

Workshop

Authoritarian State, Weak State, Environmental State? Contradictions of Power and Authority in Laos

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Outline and Significance:

Laos is undergoing a boom or, more accurately, several booms. As well as being the destination for frontier market investors— especially from regional powers China, Thailand and Vietnam – the country is attracting increasing attention from scholars, development agencies, non-government organizations and the popular media, interested in the social, economic, ecological, and geo-political consequences of resource-led development. These actors are engaged in differentiated interventions in the nexus between the Lao state, nature and environmental resources, and rural communities (that is, politics, space, and population). Yet, they appear to hold widely differing ideas about how state power and authority works in Laos, and how the Lao political field might be transforming.

Not surprisingly, given the Marxist-Leninist one-party system that has continued to operate under the Lao People's Revolutionary Party since 1975, Laos is often described as a type of hybrid, “market-Leninist” state along the lines of China and Vietnam. Yet international agencies often characterize Laos as a “weak” or “fragile” state, labels rarely applied to Laos' powerful socialist neighbours. In terms of political organization, the term “authoritarian” is typically applied to the Lao Government. However, recent work by anthropologists and other social scientists emphasizes the “localized”, “negotiated”, “networked” and “relational” nature of power, i.e. anything but authoritarian. If the characterisation of political repression and authoritarianism stokes out-dated images of Asian despotism, a de-politicized interpretation can misconstrue Lao development as proceeding through a culturally mediated harmonious partnership, as opposed to a complex arena of continual social struggle and contestation.

Although most scholars would acknowledge the importance of control over economic resources, one point of difference concerns cultural factors. Martin Stuart-Fox bemoans the “persistence of political culture” in contemporary Laos – the politics of patronage that undermines political institutions and feeds corruption – which he traces to the traditional *muang* polity of the Lao kingdoms. For Stuart-Fox, this culture was unaffected by colonialism and is rooted in Buddhist karma, which “undermines any principle of social equality, and reinforces acceptance of social hierarchy,” rationalizing the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of Party officials. For others, the politics of patronage and corruption are typical of elite resource capturing practices elsewhere, whether this is understood in conventional Marxist terms as “primitive accumulation” (Baird 2012) or in more detailed comparative

terms that render Laos “a state coordinated frontier economy” (Andriessse 2011). Yet studies of political culture in Laos lack the theoretically sophisticated and fine-grained empirical analysis of clientelism and patronage that define the best political studies of other Southeast Asian countries (e.g. Nishizaki, 2011; Hutchcroft, 2012). Nor has Laos been a focus for the key political economists of development, neoliberalism and authoritarianism in Southeast Asia (e.g. Kevin Hewison, Gary Rodan, Richard Robison, Vedi Hadiz).

In her recent book, Sarinda Singh (2012) considers power more broadly than its material aspects. Proposing three primary characteristics of governance and authority in rural Laos – namely a policy-practice divide; patronage politics; and secrecy, fear and uncertainty – she considers these in relation to a conceptualization of state power based on Buddhist-inflected notions of “natural potency” and “potential”.

Yet, even with Singh’s useful typology, questions emerge. Through what rationalities does the policy-practice divide function? What are the logics underpinning the (distinct) concepts of patronage, clientelism, neo-patrimonialism, or family dynastic politics in Laos, and how is this being transformed through development and financial accumulation? How does a paradoxical interpretation of state legitimacy, inherited through inscrutability and illegibility, reconcile with the growing national and international media presence of certain members of the Lao leadership, or for instance, the emergence of a more engaged National Assembly? How are historically mediated, Theravada-Buddhist understandings of *muang-pa* spatial-cultural diacritics being reworked or replaced by a new technology of the environment, the *samphan thi din*, or land concession?

Nature represents a crucial basis for the overall project of state building in Laos. In provincial rural areas, where the majority of the population resides, livelihood production intersects directly with access to environmental resources. In this context, Michael Goldman’s work interpreting Laos as a “neoliberal environmental state” controlled by a hegemonic World Bank-environmental INGO alliance invokes yet another (governmental) rationality of order and control. Yet other scholars have questioned green-neoliberal interpretations, by both pointing to the apparent institutional weaknesses within the Lao bureaucracy to actually implement donor-supported policies, and at the same time the strength of elite Party-military-state networks that engage in discretionary extractive projects. To understand how access to resources is being controlled and how territory is being produced, we also need a better understanding of the organization of state power and how this is changing. As key areas of political reform in Laos, de-centralization, de-concentration, and center-provincial fiscal policy have direct but poorly understood implications for natural resource governance and livelihood issues.

This workshop asks how we might make sense of such varied understandings of power and authority in Laos, and how this can inform a broader assessment of the histories and politics of development in the country. In terms of understanding power and the environment, a key question is: “How can a more precise analysis of power-politics, authority, and governmentality contribute to our understanding of how and with what outcomes nature-intensive development is proceeding?”

Besides well-known problems of access and information, we note that few political scientists can be counted among the new wave of researchers on Laos. Perhaps seeking to address this shortfall, scholars from a wide range of disciplines consider issues of state power and authority in Laos as an important, if at times under-conceptualized, aspect of their work. This workshop aims to bring together such researchers, whose conceptualizations of power often differ considerably, placing ideas of power and authority at the centre of academic discourse. While understandings of power in Laos will be eclectic, we would encourage a more precise definition and understanding of power and detailed empirical-conceptual work on its applicability in the Lao context.

In this effort we organize the workshop around four sets of questions:

- a) What concepts of power are best suited to understanding the broad character of the contemporary state in Laos and its logics of government? For example, does it make sense to discuss the Lao state as “authoritarian”, or “post-socialist”; if so, under what conditions? What are the advantages and limits of hybrid concepts such as “variegated neoliberalisation” or “market-Leninism”?
- b) What is the importance of regional history and politics? How did the LPRP establish power and authority after 1975: how important were colonial-era precedents, and what role did the Vietnamese alliance play? What has changed (or not) since the reforms that began in the late 1980s, and again since the current resource and investment boom began in the early 2000s?
- c) How can an improved analytic of power and authority in Laos contribute to a better understanding of political ecology and nature’s governmentality? How has territory and population become key arenas for re-organizing political power in Laos, and how is the Lao state itself being transformed through (neo)liberalization and the enclosure, privatization and commodification of key natural resources?
- d) What are the dynamics of power within the Lao state, i.e. among and between different institutions of the state, including the military, party and bureaucracy? To what extent do we need to distinguish between the party and the state, in spite of state discourses (repeated by scholars) that the two are synonymous (*phak-lat*)?

The goal of the workshop is to bring together new-generation scholars of Laos employing a wide range of theoretical approaches drawn from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including history, geography, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and political science. Understandings of political power are thus expected to be wide-ranging. Embracing the potential for intellectual tensions in such an approach, we anticipate that the outcome will be an outstanding journal special issue or edited volume, not just presenting the best new research on state power and authority in Laos, but also showcasing the finest new scholars in the field of Lao studies.