

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2022

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.](#)



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 or independent civil society. News coverage of the country is limited by the remoteness of some areas, repression of domestic media, and the regime’s opaque nature. Economic development has led to a rising tide of disputes over land and environmental issues and growing debt to China. In recent years, a wide-ranging anticorruption campaign has had some positive impact, though official corruption persists.

Key Developments in 2021

- In January, an LPRP party congress named former prime minister Thongloun Sisolith secretary-general. In March, Thongloun was named state president by the National Assembly—whose members are neither freely nor fairly elected—while former vice president Phankham Viphavanh was named prime minister.
- The LPRP won 158 of the National Assembly’s 164 seats in elections held in February. The remaining seats were won by independent candidates vetted by the LPRP.
- The first COVID-19-related death in the country was reported in May, and cases rose beginning in July. Some 110,000 cases and 360 deaths were reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) by 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 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, Thongloun was named state president by the National Assembly, while former vice president Phankham Viphavanh was named 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 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

<p>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?</p>	<p>0 / 4</p>
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The constitution makes the LPRP the sole legal political party and grants it a leading role at all levels of government.

<p>B2 0-4 pts</p>	
<p>Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?</p>	<p>0 / 4</p>

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, effectively barring genuine independents from contesting elections.

<p>B3 0-4 pts</p>	
<p>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?</p>	<p>0 / 4</p>

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

<p>B4 0-4 pts</p>	
<p>Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?</p>	<p>0 / 4</p>

The right to vote and run for office are constitutionally guaranteed, 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 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 the 27.5 percent figure attained 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 top officials. The Central Committee and Politburo are the country's effective legislators as opposed to the National Assembly. In recent years, the government has more frequently passed laws, rather than decrees, to govern, though the representatives approving these bills do not represent 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 poorly enforced, and government regulation of virtually every facet of life provides many opportunities for bribery and fraud.

Thongloun initiated an anticorruption drive while serving as prime minister. 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. Thongloun also took steps to address illegal or environmentally harmful extraction industries that have been conduits for corrupt activity, though his actions were largely unsuccessful.

Phankham, Thongloun's successor as prime minister, vowed to combat official corruption after taking office. National Assembly members have also criticized corruption and bribery in various sessions, though official corruption apparently remains common. Punishments, which can include "reeducation," are reportedly not issued through the judicial system but within the ruling party. In December 2021, Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported that eight state employees were disciplined and two were expelled from the LPRP after state inspectors discovered that investment projects in Bokeo Province were affected by embezzlement.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

1/4

There is no access to information law 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.

Authorities have withheld information about a 2018 dam collapse which resulted in 43 deaths. A 2019 report that blamed the collapse on substandard construction was never fully made public. Laos continues to plan new dams on the Mekong River, despite the 2018 collapse.

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.

In 2019, the government required news outlets that disseminate material through social media to register themselves, threatening fines and prison sentences for noncompliance; the Information Ministry claimed the move was meant to arrest the spread of “fake news.”

In July 2021, police in Savannakhet Province held and questioned musician Syphone Vongchinda, who performs as Ther Una and has recorded material criticizing official corruption. Ther Una was released later that month.

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, including planning funerals, or being pressured by authorities to renounce their faith. In April 2021, the government released a Christian pastor who had been detained for a year for “disrupting unity.”

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

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. The government attempts to monitor social media usage for content and images that portray Laos negatively. In April 2021, President Thongloun made a speech calling for stricter social media controls. In May, the government formed a task force to monitor social networks.

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.

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 2021. That same year, Phetphouthon Philachane, a Laotian citizen who demonstrated in front of the Laotian embassy in Bangkok, disappeared after returning to Laos.

Multiple Thai dissidents have 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. 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

Laotian 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 but 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. 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

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

Antigovernment groups have reportedly attacked border checkpoints and transportation hubs over the last two decades. In March 2021, antigovernment fighters reportedly fought troops in Xaysomboun Province; one fighter was reportedly killed.

Members of the Hmong ethnic group face violence at the hands of the military and other government authorities. In March 2021, a Hmong man was reportedly killed by soldiers while searching for food.

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.

In April 2021, the UN's special rapporteur on human rights defenders called for their release, stating that they had been denied a fair trial.

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 preference 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, 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 there.

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, land rights have become a source of public discontent in recent years. 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 December 2021.

Villagers who live on or near the sites of planned dams are often forced to leave their homes and fields. In January 2021, residents of Luang Namtha Province who were displaced for a dam construction project reported that they received new homes but not land for agricultural purposes. In June, hundreds of people were forced to move for a coal-plant expansion project in northwestern Laos. In July, RFA reported that growing numbers of Laotian farmers were transitioning from agriculture to work in urban areas due to displacement.

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. A 2016 survey supported by the UN and the 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 US State Department's *Trafficking in Persons Report 2021* notes that the Laotian government was working to combat human trafficking, though survivors were sometimes accused of prostitution by the authorities. The report calls the government's efforts to identify Laotian and foreign survivors insufficient. The lack of jobs in Laos due to COVID-19 has prompted greater trafficking of women to China.

Children as young as 12 years old may be legally employed in Laos. Workplace inspections, including those for industries considered hazardous, are legally required 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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