

Laos in 2020

Reaping a Harvest of Unity and Debt

ABSTRACT

In 2020, Laos successfully contained the spread of COVID-19, with very few cases and no deaths. The key elements of the COVID-19 response reflect not only public health advice but also the core values of the political culture promoted by the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party. These include unity, solidarity, struggle, respect for science, guidance by a strong center, and the extension of the state into everyday life in the form of designated roles, committees, and organizations. These significantly shaped the social fabric drawn on in the COVID-19 response. This success, then, can be read as a reaping of some of the benefits of this political culture. More ominously, the global pandemic exacerbated Lao PDR's public debt crisis. Born of years of government backing of megaprojects such as hydropower, this debt is the dark harvest of the LPRP's reign.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, socialism, values, new normal, public debt

LAOS BY DECEMBER 2020 REPORTED only 39 cases and no deaths from COVID-19. All the identified cases were linked epidemiologically to another known case or were incoming travelers from an affected country. There is no clear evidence of community transmission. While testing rates remain low, surveillance of influenza-like illnesses throughout the nation has indicated numbers within the ranges of previous years. Severe acute respiratory infections increased in some provinces, but all samples taken from such cases to date have been negative for SARS-CoV-2 (World Health Organization 2020). This increased surveillance did lead to one diagnosis of avian influenza A (H5N1) in Salavane Province, the first detected in Lao PDR since 2007

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despite the known endemicity of the virus in the country. This lends weight to the conclusion that Lao PDR has achieved a remarkable victory over COVID-19 in 2020. Laos's case numbers are minuscule compared to the worldwide figures of 50 million reported cases and 1.25 million reported deaths. What is more, it has achieved this success as a landlocked, least developed country that shares a border with China.

Close attention to the steps taken to control the virus in Laos yields insights not only into a public health success story, but also into the lived impact of Lao PDR's political project. One way of viewing the apparent success is in terms of the political values promoted under Lao socialism: unity, solidarity, respect for science over superstition, the sense of the nation as engaged in a joint "movement" and "struggle" against an external enemy and for development, and a sense that the purpose of the Party-State is to "guide" those efforts and care for the welfare of its people. These are all long-running political values expressed since the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) gained power in 1976 (Phomvihane 1981; Evans 1990:123; Stuart-Fox 1996:53; High 2006). While at times these values have been repeated *ad nauseum*, to the point of evoking cynicism (Tappe 2013), in the COVID-19 response they proved to be more than rhetoric. Arguably, they formed key vertebrae in the backbone of Laos's COVID-19 response.

The ruling party has also supported a robust set of mass organizations, village committees, local militias, and local branches of line ministries that are explicitly intended to link state and society. Again, while many outside observers have decried the lack of a truly independent civil society (e.g. Whittington 2018), and others have observed the lip service paid at the village level to much of this often empty-seeming official business (High 2014), in the COVID-19 response these pathways between state and society apparently worked as effective capillaries. They delivered services, information, and surveillance into villages and homes—ensuring, for example, that quarantines were effectively implemented, even in remote villages.

The Lao response to COVID-19 began on February 3, 2020 when face masks, frequent hand washing, and cough etiquette were recommended (WHO 2020). Schools were asked to close on March 17. A lockdown was imposed with the Prime Minister's Order 6 of March 29, which compelled non-essential workplaces to close, restricted international and domestic travel, banned large gatherings, and ordered people to stay at home. It also imposed price controls on necessary goods, such as face masks and hand sanitizers, and

a strict surveillance of social media to penalize “fake news.” Thousands of people a day crossed land borders into Laos at this time, mainly migrant workers returning from Thailand. They were screened at the border, and the vast majority were asked to self-quarantine for 14 days at home. High-risk returnees were quarantined in locally run Designated Quarantine Facilities, thousands of which were set up in districts and villages, in sites such as schools. Many housed just one or two detainees and were staffed by volunteers. Many people doubted that stay-at-home orders and travel bans, let alone self-quarantine for recently returned migrants, could be implemented during the Lao New Year period. This national holiday is characterized by visiting and gatherings of large groups for ritual and often raucous celebration. However, the New Year rituals were officially canceled, and by all reports the spirit of the lockdown was observed by the overwhelming majority.

The measures began easing in May. In a jubilant speech on June 10, Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith announced that Laos had reached zero cases, with the last remaining case discharged from Mithaphab Hospital the day before and 59 consecutive days with no new cases (Thongloun 2020). In that speech, he referred to COVID-19 as “the ferocious enemy, the wretched executioner” still claiming numerous victims abroad in both developed and developing nations. The defeat of this enemy in Laos he credited to, first, the measures taken in the Prime Minister’s Orders, and then to the way all Lao people joined together to enact these “as if in a [political] movement, with high responsibility” (Thongloun 2020). Specifically, the PM credited the success to:

- Early response (“protection is better than cure”);
- Focused and unified guidance from the highest levels of the country’s leadership;
- Strength, unity, and exemplary responsibility shown by the other levels of government in implementing and disseminating this guidance;
- The people, “one and all,” who came together “consciously, with ownership and high self-awareness,” donating necessary provisions, strengths (of both body and soul), and means, so that the “struggle” against COVID-19 was a vast and plenteous “full swing movement, with one mind and one heart, and with sacrifice”;
- Responsible parties, such as the Special Task Force, logistics and transport workers, police and security, civil servants, and health workers.

Doctors, he said, are “the frontline soldiers in white shirts: our attack forces”; and

- Timely and effective support from friendly nations and international organizations.

Thongloun warned that the fight was not over. The work ahead was to facilitate people’s return to their livelihoods and activities while preventing a second wave and also fighting dengue fever. He flagged “the new normal,” which he defined as “having more awareness, advancement, modernity, and civilization, being thrifty and economical, and enhanced order and discipline to prevent COVID-19 returning to attack our society a second time.”

Note the recurring themes in Thongloun’s speech: strong and unified guidance from the Party-State leadership, unity at other levels of government, and below them the common people, also unified, with the overarching sense of a common struggle against a common enemy. Note also the definition of the “new normal” as a series of essentially moral changes, rather than the more narrowly behavioral changes often associated with the “new normal” in English-speaking countries. This is consonant with the long-running socialist political project of not only improving life for Lao citizens, but doing so by making new socialist people, with “civilized” habits, modern dispositions, and unified values. The value put on order and discipline indicates that the ruling LPRP did not hesitate to admit that the pandemic had been an opportunity to extend state power (conceived of here as an ordering force acting for the good of society). The commentary that greeted the daily press briefings on social media suggested that the COVID-19 response had indeed been a tremendous public relations win for the regime.

Besides the extension of political power, it appears that the other major impact of COVID-19 on Lao PDR in 2020 was on the economy. In September, Fitch Ratings (2020) downgraded Laos from B– to CCC, based on “the economic shock and fiscal deterioration [which] will push up public and publicly guaranteed . . . debt to nearly 65% of GDP in 2020.” The state-owned *Électricité du Laos* was reported to have ceded control of the Lao electricity grid to a Chinese firm in a bid to stave off debt default (Zhai and Johnson 2020). Ballooning debt balanced precariously over a small revenue base is the other harvest reaped in 2020 from the LPRP’s long-running control of Laos, a harvest that took a pronounced shape in the context of COVID-19.

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