

After the Sixth Party Congress

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The Sixth Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) was held in Viang Chan from 18-20 March 1996, with none of the delay that attended the 1991 Fifth Congress. Then there was widespread debate over the wording of the Constitution and continuing concern over the fallout from the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Five years later the LPRP was firmly in power, the economy was, if not booming, then at least developing at a reasonable rate and in the right direction, and Laos was looking forward to joining ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) in 1997. The Party could thus concentrate on its internal affairs and policy directions. This brief article will examine the outcome of the Sixth Congress, and attempt to assess some of its political and policy implications.

In a Party like the LPRP, power is highly personalized and hierarchical, in part because political institutions are weakly developed, and in part because Lao political culture still rests on inter^alinked family (clan) and regional/ethnic patronage networks that are both hierarchical and personal. For this reason changes in membership of the upper echelons of the Party are carefully noted and analysed as an indication of the relative political influence of powerful individuals. So even though the Congress brought together 381 delegates representing more than 78,000 Party members (15,000 more than in 1991, but still only about 1.7% of the total population), interest focused almost entirely on the membership of the Political Bureau (Politburo) and the Central Committee.

Changes in the Politburo were most significant, not just because more faces changed than at any previous Congress, but because by any estimation it appeared that the Army had gained control of the Party. Of the nine members of the new Politburo, no fewer than seven have a military background. Six are generals and one a colonel in the Lao People's Army (LPA), and even if the duties of most are now more political and administrative than military, they still retain their military ranks and their influence within the LPA. The strength of military influence is even more apparent when the order of listing of the Politburo is considered. Party President General Khamtai Siphandon is a former commander-in-chief of the LPA, while number three in the hierarchy is the current commander-in-chief and defence minister, Lt-General Chummali Xainyason. In between at number two spot is the powerful President of the National Assembly, Lt. General Saman Vinayket. At four and five follow two Party functionaries, Udom Khattinya and Thongsing Thammavong, but the remaining four members are military men. (There has never been a woman in the Lao Politburo; four members of the current Central Committee are women.)

These last four are all powerful men: none were members of the previous Politburo. At number five spot is Lt-General Osakan Thammatheva, currently Minister of Information and Culture, followed by Colonel Bunnyang Vorachit, mayor of Viang Chan. Next, making his political comeback, ranks General Sisavat Kaeobunphan. Sisavat was a flamboyant member of the 1986 Politburo, but was dropped in 1991, allegedly because of corruption and his close links to the Thai military. His return may not just reflect his popularity or influence in the Party. He was reported to be close to Saman and to have, somewhat surprisingly, Chinese and Vietnamese backing. If there is any truth in such rumours, then Sisavat has been particularly adept at mending his political fences. Finally the last member of the Politburo is Maj-General Axang Laoli, the powerful Minister of the Interior.

In assessing the make-up of the Politburo, it is instructive to see who has been dropped to make way for new members, and who might have been promoted but was not. Of the 1991 Politburo, three died (Kaison Phomvihane, Phun Siipasoet and Somlat Chanthamat), two retired because of age (State President Nouhak Phumsavan and Maichantan Saengmani), and one, most significantly, was demoted (Deputy Prime Minister Khamphuy Kaeobualapha) - not just from the Politburo, but from the Central Committee as well. Khamphuy's fall seems to have been due not so much to dissatisfaction over how he had handled the direction of economic development, or its pace (though this may have been a factor), but, like Sisavat before him, because he was seen to be too friendly towards the Thai. As of the end of the year, Khamphuy still retained his position as Deputy Prime Minister (though shorn of some of his previous ministerial duties). What is not yet clear is whether his Party demotion is considered sufficient reprimand, or whether behind the scenes a power struggle is going on to decide on the make-up of a new government. (A Cabinet shake-up usually follows a Party congress.)

Of those who might have hoped for or expected a position in the Politburo perhaps as an alternate member, Vongphet Xaikeuyachongtua and Khambu Sunixai rank behind Axang. Both are Party stalwarts, and Vongphet was elected Chairman of the powerful Control Board of the Party. They were followed by Foreign Minister Somsavat Lengsavat, who, if rumour in Viang Chan is anything to go by, was to have gained a position in the Politburo, but then lost it to Sisavat. By all reports, Somsavat has handled the Foreign Affairs portfolio well, and his star seems to be on the rise, not least perhaps because he is half Chinese and is popular in Beijing. At the time of the Congress, various statistics were trotted out by the Party. Of the 49 members of the Central Committee, only three are former members of the Indochinese Communist Party. Thus the "Old Guard" is passing. Perhaps more significant is the fact that a quarter of the Central Committee were not even members of the Party twenty years ago when the LPRP seized power and declared the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Only 10%, however, did not take part in the revolutionary struggle. Yet even this figure is significant, for it suggests that there are now a handful of members of the

Party Central Committee who were actually on the side of the Royal Lao government before 1975, if only nominally as young men. Fully 90% are said to have tertiary qualifications, though what institutions they attended at what level is unclear. Just over half have scientific or technical qualifications, suggesting that the rest probably graduated in Marxism-Leninism.

One statistic not revealed was how many of the new Party leaders came from ethnic minorities. In the past, neither the Politburo nor the Central Committee has reflected the ethnic composition of the country as a whole. Lao Lum have predominated, including both lowland Lao and such groups as Tai-Phuan, Tai-Lue, and upland Tai (Tai-Dam, etc.). The 1996 Politburo has the highest percentage of minority representatives to date. Osakan is an ethnic Cambodian, originally from the southern Isan region of Thailand; Bunnyang is Lao Thoeng from southern Laos; while Axang is Lao Sung (Akha) from Phongsali. The Central Committee too includes a number of minority cadres, including three Hmong. Nothing was said either about regional representation, though in Laos this remains important. Earlier Central Committee representation made a point of including provincial Party chairmen, especially from the larger and more populous provinces like Champassak, Khammuan and Luang Phrabang. Of course minority members are at the same time regional representatives. Thus the 1991 Central Committee does seem to represent regions more widely than did previous ones.

What then are some of the implications of these changes? Do they, for example, merely reflect power plays among the Party hierarchy? It would be easy to explain Army dominance this way. But there may be another factor operating - a genuine concern inside the Party about its and the country's future, about the new pressures Lao society is already encountering, about the implications of joining ASEAN. The men it has turned to guide the Party are those who steered the revolution throughout the "thirty-year struggle". Perhaps the Party has turned to the Army for strength and discipline over a difficult period. And perhaps the Army then insisted on wider ethnic and regional representation, not least because that better reflects the LPA's own composition. One could thus interpret the outcome of the Sixth Congress as an attempt to build on the strength of both the Party and the Army, their ethnic inclusiveness, in order to strengthen national solidarity to face the challenges ahead.

This is to endow the Party with a degree of foresight some might doubt it possesses. An alternative interpretation is that the Army has taken the opportunity, given that its former commander is Party President, to position itself to gain the lion's share of whatever "benefits" are forthcoming as a result of future development. Foreign investment is flowing into the country, and a certain amount is "sticking" to the hands of strategically placed officials, many of them military officers.

The LPA already runs three large commercial conglomerates, one each in the north, centre and south of the country. The best known and most successful of these from a

commercial point of view is the Mountain Area Development Company, whose area of operations extends from Viang Chan province east and south to include Khammuan. It has access to huge timber reserves, and is currently denuding the area eventually to be inundated by the vast Nam Theun II hydro-electric dam. The Army seems now to be in a position to play a bigger role in determining both the direction and pace of development (what projects get the green light, and when), and to benefit accordingly. The LPA is certainly well aware of the need to protect its interests. Already there have been reports of dissatisfaction among junior officers and men over low pay and poor conditions. Some of this is due to corruption, but some reflects the government's priorities and limited budget. Revenue collection is inefficient and the tax base small. The Army has been expected for some time to raise much of its own finances, and this it is determined to do, both to raise morale and to upgrade equipment and armaments. It is now in a better position to do so, but without so monopolizing the economy as to deny others a fair share of the cake.

Pressing questions following the Sixth Congress are to ask what effect the Army might have on the Party, and whether the LPA can play the kind of role it now should. According to the Resolution of the Sixth Congress, the Party faces five tasks: to strengthen the unity between Party and people; to encourage a sense of nationalism; to get the settings right for economic development; to "enhance the leading capability of the Party" while at the same time "enlarg[ing] the self mastery rights of the people", a contradictory goal demonstrating how little the concept of democracy is understood; and to develop ties and improve cooperation with foreign friends - that is, anyone prepared to assist the country financially.

Many commentators condemned the Sixth Congress as "a step backwards" for Laos away from a policy of increasing openness and rapid economic liberalization. Conservative generals, it was said, had stacked the Politburo primarily in order to prevent the Party being dominated by the reformers. But few in the Army want to put on the brakes, and no one wants to return to the policies in force during the first decade of the LPDR (1975-85). It is more accurate to see the debate in Laos not as between Marxist conservatives (the word Marxism never appears in the official documents of the Congress) and liberal, free-market reformers, but as over direction and safeguards. The debate is between, in the words of Yves Bourdet in a forthcoming paper, "reformers by conviction" and "reformers by necessity". There is no way Laos can escape the global forces impacting upon it. The military and the Party both know that. But it is still possible to direct development and to steer the process of reform in directions that will be of more value to Laos itself than to the eager foreign entrepreneurs wanting only to exploit Lao resources for their own profit.

The military men now in power in the LPDR are "reformers by necessity". They are concerned about keeping control, about levels of corruption, about "social pollution". They listen to their Vietnamese and Chinese friends. And they are determined to allow no challenge to their monopoly of power through the Party. But they are not opposed

to change, and certainly not opposed to economic development. Nor are they opposed to foreign economic aid and investment. What they are concerned about is the evenness of development. Though the Congress did endorse a zonal approach to development, these zones will not be located just in lowland Lao areas (Viang Chan, Savannakhet, Champasak), but will also take in mountainous regions where they will benefit ethnic minorities.

Such an approach would be welcome. Politically (if not economically) it makes good sense in terms of social cohesion and development of a nationalism that can override regional and ethnic loyalties. But does the Party, or rather the Army, have the commitment and discipline to carry out such a policy? It would require a systematic shifting of resources, new priorities, disciplined cadres and officers. There is very little evidence that the LPA has the ability to re-make itself in the ways needed. Far more likely is that it will take the easy way out, bow to the pressure of foreign, principally Thai, capital, and take a healthy cut for itself. A propensity for corruption, rather than principle and discipline is what has marked the LPA to date.

As for the Party, some idea of the problems it faces can be gained from the Political Report delivered by Khamtai to the Sixth Congress. Under the section headed "Weaknesses and Shortcomings", cadres were called to task for their failure to manage state enterprises profitably and for failing to implement policy as intended. Ownership of some state enterprises had been "hastily" transferred to the private sector, resulting in "losses of state property", a phenomenon not unknown in China and Vietnam as powerful Party officials grabbed what state assets they could under the pretence of "privatization".

The "most fundamental" weakness was said to be the lack of a "high sense of responsibility" in the Party in carrying out Party policy. In particular, cadres failed to implement the regulations and laws pertaining to "the rights, interests, and obligations" of citizens, and of applying "equality before [the] law". What was essential was to study Party directives, accept Party discipline, and strengthen Party unity. This would be encouraged through ideological training and organization. Reading between the lines, one can detect evident concern over the tendency of cadres to consider themselves not only above the law, but also above the Party itself, and to feather their own nests at the expense of the national good. Hence the emphasis Khamtai placed on the need for "control work" within the Party.

No direct reference was made to corruption, though this is at the root of the problem. The corruption commission set up on prime ministerial order has yet to set its sights on any major figure, even though millions of dollars worth of stolen state assets are reported to have been recovered. The pattern is remarkably similar to what occurred under the Royal Lao government when no member of any powerful family was ever convicted for the massive corruption that undermined the legitimacy of the regime. Then the example set by the high and mighty encouraged both popular cynicism and

lack of respect for the law. Now the same thing is happening again, if not yet on a similar scale, posing a similar threat to the legitimacy of the Party and even the regime itself.

In the longer term, legitimation will pose a problem for the Party. As the revolutionary struggle recedes into the past, and socialism no more than a slogan, the only justification the Party will have for its monopoly on power will be the same as the claim made by political parties to wield power in multi-party democratic states © that is, that it is doing the best possible job in ensuring individual welfare and national prosperity. So far the Party can claim a degree of success, but should the economy go sour, there is nowhere that popular dissatisfaction can focus but on the Party.

The target set by Khamtai in his Political Report was for the La economy to grow by 8-8.5% annually for the five years 1996-2000, thereby raising per capita income from around \$300 per annum to \$500 (not allowing for inflation). This target will be difficult to attain, though not impossible. If the general level of affluence does increase at this rate, and if the Party does not become too corrupt and arrogant, it will have something to celebrate at its Seventh Congress.

Of course, there are many, especially outside the LPDR, who are hopeful that the Party will never get to celebrate a Seventh Congress. Certainly a more democratic political system would be welcome, but realistically there seems little likelihood that this will happen. Nor do there seem to be any forces likely to challenge the Party. Expatriate organizations run by members of the former Royal Lao elite suffer from a burden of failure and a lack of credibility, and will not be permitted to play any part in the future of the country. Political opposition, when it does arise, will be internal, but given the weak state of development of Lao civil society, this is likely to be well in the future. Nor does it seem likely that joining ASEAN will result in any real pressure being placed on the LPDR to democratize. After all, a number of ASEAN countries hardly have much of a record themselves when it comes to democratization.

One party military rule in Laos will not be considered in any different light to military rule in Indonesia or in Myanmar/Burma, if it joins too. In the meantime, the Army will control the Party, thus providing a model that Vietnam, and even China, might yet decide to follow. And once generals have tasted power they will be unlikely easily to give it up. Behind the tough old officers who currently wield power, a new generation of generals are rising through the ranks, a generation whose training has been as much political as military, whose training has been as much in running companies and in administration as in preparing for war. Therefore, dangerous as it is to make political predictions, the betting must be that the military will be running Laos well into the next millenium.

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