

Laos 2013



Total: 6.63

Quick facts

Population:	6.7 million
Population growth:	1.63 %
Unemployment rate:	2.5 %
GDP:	19.52 billion \$
GDP growth rate:	8.3 %
GDP per capita:	3100 \$

Political Freedom

Free and Fair Elections : 0

Laos gained its independence in 1953, and was consequently dragged into the Vietnam War. With support of the Vietnamese Communist Party the Pathet Lao came into power in 1975. Based on the 1991 constitution the only legal party in the country is the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), and all candidates for the rubber stamp National Assembly are vetted and approved by the LPRP.

Elections are held every five years, the last time in April 2011, which saw 190 candidates, including 5 independents, compete for 132 seats. Voter turnout was put at 99.6% by state media. However the actual power of the National Assembly is minimal because the real policy makers are appointed by the LPRP at the Party Congress one month earlier.

The government severely restricts freedom of assembly. Civil society organisations and all trade unions must belong to the official Federation of Lao Trade Unions. Collective bargaining is illegal. Laos has recently opened up to international NGOs which operate frequently in the country but are reminded not to pursue any political agenda as the expulsion of Anne-Sophie Gindroz, the country director of the Swiss-based development agency Helvetas, clearly shows.

Absence of Unconstitutional Veto Players : 0

All power lies in the hands of the LPRP and the military is also entirely controlled by the Communist Party. The National Assembly is in fact powerless and all decisions are made by the Politburo. There is no power within the country strong enough to remotely challenge the power exerted by the LPRP.

Allegedly, some foreign businesses have become influential in Lao politics. Farming and mining has been opened to foreign companies, leading to an influx of Chinese and Vietnamese firms. Evidence suggests that they have been successfully nudging the Lao government to expropriate farmers in order to gain access to their land.

Freedom of Press : 1.6

Press freedom is severely restricted in Laos. Although the government, in cooperation with international donors, passed a new press law in 2008, little improvement could be noticed. Most media in the country is state owned and content in private publications is reviewed and censored by officials. The criminal code includes laws which punish crimes such as “weakening the state”, or the import of publications “contrary to national culture” with long prison sentences. But strict (self-) censorship results in these laws being seldom applied. Violence against journalists and activists is uncommon, but does happen occasionally.

All internet service providers are controlled by the state, but technical capacities to monitor and block content are low. Young Laotians increasingly use social media to discuss social issues. However the internet access rate remains comparatively low at 11%.

Rule of Law

Independence of the Judiciary :

No data available.

Corruption : 2.1

Laos is burdened by high levels of corruption. The country’s overall legal framework is inefficient and lacks transparency, which enables government officials to constantly extract bribes. The rule of law is undermined by political interference and rampant corruption corrodes the foundations of economic freedom. The law stipulates penalties for official corruption, but Laos lacks an adequate civil society to keep government accountable. Special Economic Zones and collaboration between the Laotian government and Chinese and Vietnamese conglomerates have fostered greater levels of corruption.

Protection of Human Rights : 2.93

A lack of free or fair elections and one party rule for almost 40 years has warped civil society. Freedom of association is incredibly limited and government opposition regularly faces arbitrary arrest and harassment.

Social issues such as sexual orientation and HIV/AIDS remain taboo and individuals are regularly victims of discrimination. Although it has not been abolished, the death penalty has not been used since 1989.

Extrajudicial killings and disappearances are rare, but the public abduction by police and subsequent disappearance of the 2005 recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership and prominent civil society advocate Sombath Somphone remains incredibly disturbing.

Economic Freedom

Security of Property Rights :

No data available.

Size of Government: Expenditures, Taxes, and Enterprises :

No data available.

Regulation of Credit, Labour, and Business :

No data available.

Freedom to Trade Internationally :

No data available.