

One of Us

How to foster nationalism in a poor, diverse country?

By Bertil Lintner in Vientiane

Buddhists and communists aren't exactly ideological bedfellows, but that didn't prevent an incongruous encounter of the two near Vientiane recently. At the communist party school in Ta Ngone, near the Lao capital, seven Buddhist monks blessed a newly unveiled, North Korean-made bust of communist hero Kaysone Phomvihane.

An odd scene, perhaps, but an apt metaphor for two new, seemingly contradictory phenomena of today's Laos. Twenty years after the communist takeover, the government is trying to replace communist ideology with Lao nationalism—of which Buddhism is an integral part—and foster "love for the motherland."

"Communism as an ideology is dead in Laos, if it ever existed," says a foreign observer in Vientiane.

But by replacing an outdated ideology with nationalism, the regime may undermine its most important achievement: It has managed for the first time in modern Lao history to create a unified nation out of one of Southeast Asia's most ethnically diverse countries, says Grant Evans of Hong Kong University. Nationalism in a Lao context means lowland Lao nationalism, or the beliefs and traditions of no more than 60% of the population. Kaysone, who died in 1992, is considered part of that tradition, although he was a dedicated revolutionary.

"They want to create their own history, based on the long struggle against the former royalist government as well as the impressive achievements of the new regime," says a political observer in Vientiane. "Kaysone was the leader of the former and the architect of the latter. That he was also a communist is not important."

July was probably a turning point in official efforts to promote Lao culture and preserve traditional values. That's when Thongsing Thammavong, a member of the politburo of the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party, urged the police to crack down on problems arising from Laos's new open-door policy. He identified corruption and prostitution as the worst social ills.

It's also when the regime first officially solicited support from the Buddhist *sangha*, or clergy. In Vientiane, state and party leaders assembled more than 100 Buddhist monks from all over the coun-

try and urged them to "lead the way in a cultural renaissance which will ensure the longevity of the Lao way of life," according to the *Vientiane Times*, an English-language weekly.

This approach may work among lowland Lao, but what about other nationalities? According to a Lao government document, the country's 4.5 million people comprise 47 ethnic groups. In official terminology, the population consists of three broad groups, even if anthropologists argue that the differences between them are often blurred. The Lao Loum are Tai-speaking Buddhists of the lowlands. The Lao Theung are upland, animistic tribes mostly of Mon-Khmer origin. The Lao Sung are highlanders like



Kaysone: shift of image.

the opium-growing Hmongs in the north, who have their own very distinct culture and a long tradition of rebellion against successive central governments.

"Striking a balance between these groups has never been easy," says the political observer in Vientiane. "But as long as there was an ideology, it at least in theory cut across all ethnic barriers. Nationalism alone won't do the work."

Economic factors may exacerbate the cultural differences that inhibit a sense of national unity. Rapid growth has created severe income disparities between urban and rural areas, the United Nations Development Programme warned last year. The problem is that the less-developed, outlying areas are almost entirely populated by Lao Theung or Lao Sung.

"When they come down to Vientiane, where the lowland Lao live, it's like Hong Kong to them. Here's money, here's development. In their own villages, there's

nothing," says a foreign aid worker in Laos. And the Mekong River valley, where development is taking place, is dominated by lowland Lao.

Hans Luther, a German development expert, notes that 60% of rank-and-file Pathet Lao guerrillas during the Indochina war were Lao Theung tribesmen, mainly Khmu. Many Hmongs fought along with CIA-backed forces led by Vang Pao, but a considerable number, led by his rival, Faydang Lobliayao, rallied behind the Pathet Lao.

"The lowland Lao were the political commissars, and they're now in the government, while the rank-and-file of the army to a large extent remains non-Lao Loum," says a European military expert. "They joined the resistance during the war because they disliked the central government, not because they were communist ideologues. Now there's another lowland Lao government in power, and problems could easily arise if the government doesn't handle the issue delicately."

Friction became apparent in July, when an army unit of mainly hill-tribe soldiers mutinied at a garrison north of Luang Prabang. A Hmong general had reportedly been passed over for promotion, angering his followers. At least five soldiers died in the clashes that ensued, and a curfew was imposed in the area. Several thousand loyal soldiers were dispatched to quell the mini-rebellion.

Recent visitors to the northeastern province of Houa Phan tell of discontent among the population there as well. Houa Phan is especially sensitive not only because it has always been known as Laos's most neglected province, but also because it was in Houa Phan's caves that Kaysone and other revolutionary leaders held out during the civil war.

"The people there feel let down," says one such visitor. "They sheltered the leaders of the revolution, they fed them and protected them. And now these leaders are in Vientiane and have forgotten the people who once helped them."

It's clear that the government is acutely aware of the problem. It recently decided to launch a development programme that aims to improve Houa Phan's irrigation and agriculture, and build schools and hospitals there.

But diplomats feel other measures could undermine such attempts to create more even development across the country. The government has told foreign aid donors that it intends to resettle as many as 800,000 Hmongs and other highlanders in the valleys to bring an end to slash-and-burn farming in the hills and to eradicate opium production. While foreign donors laud both objectives, many fear the methods could further alienate non-Lao Loum nationalities. ■