



## Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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### Laos 1959–75

#### Executive Summary

The Laotian civil war was fought during the years 1959–75, mainly between the Royal Lao government (RLG) and the Communist Pathet Lao, along with non-state actors such as the Hmong guerillas and external actors like the United States and North Vietnam (DRV). While Laos gained independence from France in 1953 and had a declaration of neutrality from the Geneva Conference, the presence of Pathet Lao grew in the north, thus leading to an invitation for a coalition government in 1957.<sup>1</sup>

It was not long before this government collapsed, reigniting tensions between the two externally backed groups. In early 1959, the North Vietnamese government began to establish the Ho Chi Minh Trail partly through Laotian territory and began to provide military assistance in northern Laos to the Pathet Lao. In 1960, a neutralist party led by Captain Kong Le carried out a coup on the city of Vientiane. This brief coup was ended by US-backed Phoumi Nosavan and the Royal Lao Army (RLA) that December.<sup>2</sup>

In 1961 and 1962, military conflict continued, with mixed results that further exacerbated the involvement of outside actors. In July 1962, a temporary coalition government was formed between the RLG, the neutralists, and the Pathet Lao that broke up by mid-1963. The beginning of Operation Barrel Roll by the United States in 1964 brought the aerial bombardment of the Pathet Lao and the enlargement of the Ho Chi Minh Trail into the Plain of Jars in northern Laos. Operations Steel Tiger and Tiger Hound helped slow the gradual Pathet Lao advance on the Plain of Jars, and the years 1965–67 were characterized by short but intense engagements with the RLG, generating some success.<sup>3</sup>

The People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) launched a major attack on Nam Bac in 1968 that largely crippled the RLA for the duration of the conflict. US-backed RLA forces did retake territory in the Plain of Jars in September 1969, but a PAVN-backed Pathet Lao counteroffensive in February 1970 regained the ground. This inconclusive fighting continued for the rest of that year. Northern Laos witnessed Pathet Lao gains throughout 1971–73, but they did not entirely displace government forces, and a ceasefire was concluded in 1973.<sup>4</sup>

In 1973, the United States withdrew from Vietnam in accordance with the Paris Peace Accords, which left government forces without any external support to fight the PAVN-backed Pathet Lao and resulted in a mass demobilization of other pro-government actors, which created a shift in momentum towards the insurgency throughout 1974–75. Following the North Vietnamese victory in the Vietnam War in 1975, the Pathet Lao surged through the RLG forces, ending with the proclamation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic by December 1975.<sup>5</sup>

## Assessing the Five Factors

### 1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

**Yes.** The majority of the population identified as Lao. The conflict between the Pathet Lao and the RLG was fought along political divisions between the Communists and the Lao monarchy. This internal conflict largely transcended sub-national ethnic divisions, and there were instances throughout the war of soldiers of different ethnic groups fighting together against opposition soldiers of their own ethnic group, including the Hmong.<sup>6</sup>

### 2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

**No.** Following the end of the French protectorate, there was a necessity for a coalition government between the Pathet Lao and RLG because of political divides in 1957, and these divides were increased by its subsequent collapse in 1959.<sup>7</sup> Although there was involvement by external actors (such as North Vietnam), the Pathet Lao enjoyed success in the political realm on its own through its utilization of the political front Neo Lao Hak Sat, a broader organization aimed at mobilizing nationalist sentiment and anti-American feelings, which had initially supported the ruling RLG. This organization enjoyed election success in May 1958, seeing the Neo Lao Hak Sat win 9 of 21 available seats. Although the general population remained largely neutral at this stage, the Pathet Lao used its growing influence to fan public discontent with the RLG's ties to the United States and its perceived influence on the government—a good example of an outside actor delegitimizing the government it was supporting.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

**No.** By the cease-fire agreement of early 1973, which was still not the end of the conflict, the Pathet Lao movement had become a legitimate threat to RLG rule, with their secured zones encompassing roughly two-thirds of the country's territory and more than a third of the population being under their control.<sup>9</sup>

### 4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

**Yes.** Following the collapse of the first coalition government of the RLG and the Pathet Lao in 1959, RLA forces nearly surrounded the two Pathet Lao battalions, and one of the two battalions fled into North Vietnam, where it received training and assistance from the PAVN.<sup>10</sup> More generally, some Pathet Lao-controlled zones bordered China and North Vietnam. In northern Laos, territory controlled by the Pathet Lao included the areas of Phongsaly and Xam Neua, which have populations ethnically related to and controlled by the DRV. In extremis, the Pathet Lao could and did use these areas for sanctuary.<sup>11</sup>

### 5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

**Yes, marginally.** The Royal Lao Army (RLA), otherwise known as the French acronym ARL, was the main army for the government in existence at the start of the conflict. This army was not self-sustaining, however, and was far from reasonably competent, as, following the First Indochina War, the French protectorate could no longer help sustain Laos's military capabilities, which the French themselves had first created in 1941. Upon seeing their inability to meet the Pathet Lao threat, the United States used the Programs Evaluation Office in 1955 to continue where the French left off in supporting the RLA, with the United States paying all RLA salaries by 1959. So, though the RLA by itself was far from

self-sustaining and competent, the involvement of external actors allowed its capabilities to become so from the start of the conflict until the US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973.<sup>12</sup>

<b>LAOS 1959–75</b>	
<b>NATIONAL IDENTITY</b>	<b>YES</b>
<b>GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>POPULATION SECURITY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>EXTERNAL SANCTUARY</b>	<b>YES</b>
<b>EXISTING SECURITY FORCES</b>	<b>YES</b>

## Outcome

Government defeat. From 1973–75 the monarchy gradually collapsed within Laos. The US withdrawal from this region and a mass demobilization in the country forced the remaining guerillas and RLA groups to merge. This demobilization in conjunction with the formation of a coalition government between the Royalists, Neutralists, and Pathet Lao in 1974 completely demoralized the remaining royalist forces. As a result, by early May 1975, the Royal Lao government had collapsed, and the Pathet Lao quietly disarmed the remaining RLA units. The abolition of the monarchy in December 1975 and the establishment of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic ended the war.<sup>13</sup> This case study supports the Five Factors theory.

## Endnotes

1. Kenneth Conboy, Don Greer, and Tom Tullis, *War in Laos, 1954–1975* (Carrollton, TX: Squadron/Signal Publications, 1994), <https://archive.org/details/warinlaos19541970000comb/page/63/mode/1up>.
2. Conboy, Greer, and Tullis, *War in Laos*.
3. Conboy, Greer, and Tullis, *War in Laos*.
4. Conboy, Greer, and Tullis, *War in Laos*.
5. Conboy, Greer, and Tullis, *War in Laos*.
6. Grégoire Schlemmer, “Ethnic Belonging in Laos: A Politico-Historical Perspective,” 2017.
7. Conboy, Greer, and Tullis, *War in Laos*.
8. Joseph Zasloff, *The Pathet Lao: Leadership and Organization* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1973), <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2007/R949.pdf>.
9. Zasloff, *Pathet Lao*.
10. Conboy, Greer, and Tullis, *War in Laos*.
11. Kenneth L. Hill, “Laos: The Vientiane Agreement,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 8, no. 2 (1967): 257–67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20067631>.
12. Andrea Matles Savada and Donald P. Whitaker, *Laos: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1995), <https://www.loc.gov/item/95017235/>.
13. Conboy, Greer, and Tullis, *War in Laos*.



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