

# Laos 2014



Total: 7.91

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## Quick facts

Population:	6.8 million
Population growth:	1.59 %
Unemployment rate:	1.9 %
GDP:	20.78 billion \$
GDP growth rate:	8.3 %
GDP per capita:	3100 \$

## Political Freedom

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### Free and Fair Elections : 0

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

Elections are held every five years. The last election in April 2011 saw 190 candidates, including 5 independents; compete for 132 seats in the National Assembly. According to state media, voter turnout was 99.6%. However, the actual power of the National Assembly is minimal as all its members need approval from the ruling party. The main decision-making body is the Politburo. Due to the nature of its one-party system, datasets for free and fair elections are not available.

Government critics and human rights activists live in danger. In December 2012, the prominent human rights activist Sombat Somphone disappeared. He was last seen at a police checkpoint in the capital Vientiane. International NGOs and human rights defenders urged the government to investigate the case and to adhere to international human rights standards. Laos is a State party of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states that governments must provide an “effective remedy” for violations of rights including the right to liberty and security of a person.

## **Absence of Unconstitutional Veto Players : 0.83**

All power lies in the hands of the LPRP including control of police and military. 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 remains highly restricted in Laos. Only North Korea scores worse in the overall ranking of the Asian region. Even though improvements in communication infrastructure were made, all media are controlled by the government. Media personnel are appointed mostly from within the LPRP, and publications must be approved by the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism. The internet is more or less free and the online community is growing, though still relatively small. According to an official of the national Ministry of Post and Telecommunication, Laos has no intention to restrict the use of social media unless they are used to spread “inappropriate” or “inaccurate” information. (Unsurprisingly, details on what constitutes “inappropriate” or inaccurate” content were not given.) Foreign journalists are allowed to enter the country and freely report on certain topics. But occasionally they are refused immigration and long-term stay permits are seldom granted.

## **Rule of Law**

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### **Independence of the Judiciary :**

No data available.

### **Corruption : 2.6**

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. Although

relevant laws threaten to punish corrupt practises with fines and imprisonment, they are rarely enforced. Police and army are poorly paid which makes them prone to abusing their powers for financial gains. (High ranking army officers are allegedly involved with Chinese and Vietnamese mining and logging companies).

## **Protection of Human Rights : 2.88**

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. International calls for an investigation into that matter were roundly ignored by the government.

## **Economic Freedom**

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### **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.