party, National Assembly candidates are not required to be members. However, all candidates must be approved by National Assembly-appointed committees.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

0/4

The authoritarian one-party system in Laos excludes the public from any genuine and autonomous political participation.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

0/4

The right to vote and run for office are guaranteed in the constitution, but due to the one-party system, no portion of the population may exercise full political rights and electoral opportunities. Nominal representatives of ethnic minorities hold positions in the Politburo, Central Committee, and National Assembly, but they are limited in their ability to advocate for policies that benefit minorities. Women hold 27.5 percent of the National Assembly's seats, but their presence in the legislature similarly does not guarantee that the interests of women are represented in politics.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

0 / 4

None of the country's nominally elected officials are chosen through free and fair contests, and major policy decisions are reserved for the LPRP. In recent years the government has more frequently passed laws, rather than decrees, to govern, though due to the choreographed nature of elections the representatives approving these bills cannot be said to be enacting the will of the electorate.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

1 / 4

Corruption by government officials is widespread. Laws aimed at curbing graft are not well enforced, and government regulation of virtually every facet of life provides many opportunities for bribery and fraud.

However, Prime Minister Thongloun has initiated an anticorruption drive since taking office in 2016. After taking office, he empowered the State Audit Organization (SAO) to conduct financial and budget investigations. The SAO has since uncovered several instances of misappropriated state funds and unreported expenditures, and some

LPRP officials have apparently returned money that they stole to the national treasury.

Anticorruption efforts continued in 2019; in March, the Transport Ministry's inspection unit reported over 1,000 cases of corruption by employees stretching back to 2018, and that 850 were disciplined. By May, at least 200 officials were disciplined for activities including corruption, drug trafficking, and embezzlement. Punishments varied, and included acts of party discipline, demotion, and in some cases, "reeducation." Relatively few of the officials suspected of corruption were pursued through judicial means. The National Assembly has also become more rhetorically assertive on the matter, with members criticizing corruption, bribery, and the lack of judicial independence in a session broadcast in mid-June.

The prime minister placed a ban on export timber in 2016, in an effort to crack down on illegal logging and extensive deforestation. In 2017, he restricted some mining and fruit plantation operations that were accused of causing environmental damage and being conduits for graft. Two provincial governors were fired, one in late 2017 and one in early 2018, over alleged links to graft in the timber trade. Despite these efforts, illegal timber exports have continued; 21 of the government employees who were disciplined for corruption in 2019 were involved in the trade.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

1/4

There are no access to information laws in Laos. However, the 2012 Law on Making Legislation increased legislative transparency by requiring bills proposed at the central and provincial levels to be published for comment for 60 days and, once passed, to be posted for 15 days before coming into force.

A 2014 asset declaration program has helped identify corrupt government officials. The prime minister has repeatedly promised to make government more transparent to the citizenry, although he has been unclear about how he will do so.

Authorities have also withheld information about a 2018 dam collapse, which resulted in 43 deaths according to the authorities. The government received a report on the incident in March 2019, which blamed the collapse on substandard construction; however, it remained private at year's end.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

0/4

Authorities use legal restrictions and intimidation tactics against state critics, and as a result, self-censorship is widespread. The state owns nearly all media, though some independent outlets, primarily entertainment magazines that steer clear of political commentary, have emerged in recent years. Coverage of the catastrophic 2018 dam collapse was suppressed, particularly within Laos.

In July 2019, news outlets that disseminate material through social media networks were ordered to register with the government, which threatened fines and prison sentences for those who did not comply; the Information Ministry claimed the move was meant to arrest the spread of “fake news.”

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

2/4

Religious freedom is guaranteed in the constitution, but in practice is constrained, in part through the LPRP's control of clergy training and supervision of Buddhist

temples. There have been multiple cases in recent years of Christians being briefly detained or sentenced to jail for unauthorized religious activities, or pressured by authorities to renounce their faith. A ban on public proselytizing is generally enforced, and authorities make efforts to monitor the importation of religious materials. Three Americans who distributed religious literature in northern Laos were detained in April 2019 and deported.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

1/4

University professors cannot teach or write about politically sensitive topics, though Laos has invited select foreign academics to teach courses in the country.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

1/4

Government surveillance of the population has been scaled back in recent years, but security agencies and LPRP-backed mass organizations continue to monitor for public dissent, which is punishable under a variety of laws. As a result, there is little space for open and free private discussion of sensitive issues. The government attempts to monitor social media usage for content and images that portray Laos negatively, courts hand down heavy sentences in response to the posting of such material. In November 2019, a court sentenced a Laotian citizen to five years in prison for criticizing the government in a Facebook post.

Nevertheless, a Chinese railway construction project that has displaced citizens and prompted the government to take on debt, the 2018 dam collapse, and other projects that have forced people off their land have been controversial enough to prompt some criticism of the government among ordinary people.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

0 / 4

Although protected in the constitution, the government severely restricts freedom of assembly. Protests are rare, and those deemed to be participating in unsanctioned gatherings can receive lengthy prison sentences. The government occasionally allows demonstrations that pose little threat to the LPRP.

In 2017, Laos's government arrested 15 villagers in Xékong Province for protesting against alleged land grabs. While five were released without explanation, nine were detained for two years and received two- to six-year prison sentences in June 2019. One protester was subsequently released in July.

In November 2019, police detained eight activists who planned a prodemocracy protest in Vientiane; six were released, while the whereabouts of the remaining two were unclear at year's end. The organizers reportedly cancelled the event after potential participants were placed under state surveillance.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work?

0 / 4

Alongside LPRP-affiliated mass organizations, there are some domestic nongovernmental welfare and professional groups, but they are prohibited from pursuing political agendas. Registration and regulatory mechanisms for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are onerous and allow for arbitrary state interference. A new decree on associations, which came into force in 2017, mandates

that NGOs secure government approval for their initiatives and funding, among other new restrictions.

Human rights and prodemocracy activists are also at risk of unexplained disappearance. In August 2019, prodemocracy activist Od Sayavong disappeared in Bangkok, where he resided. In November 2019, Phetphouthon Philachane, a Laotian citizen who demonstrated in front of the Laotian embassy in Bangkok earlier in the year, disappeared after returning to Laos. Both were still missing at year's end. Scores of participants in a cancelled November 2019 prodemocracy rally also went missing; their whereabouts were similarly unknown at year's end.

The 2012 disappearance of prominent antipoverty activist Sombath Somphone remained unsolved in 2019.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

0 / 4

Most unions belong to the official Lao Federation of Trade Unions. Strikes are not expressly prohibited, but workers rarely stage walkouts. Collective bargaining is legally permitted, but rarely exercised by workers, as workers who try to engage in collective bargaining are usually punished.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

0 / 4

The courts are wracked by corruption and subject to LPRP influence. Major decisions are often made secretly.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	0 /4
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Due process rights are outlined in the law, but these rights are routinely denied. Defendants are often presumed guilty, and long procedural delays in the judicial system are common. Appeals processes are often nonexistent or delayed, sometimes indefinitely. Searches without warrants occur and arbitrary arrests continue. Villages are encouraged to settle noncriminal disputes in local mediation units, which are outside the formal judicial system.

F3 0-4 pts	
Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?	1 /4

Security forces often illegally detain suspects. Prison conditions are substandard, with reports of inadequate food and medical facilities.

Prisoners are also subject to torture; a group of villagers from Xékong Province, who were detained after their 2017 protest, were reportedly tortured while in detention. One villager died in prison in 2018, though authorities claimed his death was a suicide. A villager from Salavan Province, who was detained in 2011, died in custody in May 2019, with neighbors fearing he was tortured.

F4 0-4 pts	
Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	1 /4

Equal rights are constitutionally guaranteed, but are not upheld in practice. Discrimination against members of ethnic minority tribes is common. The Hmong, who fielded a guerrilla army allied with US forces during the Vietnam War, are particularly distrusted by the government and face harsh treatment. Asylum for refugees is protected by law, but not always granted.

There have been multiple violent attacks, including murders, of Chinese nationals in Laos in recent years.

While same-sex sexual acts are legal and violence against LGBT+ people is rare, no legislation provides explicit protection against discrimination based on sexual preference or gender identity.

Gender-based discrimination and abuse are widespread. Discriminatory traditions and religious practices have contributed to women's limited access to education, employment opportunities, and worker benefits.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

2/4

The dominance of the LPRP over most aspects of society can effectively restrict individuals' ability to choose their place of residence, employment, or education. Freedom of movement is sometimes restricted for ethnic Hmong. Security checkpoints in central Laos can hamper travel, though the military has in recent years reduced controls in the region.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

1/4

All land is owned by the state, though citizens have rights to use it. However, in recent years land rights have become an increasing source of public discontent. Construction began on a high-speed rail line from China through Laos at the end of

2016, resulting in the displacement of over 4,000 families; many villagers remain uncertain of what kind of compensation they will receive.

Villagers who live on or near the sites of planned dams on the Mekong River are increasingly caught up in land disputes, and are often forced to leave their homes. As many as 465 families in Louangphabang Province were reportedly displaced in July 2019, as construction proceeded on one of the dams. Apparent deficiencies revealed by the catastrophic dam collapse in southern Laos in 2018, which killed dozens of people and left thousands homeless, have not prompted the government to reevaluate dam-building projects. Many survivors of the 2018 collapse are living in resettlement camps, and are still awaiting compensation.

Foreign investors are subject to expropriation of joint ventures without due process in Laotian courts.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

2 / 4

Social freedoms can be restricted, especially for women and children. In 2016, a survey supported by the UN and the World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that nearly a third of women in Laos had experienced domestic violence. Abortion is illegal and only permitted when the mother's life is at risk. Underage marriage is permitted with parental permission.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

1 / 4

Trafficking in persons, especially to Thailand, is common, and enforcement of antitrafficking measures is hindered by a lack of transparency and weak rule of law. The building of new roads through Laos in recent years has aided trafficking operations.

Children as young as 12 years old may be legally employed in Laos. Inspections of workplaces, including those for industries considered hazardous, are required by law but do not take place regularly.



On Laos

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

13/100 ● Not Free

Other Years

2024



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