

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2018

Laos

12

NOT FREE

/100

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|-------------------------|---------------|
| <u>Political Rights</u> | 1 /40 |
| <u>Civil Liberties</u> | 11 /60 |

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

12 /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, which frequently lead to violence.

Key Developments in 2017

- In May, the government sentenced three Laotian citizens to lengthy jail terms for criticizing the government on social media while living in Thailand. They had been arrested in connection with the remarks upon their return to Laos.
- There were several violent attacks against Chinese citizens during the year. The attacks came amid rising tensions over the development of Laotian land by Chinese companies.
- The year saw modest progress in the fight against rampant corruption, under initiatives spearheaded by Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith.

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 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 election, 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 considered free or fair and international observers are not permitted to monitor them. The LPRP won 144 of 149 seats in the 2016 legislative elections 2016, 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

0/4

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|---|--|
| of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? | |
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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

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|---|--------------|
| Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? | 0 / 4 |
|---|--------------|

Although LPRP is the only legal party, National Assembly candidates are not required to be members. However, all candidates must be approved by assembly-appointed committees. In practice, almost all lawmakers belong to the LPRP, and legislate alongside a handful of party-vetted independents.

B3 0-4 pts

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| Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? | 0 / 4 |
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The authoritarian one-party system in Laos excludes the public from any genuine and autonomous political participation.

B4 0-4 pts

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|---|--------------|
| 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 approximately 28 percent of the National Assembly seats, but their presence in the legislature similarly does not guarantee that the interests of women are represented in politics. At the local level, village-level leaders are responsible for many of the decisions affecting daily life, and nearly all village chiefs are men.

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 there is still little room for the public to influence policy.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

0 / 4

Corruption by government officials is widespread. Laws aimed at curbing graft are poorly enforced, and government regulation of virtually every facet of life provides many opportunities for bribery and fraud.

Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith has initiated some anticorruption drives since taking office in 2016. After taking office, he empowered the State Audit Organization (SAO) to conduct financial and budget investigations. The office 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. The State Inspection Authority (SIA) reported in 2017 that 71 officials had been investigated for corruption the previous year. In February 2017, the government publicly auctioned off luxury cars that had previously been used by top officials.

Additionally, the prime minister has targeted drug traffickers in an effort to combat corruption and crime, and a few key drug traffickers have been arrested.

The prime minister also placed a ban on export timber in 2016, in an effort to crack down on illegal logging and the extensive deforestation of the country. Despite the ban, government officials continue to be linked to the illegal smuggling of timber.

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. Meanwhile, SIA reported that over 240,000 government officials and employees submitted asset declarations for review in 2017. In October 2017, SAO reported that over \$120 million of unapproved state spending was discovered in the 2015–16 budget.

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.

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 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. In May 2017, Pope Francis appointed the first-ever Laotian cardinal, demonstrating the potential for improved relations between the government and the Vatican.

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, and some young people go overseas for university education.

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. In 2016, three Laotians living in Thailand criticized Laos's government on social media, and when they returned to Laos, they were arrested. In May 2017, the government, in a secret trial, sentenced them to between twelve and twenty years in jail.

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 September 2017, upset investors gathered in Vientiane to protest against an alleged pyramid scheme by a Laotian agricultural company. The government later detained two of the companies' executives.

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 November 2017, mandates that NGOs secure government approval for their initiatives and funding, among other new restrictions.

The 2012 disappearance of prominent antipoverty activist Sombath Somphone remained unsolved in 2017.

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.

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

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,

particularly those arrested for drug use or activism. Villages are encouraged to settle non-criminal 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. Torture of prisoners is occasionally reported.

A Thai antigovernment activist living in exile in Laos was reportedly abducted in Vientiane in July 2017 by a group of armed men.

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. A Chinese worker was killed in March 2017 at a logging site in Luang Prabang and in June, a Chinese national was shot and killed in Xaysomboun Province. Some observers suggested that local anger at the environmental destruction caused by foreign-owned mining, logging, and farming concessions has been a contributing factor to the attacks on Chinese nationals, many of whom traveled to Laos for work in these sectors.

While same-sex sexual acts are legal and violence against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) 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?

1 / 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.

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. 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, and many villagers remain uncertain of what kind of compensation they will receive. In July 2017, the government arrested eleven people in Sekong Province who were involved in a decade-long land dispute with a Vietnamese rubber company. Three more villagers were arrested in September and were reportedly assaulted by the police. Villagers who live on or near the sites of planned dams on the Mekong River are also increasingly caught up in land disputes.

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. Marriage to foreign citizens requires approval by the government. In 2016, a survey supported by the UN and the World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that close to one third of women in Laos had experienced domestic violence. Abortion is illegal and only permitted when the mother's life is at risk. There are no penalties for facilitating child prostitution, and 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. Public workers are not always paid on time.



On Laos

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

13/100 ● Not Free

Other Years

2024



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