

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2023

# Laos

NOT FREE

13  
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	2 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	11 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

13 /100 ● Not Free

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



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# 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, independent civil society, or independent media sector. Economic development has stoked disputes over land and environmental problems, and an economic and debt crisis that erupted in 2022 has led to public anger toward both the government and China, the country's main creditor.

## Key Developments in 2022

- Laos suffered a major economic crisis during the year, driven by a combination of excessive debt, rising fuel prices, a broader global economic downturn, and the COVID-19 pandemic's lasting impact on tourism. Some analysts suggested that additional debts owed to Chinese entities had still not been publicly revealed.
- In June, as fuel and other basic supplies grew more scarce and inflation spiked, the prime minister shuffled the cabinet and replaced the head of the national bank. The risk of a default on public debt remained a concern at year's end, and the prime minister resigned in late December, citing health reasons.
- The dire economic circumstances led to somewhat more open dissent than in the past, with many Laotians expressing anger at the government on social media. While the authorities made little effort to censor the online criticism, public protests remained extremely rare, with a heavy security presence and repressive laws serving as deterrents.

## 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 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.

In an opaque January 2021 party congress, former prime minister Thongloun Sisolith was named LPRP secretary-general. In March of that year, Thongloun was named state president by the National Assembly, while former vice president Phankham Viphavanh was named prime minister. In December 2022, Phankham resigned, citing health reasons; he was replaced by his deputy prime minister, Sonexay Siphandone.

**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 they are not free or fair, and international observers are not permitted to monitor them. The LPRP won 158 of the body's 164 seats in the February 2021 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 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 nominally independent candidates are allowed to seek National Assembly seats, all candidates must be approved by National Assembly-appointed committees, effectively barring genuine opposition figures from contesting elections and challenging the LPRP's dominance.

**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

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

**B4** 0-4 pts

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

**0/4**

The rights to vote and run for office are constitutionally guaranteed, but due to the one-party system, no segment of the population can exercise full political rights and electoral opportunities. Some members of ethnic minority groups hold positions in LPRP leadership bodies and the National Assembly, but they have little ability to advocate independently for policies that benefit their communities.

Women's interests are not addressed in the political system, and women are poorly represented in the legislature; female candidates won 22 percent of the National Assembly's seats in the February 2021 elections, a decrease from 27.5 percent in the 2016 polls.

## **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 and particularly a small cadre of its top leaders.

**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 poorly enforced, and government regulation of virtually every facet of life provides

many opportunities for bribery. Punishments for corruption are often administered through LPRP disciplinary mechanisms rather than the judicial system.

President Thongloun initiated an anticorruption drive while serving as prime minister from 2016 to 2021. The State Audit Organization, which gained the power to conduct financial and budget investigations during his premiership, uncovered instances of misappropriated state funds and unreported expenditures. Yet there have been persistent rumors that the country's large-scale borrowing from China in recent years was inflated in part by corruption in the associated infrastructure projects.

Phankham, Thongloun's successor as prime minister, also vowed to combat official corruption, but this goal appeared to be overshadowed during 2022 by the need to manage the broader economic crisis.

**C3** 0-4 pts

**Does the government operate with openness and transparency?**

**1/4**

There is no law guaranteeing access to official information in Laos. The 2012 Law on Making Legislation increased legislative transparency by requiring bills proposed at the central and provincial levels to be published for a 60-day comment period and, once passed, to be posted for 15 days before coming into force.

In June 2022, responding to growing public anger about the economic crisis, Prime Minister Phankham reshuffled his cabinet and fired the head of the central bank. He also offered a rare admission that the government had made mistakes. Phankham's resignation in December 2022, ostensibly for health reasons, came amid ongoing concerns about unreported debts to Chinese entities and reports that many Chinese mining enterprises in the country had failed to pay taxes.

## **Civil Liberties**

# D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

**D1** 0-4 pts

**Are there free and independent media?**

**0**/4

Authorities use restrictive laws and intimidation tactics against critics of the government, and as a result, self-censorship is the norm among journalists. The state owns nearly all media, though some independent outlets, primarily entertainment magazines, have emerged in recent years. In 2019, the government required news outlets that disseminate material through social media to register themselves, threatening fines and prison sentences for noncompliance. The move was ostensibly intended to halt the spread of “fake news.”

Amid the economic crisis in 2022, the normally obedient state media were at times obliged to acknowledge fuel shortages and other hardships, but there was no consistent trend of more critical reporting.

**D2** 0-4 pts

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

**1**/4

Religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed but is constrained in practice, 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 being pressured by authorities to renounce their faith.

**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 select foreign academics have been invited 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**

Security agencies and LPRP-backed mass organizations 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. In 2021, the government formed a task force to scrutinize social media content. During the economic crisis in 2022, authorities appeared to allow some online expression of public anger about the situation, including the country's indebtedness to China, though this did not develop into a general expansion of freedom of speech.

## **E. Associational and Organizational Rights**

**E1** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom of assembly?**

**0/4**

The government severely restricts freedom of assembly, and protests are extremely rare in practice. In 2022, small demonstrations by unpaid construction workers and farmers involved in a land dispute were disrupted by the military, with arbitrary detentions reported in some cases.

**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 harsh decree on associations, which came into force in 2017, mandates that NGOs secure government approval for their initiatives and funding.

Human rights and prodemocracy activists are also at risk of unexplained disappearances. In 2019, Laotian prodemocracy activist Od Sayavong disappeared in Bangkok, where he resided. His whereabouts were unknown at the end of 2022. Also in 2019, Phetphouthon Philachane, a Laotian citizen who demonstrated in front of the Laotian embassy in Bangkok, disappeared after returning to Laos.

Multiple Thai dissidents have similarly disappeared, or turned up dead, in Laos and neighboring states in recent years.

**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. While collective bargaining is legally permitted, workers who try to engage in such activity are usually punished.

## **F. Rule of Law**

**F1** 0-4 pts

**Is there an independent judiciary?**

**0/4**

Laotian courts are deeply penetrated by corruption and subject to systemic 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 law but routinely denied in practice. Defendants are often presumed guilty, and long procedural delays in the judicial system are common. Appeals processes are often nonexistent or delayed, sometimes indefinitely. Warrantless searches and arbitrary arrests also occur. Villages are encouraged to settle noncriminal disputes, such as land disputes, in local mediation units, which are outside the formal judicial system and often result in unfair decisions against villagers.

**F3** 0-4 pts

**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?**

**1**/4

Prison conditions are substandard, with reports of inadequate food and medical facilities. Prisoners are also subject to torture.

Antigovernment groups have reportedly attacked border checkpoints and transportation hubs over the last two decades.

Members of the Hmong ethnic group face violence at the hands of the military and other government authorities.

**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.

While same-sex relations are legal and violence against LGBT+ people is rare, no legislation provides explicit protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Laotians have participated in modest events celebrating the LGBT+ community.

Gender-based discrimination and violence are widespread. Discriminatory norms and religious practices have contributed to women's limited access to education and employment opportunities.

## 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.

**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. Violations of land rights have become a source of public discontent in recent years. Villagers who live on or near the sites of planned dams and other development projects are often forced to leave their homes and fields without adequate compensation. Construction began on a high-speed rail line from China through Laos in 2016, resulting in large-scale displacement; the rail line was inaugurated in late 2021.

**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. Domestic violence is apparently widespread but rarely reported to police. Abortion is illegal and only permitted when the mother's life is at risk. Marriage among girls younger than 18 is allowed with parental permission and fairly common in practice, especially in rural areas.

**G4** 0-4 pts

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

**1/4**

Regulations against unsafe or exploitative working conditions are poorly enforced. Trafficking in persons is common, and enforcement of antitrafficking measures is hindered by a lack of transparency and weak rule of law. The US State Department's *Trafficking in Persons Report 2022* notes that the Laotian government is working to combat human trafficking, but calls its efforts to identify Laotian and foreign survivors insufficient. The country's worsening economic situation since the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted greater trafficking of women to China and a massive migration of workers, usually illegally, to Thailand and other neighboring states.





### On Laos

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### Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

**13/100** ● Not Free

### Other Years

2024



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