A New Interpretation of Kongle’s Neutralist Coup in Laos, August 1960

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The August 1960 coup led by Captain Kongle is generally regarded as a temporary discontinuity in Lao politics, a dramatic but failed attempt to revive neutrality for Laos. Accounts are largely based on French language sources, which are oriented towards the concerns of government and political elites. This article examines the popular Lao language press of the time, specifically the newspaper of the National Union Party, Laorouamsamphan (Lao Unity), edited by Bong Souvannavong, to enhance our understanding of the motivations for the coup and the nature of its populist appeal. It shows that the coup was launched after years of widespread discussion of the Peace Through Neutrality programme of the Neutralists, a movement that elaborated a detailed Buddhist philosophy. The timing and demands of the coup committee were not therefore mysterious, but a response to quite specific hopes about how the newly independent Kingdom of Laos would move forward on its own terms.

Keywords: Laos, Neutrality, Neutralism, populism, 1960 coup, Cold War in Asia.

After the Kingdom of Laos gained independence from France in 1954, the country was divided and dependent on foreign aid. The Royal Lao Government (RLG) notionally controlled most of the kingdom, with predominant financial support from the United States, while the rival Pathet Lao movement, supported by North Vietnam, controlled two provinces in the northeast. In pursuit of national unity, a coalition government was formed in November 1957, and in supplementary elections the alliance of Neutralists and Pathet Lao won thirteen parliamentary seats, sparking a strong reaction from...
younger members among the right wing of the RLG (known as the Committee for the Defence of National Interests, or CDNI). After the Pathet Lao refused to integrate their forces into the national army, the coalition began to collapse. The CDNI ousted the Royalists, staging a coup at the end of 1959, and subsequently rigged elections in April 1960; yet the new right-wing regime remained weak, and was resented by Neutralists and many Royalists.

On 9 August 1960 Captain Kongle with several hundred men from the Second Paratroop Battalion of the Royal Lao Army (RLA) staged a Neutralist coup in Vientiane that surprised people everywhere. Though well-intentioned, and rapidly attracting mass support, it backfired and ultimately led to even deeper political divisions in the country. Although widely known about, the failed coup and the motivations of its supporters have attracted scant critical analysis.

Based on previously unexamined vernacular language press of the time, especially the National Union Party newspaper *Laorouamsamphan* (*LRS*), I here examine the motivations for the coup and of its supporters. While other scholarship has emphasized the worsening political and economic state of the country, I suggest that the coup and its supporters were largely motivated by an articulated political philosophy—Peace Through Neutrality—that hinged upon deeply embedded sentiment within Lao culture and religion. This philosophy offered a future vision of the Kingdom as a Buddhist Lao society that had been cultivated over the previous decade by leaders of the National Union Party, the Peace Party and, to a lesser extent, the Sintham Party. Although rendered impotent by externally driven events, this third force in Lao politics represented a native philosophy and programme for the nation.

The sources utilized for this research were authored by key actors in the Peace Through Neutrality movement. They are predominantly written in the Lao language, and are directed at a popular audience. In particular, I focus on issues of the *LRS* newspaper from 1958 to 1960, which offered social and political critiques intended to inform and win broad support for the Neutralist programme. In this paper I explore the content of *LRS* in more detail, touching upon specific...
stories that illustrate these various ideas and looking at how the ideas were communicated in terms of topic and continuity through Lao storytelling.  

The Cold War in Asia

With the 1949 communist victory in China, and the end of French rule in Indochina following the battle of Dien Bien Phu, new regional alignments and rivalries rapidly developed in Asia. China, fearing another Korean-style conflict, supported the 1955 Bandung Conference push for neutrality among regional states. Yet the United States and Britain regarded neutralism as effectively pro-communist (Ang 2018, pp. 68–85). What followed was a developing Cold War in Asia as the United States endeavoured to build a network of anti-communist allies to contain communist expansion and impose some regional stability. This created the expectation that newly independent Laos would function as a buffer between the emerging rival communist and non-communist states, severely affecting internal Lao politics (Christie 1998, p. 213).

The political class within Laos was not generally enthusiastic about the prospect of being pawns in a greater game. Among Lao politicians there was anxiety about the modern world changing Lao society, underlining a desire for the kingdom to be left on its own (Evans 2002, pp. 106–7). Among other newly decolonized states of Asia there was a strong sympathy for non-alignment, with countries such as Burma, Cambodia and Indonesia adopting non-aligned positions. This international perspective inspired various politicians within Laos and the early RLG participation in the emerging Non-Aligned Movement (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 93).

In Laos the US policy encountered difficulties, in particular the widely held perception that its efforts were little more than a neocolonial push to ensure that US interests prevailed over those of regional states (Christie 1998, p. 213). Inside Laos the campaign for Peace Through Neutrality, which successfully pushed for the 1957 coalition agreement, worked to bring the Pathet Lao within the
mainstream of the RLG, yet for the Americans this only reminded them that similar political agreements in Eastern Europe had paved the way for communist takeovers (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 94).

Neutralism in Laos is often identified with the Neutralist Party founded by Souvanna Phouma in 1961 and the subsequent politics that served his conservative neutralism (Stuart-Fox 2010, p. 229). Yet the idea of bringing the Pathet Lao into the mainstream of the RLG and unifying the nation had already emerged with independence in 1954. It was expressed by the phrase, Peace Through Neutrality, which became a political slogan that is still remembered today among the Lao people. The Peace Through Neutrality philosophy brought together the ideas of political non-alignment and Buddhist morality to provide a unifying principle for the nation. This movement also benefited from the rise of the international Non-Aligned Movement and from the highly auspicious celebrations around the 2500th year of the Buddhist calendar in 1957, which resonated with calls for unity and peace. For the movement’s supporters, it seemed to be an idea whose time had come (Wolfson-Ford 2019, p. 31).

The Peace Through Neutrality philosophy was shared by three parties that featured in key events of those times: the Peace Party (Santiphap) created in 1955 under Quinim Pholsena, Champa Phommachan and Chan Pao Vanthanouvong. This was alongside the existing Lao National Union Party led by Bong Souvannavong. In 1956 the Sintham Party emerged, led by Thammala Souvannavong (the nephew of Bong Souvannavong), Somchan Pathammavong, Maha Boutdy Souriyasak and Asa Viravong, assisted by Bong Souvannavong (Wolfson-Ford 2019, pp. 28–32).

The individuals involved in these various groups were well acquainted with each other. In early 1957 the three parties spun off the informal grouping, the Committee Supporting Policy for Peace Through Neutrality, with Bong Souvannavong as chairman. This Peace Committee specifically agitated for national political reconciliation to bring the Pathet Lao into a coalition RLG, building wide public support and political momentum that successfully led to the coalition agreement.
The Peace Party and National Union Party both published newspapers, and these popular Lao language publications were appreciated well beyond the respective party memberships. The parties had wide support bases within urban society, from professionals and civil servants to the ordinary populace, and they had the ability to effectively disseminate political messages.

After a series of meetings from 1956 to the end of 1957, the first coalition government was formed. However, sometime after the supplementary elections in May 1958 the question of how to deal with the Pathet Lao began to divide the Peace Committee members, with Bong rejecting a close alliance with the Pathet Lao because of the latter’s dependence on Hanoi. This left Bong politically isolated, and his status within the coalition government declined. From August 1958 to January 1959 he served as minister for education, health and religion. Following a cabinet reshuffle under CDNI influence, he was moved to the less prestigious portfolios of posts and fine arts, which he held until the April 1960 elections. Yet he continued to publish his paper, LRS, maintaining his political voice.

Events of the 1960 Neutralist Coup

With US support the CDNI engineered a political takeover through late 1959 and early 1960, bringing Laos into the anti-communist alliance. This polarized the political situation within the country and fostered a growing anti-Americanism among the Peace Through Neutrality support base. Then, on 9 August, without warning, Captain Kongle and his men took over the capital. They mobilized enthusiastic crowds despite the fact that for many attending it was the first time they had even heard of the charismatic captain. Both the RLG and the Pathet Lao and their foreign backers were caught by surprise (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 112), even though the conspiracy had existed for some time. Deuve relates that in 1959 Kongle had written to de Gaulle, who advised neutrality, and Kongle also discussed a potential coup with Souvanna Phouma and various Peace Party figures around the same time (Deuve 1984, pp. 155–56). When the time came to
act, some cabinet members, including General Phoumi Nosavan (the defence minister), were away in Luang Prabang. Dommen suggests that Phoumi Nosavan actually told Kongle to seize the capital in his absence, hoping to assume control on his return (2001, p. 389), but this did not happen, the coup leaders having their own designs.

On 11 August the coup leaders made four core demands, issued by communiqué: strict non-alignment, unity of all Lao people, no conditions on foreign aid, and an end to all corruption. On 13 August the National Assembly was coerced to pass a vote of no confidence in the government of Prime Minister Somsanit. A Neutralist government was formed with Souvanna Phouma as prime minister, but the situation quickly soured. The Pathet Lao took advantage of the neutral policy and quickly infiltrated the capital, having secured significant sympathy from many of the youth and monks who had initially supported the coup. Consequently, the new government was seen to be under increasing communist influence, causing alarm among the right wing and their foreign allies. A counter-coup committee was formed by right-wingers in Savannakhet in September, leading to a military assault led by General Phoumi against the capital in December. From 13 to 16 December, Vientiane was besieged, with several hundred reportedly killed. Fighting ended when the coup leadership decided to cease firing and withdraw from the capital. The column retreated in an orderly fashion to the strategic high ground of the Plain of Jars, reportedly accompanied by thousands of supporters and families, students and sympathetic monks. Also on the march were Pathet Lao personnel who had been in the capital. Civil war raged on until July 1962, when the three factions reached an agreement during peace talks in Geneva and another short-lived coalition government was formed.

Ideologies and Motivations

Existing scholarship has recognized the importance of the deteriorating situation in Laos leading up to the Neutralist coup. Issues included corruption, foreign interference, poor decision-making, and the
exacerbated ‘big man’ (Phu nyai) effect on the nation, all of which contributed to political instability and the polarization of society, mirroring the greater Cold War in Asia. The right-wing government increasingly lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the public, who perceived that inviting American military interference had worsened rather than improved the situation (Stuart-Fox 2002, p. 60). Both the Neutralists and the Pathet Lao played on these sentiments, which Stuart-Fox summarized as, “All Lao could live together in harmony if only the Americans would leave” (1997, p. 111). Compiling his “Laos Profiles” through 1957–59, Halpern (1961, pp. 11–100) interviewed many in the government service who expressed doubts over American aid or disapproval at its utilization. Writing soon after, Dommen discussed the growing frustration over corruption in the French language press, describing, for example, American aid in the form of trucks and jeeps rusting like scrap metal in yards (1964, p. 144). The frustration over corruption with foreign involvement helped to foster nationalist resentment and discussions around the need for Buddhist virtue.

One eyewitness source discussing motivations for the coup was a Chalermnit Press correspondent. The author explained that the Peace Party and National Union Party were most aggrieved by the right-wing takeover of the RLG, and they used their influential newspapers to agitate against the government as well as to propagate their Peace Through Neutrality message. That source claims that the coup leadership took advice from the Peace Party in formulating their programme and communiqués, and that their “mottos” were taken from the Voice of Peace newspaper, owned by Quinim (Chalermnit Press correspondent 1961, pp. 40, 63–66). It is quite apparent that the coup was more than an isolated and heroic attempt to find political redress led by naïve officers, but rather reflected a much more deeply thought-out response to the national crisis.

In the Peace Through Neutrality movement, there was more than a simple reaction to these circumstances; there was also a strong expectation that the country would be built on a Lao identity incorporating traditional virtues and practices such as Buddhist
piety. Just months before the Neutralist coup, Bong consolidated his programme into a booklet, *Latthi Lao phua sang santiphap*. Bong’s thesis is analysed in detail by Christie, reporting that Bong sought to reformulate Buddhism for modern circumstances as a code of moral sovereignty for the individual and society. His formulation integrated Buddhism and liberal democracy with the goal of economic and political self-sufficiency (Christie 2001, pp. 152–56). It is generally regarded that although *Latthi Lao* responded to the anxieties of the time, it was light on practical steps, focusing rather on broad moral guidance. Evans, echoing Christie, relates that the anxieties in Laos at the time “triggered off a nostalgic preoccupation with ‘traditional values’ which has still not subsided today” (2002, p. 100).

Nostalgia is often an important component of populism, and in the deteriorating political conditions much popular sentiment swung heavily in favour of neutrality and traditionalist nationalism, so much so that as the diplomat Unger put it, “Kong Le caught the popular fancy” when launching his coup (1991, p. 283). The populist character of the coup is recognized by Dommen (1964, pp. 143–45). Wolfson-Ford states that Kongle’s movement had grown into a truly populist cause, evidenced in part by the number of people who followed him out of Vientiane in the aftermath (2018, pp. 285–86).

The popular mood was also exasperated over the violence of the civil war, with the phrase “*Lao kha Lao*” (Lao is killing Lao) becoming a feature of popular discussion and a unifying call among many drawn to supporting the Neutralist coup. Wolfson-Ford relates how this was particularly emphasized by Kongle, who asked “why should Lao fight Lao?” Wolfson-Ford characterized this as a profoundly nationalist statement (2018, pp. 314–15).

However, it is apparent that nationalism and national unity were conceptualized and pursued in different ways. From the right of Lao politics, especially among the Young Turks, it often manifested as a push to identify all Lao citizens as being of one race and nation. For example, Creak discusses the conduct of the National Games of Laos, the keystone project of General Phoumi in the early 1960s. A key
theme of the games was the geographic unity of Laos, symbolized by the twelve provinces represented in the twelve circles of the flag of the games (evoking the Olympic rings) (Creak 2015, pp. 124–25). On the other hand, the Pathet Lao, while also presenting itself as nationalist, emphasized equal rights and the participation of all social groups and minorities, and it certainly mobilized across the demographic spectrum. Between these, the Neutralists especially emphasized unity around a common religion and virtues, such as expressed in *Latthi Lao*. While there was certainly a degree of overlap in the views of these three tendencies, the differences in emphasis are clear.

Broadly, the general view among commentators has emphasized the worsening state of the country and political polarization for the Neutralist coup. The failure of the coup is credited to the fact that political polarization had simply gone too far to be reversed. What is missing from this is a more in-depth appreciation of the extent to which the Peace Through Neutrality movement, represented by several parties, with particular intellectual leadership by Bong, had built a popular conversation that included a well-thought-out critique and programme for the nation. Thus, historians have so far paid insufficient attention to native sensibilities, especially as expressed in the vernacular press of the time.

A Newspaper for Peace Through Neutrality — *LRS*

In 1950s Laos there was only a handful of newspapers, and each of these papers had only a low print run. The titles were variously in French and vernacular Lao, and most of them were owned by politicians who sought to use them to propagate their political views (Stuart-Fox 2010, p. 230). This situation hardly changed until the end of the RLG period in 1975. According to press reports by the United States Information Service (USIS) situated in Laos from the late 1950s to 1960, there were about a dozen Lao language newspapers being published in the capital, plus four in French and two in Chinese. Of the vernacular press, five papers were government owned and seven
were privately owned, including five political newspapers. They were *Laorouamsamphan* (Lao Unity), *Lao Hakxa Sat* (Lao Guarding the Nation), *Siang Mahason* (Voice of the Public), *Anachak Lao* (Lao Kingdom) and *Lao Nyai* (Greater Lao). *LRS* advocated for Peace Through Neutrality, while the others were pro-government. These vernacular newspapers were largely not archived, so we only have very limited access to issues. Fortunately, *LRS* presents substantial holdings; yet these have not been extensively examined by scholars. As the best preserved of these papers, it represents the Peace Through Neutrality philosophy.

*LRS* was specifically marketed to the general populace; it was sold for only 5 kip, while other papers generally sold for 10 kip. The typically four-page issue of *LRS* consisted of an average of seven political editorial pieces, including some international political news, and a small number of advertisements. A noticeable number of editorial pieces were written in the style of popular poems, making them more enjoyable to read. Buddhist teachings, folktales and traditional idioms were heavily used. One can argue that this paper thus identified itself with ordinary people and their traditional beliefs and religion. It is noteworthy that while the majority of writings were anonymous, the content is relatively consistent in style, suggesting that the pool of contributors was not diverse. Overall, the political messaging served the National Union Party, focusing on the following principles: *sin ha* (Buddhist Five Precepts), *het lae phon* (Cause and Effect, or the Law of Karma) and *Thammathipatai* (Dharmic governance). This was represented visually in the *LRS* logo as an Eightfold Path Dharma Wheel, with the slogan: “*LRS* must respect Dharma”, later changed to “*LRS* must practise Dharma” in late 1959.

*LRS* from June 1958 to July 1960

For this study, the fifty-nine available issues of *LRS* (June 1958 – July 1960) were closely examined, accounting for approximately ninety per cent of the issues published in this period. The method
of investigating the newspaper content was straightforward: a close reading was made of all fifty-nine issues and notes were taken on the dominant themes and topics, the relative frequencies of each, and resonances with later statements made by the coup leadership. The dominant theme of each article was not always immediately clear, and it often required close reading to discern it. This is because the typically Lao style of prose is strongly non-linear; sub-headings and topic sentences may be missing, with a mixing of sub-themes and points within individual pieces, and the point of the story may not be revealed until the end. This contrasts with the more conventionally linear style of writing in the contemporaneous French language Lao newspapers, which historians find easier to rely upon as historical sources.

Articles concerning the party principles and propaganda take up the most column inches in LRS. Indeed, a majority of articles—regardless of theme—end with a short reference to the party’s ideologies as the ultimate solution to the problems of the Lao. This is understandable, as it was a party newspaper, but the content was much more diverse than solely party propaganda. Articles with a theme of unity are almost as frequent, yet one can say that they are richer and more persuasive than the others. Also as frequent are the articles on the anti-Pathet Lao theme. These have a strong moral dimension, with their emphasis on the virtues of truthfulness and trust. As dupes of the Vietnamese, the Pathet Lao were regarded as having lost their moral independence. Discussions against the right wing, corruption and superstition are closely related. The right-wing leaders and followers are regarded as fundamentally demoralized, subject to corruption, and as generally irrational in their character, reflecting the view of the inherently corrupting nature of American money.

The paper reveals important themes: unity, neutrality, democracy, self-reliance, and morality, all of which are closely related to the Peace Through Neutrality philosophy. Accompanying these sentiments was the message that Laos was once a great nation whose greatness can be restored. A key feature of this aspiration
is the idea that the greatness to be achieved would depend upon eschewing foreign ideas or resources, which would otherwise corrupt the national spirit.

Unity is the governing principle of the movement, symbolized in its name, the Lao National Union, and also often expressed as the desire for national reconciliation. In this discourse the notion of neutrality is inseparable from unity, both of which are realized as being free from foreign interference. But such a state necessarily requires a high degree of self-reliance and moral governance, and this also relates to the movement’s particular conception of democracy, in which the people have an obligation to participate in the national project for a peaceful Buddhist society.

The Neutralist View

The Neutralist view expressed in LRS is that to end foreign interference Laos must dissociate herself from both capitalism and communism, and this is often interwoven with an anti-foreigner theme. In later issues of the paper, stories declared that the Buddhist Five Precepts are more suitable for Lao neutrality than the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence of Nehru and Zhou Enlai. This comes through in editorial pieces such as the two discussed below; note that in the first, neutrality is suggested by the fact that neither proposed alliance is acceptable, and indirectly alluded to in the “three worlds” of the title.

“Miss Sukhantha–Mekong: A Novel of a Heroine of Three Worlds” (LRS, 3 September 1958, p. 3). In this piece, the Mekong represents a desirable girl who is caught between two men; one corrupt and the other deceitful. The author urges Miss Sukhantha to judge well, as “this novel fits rather well with the current political situation in the world and within Laos, and I wish readers to analyse this by themselves”.

“Defending the Country” (LRS, 8, 15 and 22 April 1959, p. 4). The author advises that waging the war is disagreeable even when defending the country, so neutrality is more desirable. While the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence do permit accepting foreign
aid, this still risks foreign interference. Better to follow the Buddhist Five Precepts and help one’s self. This avowal was returned to in a later issue titled, “Five Precepts and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” (*LRS*, 30 March 1960, p. 4).

**Self-Reliance**

We see that in both allegorical and more direct terms the message of neutrality serving peace is delivered to the readers. Laos is represented as precious and vulnerable, and as better off staying aloof from wider conflicts or alliances. But the advocates of this perspective are also aware that the nation has to stand on its own feet economically if it is to maintain its independence. Consequently, we also observe many stories that directly address the issue of self-reliance.

*“Eyebrow Raised When Mentioning US Dollars”* (*LRS*, 24 September 1958, p. 1). The author criticizes people who place importance on American dollars, reminding readers that Lao ancestors were able to live and raise children. It stresses that donations are only given when it pleases the donor; they cannot be relied upon to last.

*“Self-built”* (*LRS*, 17 December 1958, p. 1). This piece advises that to achieve self-reliance the young should study and accumulate knowledge, the grown-ups should apply knowledge in building the country, and the old should put in place a good plan for future generations. The National Union Party policy is explained as: “To build self-reliant people, to be free from suffering, and to be removed from the begging system.”

*“Forecast the Future”* (*LRS*, 18–25 November 1959, p. 3). The author hypothesizes about the future and suggests that by the Buddhist principle of ‘Cause and Effect’ the country is clearly headed for disaster. He condemns Lao who are no longer working for Laos and those who take orders from foreigners, and he warns that Laos might not even exist if this continues. Thus, the only way to save Laos is for the people to build self-reliance.

This programmatic requirement for self-reliance placed a strong obligation on the nation and the people, and this resonated strongly with the Peace Through Neutrality conception of democracy, which
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is very specifically conceptualized. As mentioned above, democracy is seen as an obligation of citizens. In addition, the exercise of democratic rights must be tempered by Buddhist virtues, hence the advocacy of thammathipatai (Dharmic governance), which first appears in LRS in June 1959. This is not only seen as suited to Lao culture but stands as a legitimate alternative to the forms of democracy advocated by their political rivals. We see these ideas explained in the following party announcement:

“Why It Is Necessary for Everyone to Join a Political Party” (LRS, 3 June 1959, p. 4). The author stresses that everyone must exercise their democratic right by supporting a political party. In the past, under absolute power, this right was exclusive to the elites; however, now power comes from the majority. People vote for the members of parliament (MPs), and the majority of the elected MPs are able to form a government. The author contrasts this with two other kinds of democracy (pasathipatai): first is nyakkhathipatai, specifically referring to the right wing and its supporters—if they have the majority, it is a government of a giant (figuratively of tyrant/bully). Second is kongkoi-athipatai, specifically referring to the Pathet Lao; it suggests rule by displaced ghosts living in the forest, making koi koi sounds and speaking in opposites. The author urges readers to make a choice of the type of democracy they want because it will be reflected in the outcome of their vote. He emphasized that democracy is neither bad nor good, but it is the only vehicle to take the country to where the majority want.

“Question of Being and Acting Like People” (LRS, 11 November 1959, p. 1). The author answers enthusiastically a letter from a soldier dated 6 November with a question regarding the newspaper’s banner: “Politics is people’s affairs, if you believe you are human then you must play politics.” The response to the letter explains that as specified by law each person has an equal right and duty, which they should exercise. Yet, the act of people exercising their wills presents various dangers, as individuals are subject to temptations and a lack of experience, so their democracy must be guided by principles upon which agreement can be reached. A lack of Buddhist
Corruption

Corruption is extensively discussed in the pages of LRS. The prescriptions offered against it include liberal doses of Buddhist morality plus rather modern illustrations of fairness.

“The Buddhist Five Precepts” (poem) (LRS, 11 March 1959, p. 3 and 1 April 1959, p. 4). The writing is both entertaining and sharp. The Five Precepts are required for both everyday life and for politics. Each precept is explained with an example: Pana—mercy/kindness, condemning the abuse of power by suppressing or threatening ordinary people; Athinna—theft, condemning the theft of public goods; Kame—greed/self-indulgence, which leads to harming others; Musa—deceit, complaining that these days it is hard to find an honest person; and Sura—intoxication or clouded judgement, condemning people who do terrible things such as selling themselves to foreigners.

“The Attitude of Politicians” (LRS, 17 June 1959, p. 3). The piece severely condemns politicians who think of themselves first and the country second, commenting that it is difficult to find honest people. The author laments that one simply cannot avoid selfish individuals because such people surround us and they are so greedy like the greedy Brahmin in the Vessantara Jataka.31

“As Said in Lao Chronicle” (LRS, 30 March 1960, p. 6). The situation is compared with the story of the great king Fa Ngum. When the king was old, he gave responsibility to his right-hand man, Kuan Meusa, who was unfortunately corrupt, cared for his own wealth, did not respect the Dharma, and treated the people badly. At the end of the piece the author complains that, when observing the current Kuan Meusa, one could not help feeling depressed with how history has repeated itself and how one can see that Laos will never be the true Laos and will never be self-sufficient.

“Pavie College Students and their Statement” (LRS, 30 March 1960, p. 5). The author states that Pavie College students approached
him to publish their side of a story regarding recent events at a soccer match against a police team. When the referee did not award a penalty, he was beaten by a player on the police team. Someone claiming to be a member of the secret police discharged a firearm, and the police team’s supporters tried to stop students leaving the stadium. The student soccer team went straight to the police deputy commissioner to report this abuse of power by the police. The author explains that because unity of the Lao is crucial at the present time, everyone should listen to all sides of a dispute. As in any sporting competition, a referee’s decision must be obeyed.32

It is notable that over the period from August 1959 to July 1960, a change in the proportion, emphases and tone of writings occurred, clearly correlated with political developments of the time. In particular, as the crisis accelerated, pleas for national unity came to dominate the pages of LRS, yet those criticizing the Pathet Lao were reduced to just a single piece. This reflects the changing Neutralist assessment of the situation and their strong desire for conciliation of all parties to address the spiralling conflict.33 Changes in the proportions of articles in other categories also reflect this shift in balance.

Unity
A signature event in the polarization of politics at this time was the arrest of sixteen Pathet Lao leaders by the RLG in Vientiane in July 1959, finally terminating the coalition arrangements. Immediately following this development there was a noticeable shift in the tone of LRS stories, with increasingly direct pleas for national reconciliation. The following selection from the second half of 1959 is also marked by warnings of disaster.

“Remember the Past to Prevent Danger in Future” (LRS, 26 August 1959, p. 3). The author asserts that no Lao wants the civil war, for the following reasons: families will be separated; houses and wealth will be lost; there is the possibility even of nuclear war, which could turn Lao into a dry lake; and everyone cherishes life. The article called on readers to not let the Lao be lured into killing
each other like “sweeping sawdust into an already burning fire on another’s insistence”. This idiom (equivalent to pouring gasoline on a fire) suggests the Lao are fighting because they are listening to foreigners.

“Awakening Naga” (poem) (*LRS*, 16 September 1959, p. 3; 23 September 1959, p. 4; 30 September 1959, p. 2). “Awakening Naga” is part of the *Sang Sinsai* epic poem, perhaps the most famous poem of Laos and Northeast Thailand, referenced three times in the paper in September 1959. Throughout, explanatory notes are added to emphasize the point. It ends with “finishing awakening naga poem with a high hope that the Lao will stay alert because Laos is in turmoil everyone must help!”

“A Letter from a Soldier at the Frontline to a Girl” (*LRS*, 11 November 1959, p. 3). This poem in the form of a letter pleads for the Lao to forgo personal vengeance. The poem does not criticize, but rather it urges readers to talk things out in order to end the conflict and enjoy a peaceful life. The personal story is connected with the larger political drama by its location. It begins, “I am sitting in a room in Phongsali province where the divide falls” (referring to the provincial boundary).

“A Girl’s Response Letter” (*LRS*, 18–25 November 1959, p. 3). This poem follows on from the previous one. It begins with sorrowful pleas about the ongoing conflict: “my heart is in grief; so painful seeing the Lao divided, so alarming that soon Laos will lose the Lao race”. At the end the girl wishes for the Lao to stop fighting each other, expressing the sentiment that we are all brothers, hand-in-hand together.

Changing Emphasis

In May 1960 the sixteen Pathet Lao leaders escaped from prison with assistance from their guards. In a piece that appeared in the following month in *LRS*, traditional epic narrative is employed to symbolically condemn immoral government and the descent into disaster that it invites. The meaning is evident to the vernacular Lao readership, yet potentially obscure to an outside reader:
“The Reason Why Princess Sumontha Was Kidnapped” (LRS, 22 June 1960, p. 2). The piece recalls part of the Sang Sinsai epic poem in which intoxicated guards and servants let the giant abduct the princess. By analogy, “the Lao will lose their identity, pride and greatness, because of those who are debased who pull back the country’s progress … the killing between the Lao will continue; … intoxication of the officials … like deadly weapons destroying life and wealth of all Lao with no end”.

And in the same issue, LRS plays its trump card, comparing the coming apocalypse to the historical sacking of Vientiane by the greatly reviled Siamese. This is conceptualized by the Lao as the ultimate national humiliation that must never be allowed to be repeated.

“Memory with Tears” (LRS, 22 June 1960, p. 3). This poem passionately describes the sufferings of the Lao and their ruined kingdom in 1779. For example, “Siamese ruined the capital, destroying its glory and the Emerald Buddha—as treasured as the kingdom itself”, and it asserts that this is accurate as it is taken from the chronicle. It then asks those who read it to please think about the country’s destiny.

This can be read as preparing the Neutralist sympathizers for a coming storm. A month later, in the very next issue (20 July), the last published before the coup, LRS offers an original poetic instruction for unity.

“A Swarm of Bees” (LRS, 20 July 1960, p. 3). The poem acts as a call for unity, and even for people to sacrifice their lives. The author pleads with the Lao to unite by making a comparison with bees and their strong sense of togetherness. For example:

... when we pass beehives in the forest we are delighted to see how hard-working bees are, the hive is massive because of their hard work and unity, they are not stubborn nor lazy even though there is no school, no teaching alphabet, every night and day in the forest they are so united.

Yet they can get irritated if they’ve been bullied, they would not hesitate even sacrificing their lives, they would sting knowing that by losing the stinger they will die, millions of them...
altogether willing to sacrifice, there is no leader, no order, and no payment, everyone is united in action, who do they fight for?…

They are always prepared and ready to fight, yet between themselves there is no contest, no vengeance; if the Lao could act like the bees, people would live in happiness and prosperity, no enemy would dare come near Laos, and subsequently they would be gone forever. The Lao are still so divided, each side is so obstinate and full of retribution, we have been divided between the White and Red for fourteen years and yet no ending.…

We have seen above that the pages of *LRS*, widely read and discussed on the streets of Vientiane in the years leading up to the Neutralist coup, propagated a coherent critique of the ongoing political situation as well as articulating a principled response to the sense of national disaster and the challenge of nation building in the aftermath of the failed 1957 coalition. The paper appealed to traditional virtues and morals, all in a language of discourse that was accessible to the population of the capital. It is my contention that we see the momentum for political action building in the pages of *LRS*.

In the days following the staging of the coup, the leadership issued various communiqués setting forth the programme and interim administrative arrangements, in addition to rousing speeches delivered at the National Stadium. Speeches were made by Kongle and other leadership figures, and thousands of people—especially students—turned out to cheer on their deeds and actions. Somehow those speeches touched directly on themes and imperatives that the crowds were already familiar with and motivated them to action.

The speeches at the stadium in those days articulated a programme and attitude that engaged the people so thoroughly and convincingly that it was more than a matter of remarkable charisma on the part of middle-ranking officers with limited education like Kongle. The programme expounded to the citizenry followed closely the specifics of the Peace Through Neutrality movement and the messaging apparent in the pages of *LRS*. Specific calls for unity, neutrality, democracy, self-reliance, anti-corruption, and so forth, were forcefully
issued, connecting directly with the popular mood. Below we review some short extracts from the speech given by Kongle on 11 August (Radio Communiques 1960, pp. 1–4), touching on these specific points.

Looking at the immediate motivation for the coup, it is made clear that the threat to the nation was regarded as an existential one, therefore demanding strong action:

I and my friends are weary of seeing such a sad spectacle. If this government were to be permitted to carry out its policies, our nation and the Lao people will disappear.... My group and I decided to sacrifice everything, even our lives… (Radio Communiques 1960, p. 2)

Asserting the path of neutrality, Kongle stressed the need to exercise sovereign authority over aid rather than be at the whim of foreign powers: “We must maintain control of our own country through neutrality.... We need foreign aid, but it must be given without political conditions” (Radio Communiques 1960, p. 2). Although coming to power in a coup, the immediate demand was for the restoration of democracy, especially after the recent rigged election: “Our country has tried to apply the democratic principle.... No one should become leader unless he has been chosen by the people, through a regular system of voting” (Radio Communiques 1960, p. 3). Referring to pre-colonial times, and by implication the idea of ‘Greater Laos’, self-reliance was invoked as the principle for building the nation:

We were able to help ourselves.... Self-help is the best help … sharing our happiness and sorrows with each other. By such deeds, Laos can begin to prosper and be content. (Radio Communiques 1960, p. 3)

And finally, here we see the call to end corruption, which had stoked so much anger in the populace:

we wish to put an end to corruption and cheating, and the use of government property for private purposes. We are trying to
remove the dirty hands of graft, but there are many all around us.  
(Radio Communiques 1960, p. 3)

We see in these quotes and throughout the communiqués the language and sentiment of the Peace Through Neutrality movement and very much the content that readers of LRS were familiar with. This strength of connection is not apparent in the French language press or official sources of the time, as evidenced in the lack of emphasis on this in published historical accounts.

Conclusion

An examination of the Lao language press prior to the 1960 Neutralist coup, and specifically LRS, reveals that Neutralist voices had been conducting a dialogue with the populace, expressing exasperation with the increasing national polarization and interference by foreign powers, against which they made the case for renewed national reconciliation. It is clear that the timing of the coup followed immediately this preparatory messaging in the pages of LRS. That newspaper, and other Neutralist propaganda, had not specifically called for a coup, but had maintained a conversation with the people of the capital that motivated and prepared them for action, such that they readily came out to support the coup when it occurred.

But popular support was not enough in the face of the deep internal crisis and the external situation. The Neutralists lacked the power to enforce their programme—“The Neutralist force was neither politically nor military strong enough to withstand the determination of both the political Left and Right” (Stuart-Fox 2010, p. 120). Off-again on-again negotiations did eventually lead to a new coalition agreement (the Declaration and Protocol of the Neutrality of Laos) in July 1962, but the terms did not integrate the rival forces, undermining the renewed quest for neutrality that had motivated the coup. The Second Indochina War was in full swing, and while the second coalition was officially neutral, it “was not the kind of neutrality the United States was prepared to countenance”,
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(Stuart-Fox 2002, p. 18) given that it allowed the North Vietnamese to continue operating freely on Lao territory.

By late 1964 Souvanna Phouma was leading a right-wing-dominated RLG, having absorbed many Neutralists, including Kongle, and one can say that by 1965 Neutralism had decisively failed in Laos. In the assessment of Evans, the Neutralist coup had been a “godsend” to the Pathet Lao, delivering them the opportunity to expand and consolidate their forces; the Royal Lao Army was effectively demoralized and weakened. On top of this, the Royal Lao state and its institutions were unable to exercise authority necessary to redress the situation (Evans 2002, pp. 121, 127).

In 1966 Kongle was forced into exile, although he continued low-level political activity in Asia and Europe. He continued travelling and giving speeches, active in the United States in the 1990s, but by the mid-2000s he had effectively retired from public activity. Eventually he settled into seclusion outside Paris, where he passed away in January 2014. To the present day, Kongle and his followers remain officially reviled by the Lao PDR and bitterly unforgiven by expat right-wingers. Within Laos, the coup of August 1960 is officially portrayed as an act of popular patriotism, especially praising those Neutralists who later came over to the Pathet Lao side (for example Duangsai 2018, pp. 238–41; Phumi 2015, pp. 226–27; Pavatsat Lao lem III 1989, pp. 307–9, 331–33).

Bong Souvannavong had effectively retired from political life by late 1962. He was arrested by the Lao PDR regime in 1975 and he passed away in an internment camp some two years later. Among the Lao expat community there remains a group of National Union Party supporters with dedicated social media spaces for the LRS philosophy.

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NOTES

1. Kongle is known by this name according to his eulogy (Khen Thammavong 2014, p. 2). However, there are several sources that mention surnames: Sichampa (2005, p. 202) and Duangsai (2018, p. 207) refer to him as Kongle Rolin or Rolain, apparently coined from French. Additionally, he is named Kongle Wirasan (“Kongle Wirasan” n.d.). I have no explanation for these names.

2. The Romanization of the title of Laorouamsamphan newspaper is based on Bong Souvannavong’s original practice. The catalogued title (Worldcat) is Lao huam samphan. I retain established transliterations for proper nouns. All translations are my own. Note also that “Kongle” is spelled here as one word, and that “Lao” is used to refer to the Lao people or Lao citizens and the language.

3. The Pathet Lao was a national liberation movement that overthrew the RLG in 1975 after twenty-five years of off-again on-again civil conflict. The name was later changed to the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party.

4. CDNI was formed in July 1958 by younger politicians and members of the military frustrated with the attitudes of established politicians. With US support these ‘Young Turks’ engineered a political takeover through late 1959 and early 1960. See further discussion in Wolfson-Ford (2018, pp. 170–73).

5. Lao: Santiphap pen kang. Ladwig (2017, p. 88) and Wolfson-Ford (2019, p. 15) translate it as “Peace Is Neutrality”, while Stuart-Fox translates it as “Peace Through Neutrality” (2010, p. 289). I think the meaning has been preserved by both translations.

6. This use of newspapers was inspired in part by the recent thesis of Wolfson-Ford (2018) that made use of the Lao press in its examination of democracy in the Royal Lao period (1945–75).
7. Lao: Laorouamsamphan (French: Union Nationale Lao). It was the first political party founded, in 1947, in the Kingdom of Laos. The party was created by Bong Souvannavong and Kou Voravong. Kou left and formed the Democratic Party in 1951, which also advocated for peace and reconciliation. Kou was assassinated in September 1954 while holding the post of defence minister.

8. Born on 8 June 1906 in Vientiane to the aristocratic Souvannavong family, Bong had become a prominent political figure by the mid-1940s. In 1946 he became governor of Luang Prabang and president of the National Assembly. He formed the National Union Party in 1947. Bong has always been regarded as a maverick figure in Lao politics, while also being a traditionalist-nationalist. He was especially vocal in his attacks on corruption. His family was among the established clans in Vientiane, with businesses in real estate and construction, which largely financed the party and its newspaper, LRS. Bong also owned the publishing company Lao Mai (New Lao), which was one of the few local newspaper presses. Wolfson-Ford (2018, p. 36) provides more biographical details, as does Halpern (1960, pp. 23–30).

9. The word Sintham translates as ‘Buddhist morality’, although the party is generally referred to by the Lao name.

10. Wolfson-Ford draws upon Deuve (1984 and 1995) to provide a detailed account of the connections between the three parties: National Union, Peace, and Sintham. I am grateful to Wolfson-Ford for sharing his unpublished conference paper with me.

11. Also known as Khana Santiphap (Peace Committee) (LRS, 27 August 1958, p. 5), or the League for Peace and Neutrality (Ladwig 2017, p. 88). The committee published a free newspaper, Santiphap (Peace) (6,000 copies weekly through much of 1957, although I have only been able to obtain a single issue—1, no. 8, 17 June 1957—courtesy of Wolfson-Ford). Major contributors included Khamphai Buppha (one of sixteen Pathet Lao leaders arrested in July 1959) (Huankhun sivit kankhuanvai 2001, p. 16). This is significant because it points to the efforts to draw the Pathet Lao into cooperation with the Neutralists.

12. I have not seen the Peace Party newspaper; however, I became aware of it indirectly through an interview I conducted with a former monk in 2018 in Sibunheuang Village, Vientiane (name withheld). He said there was no proper newspaper, more like a kind of handbill distributed among members and followers. I suspect that he was actually recalling Santiphap, published by the Peace Committee in 1957—see endnote 11. LRS was a popular newspaper. For example, Khamphui reflects on the newspaper’s
significance in his autobiography. He recalls the repeated appearance of a particular popular political riddle in the paper following public debates organized by senior monks from 1956 onwards (2011, pp. 32–34). This is indicative of the popular character of LRS at the time.

13. Phonthep recalls that as Quinim united with the National Union Party his popularity climbed among ordinary people. For example, sam lo (rickshaw drivers) would climb the fence of the National Assembly building to listen to the debates (2013, p. 147).

14. Bong was a strict neutralist, but he was not a communist sympathizer, as the United States misunderstood him to be. Scholars in the past have labelled him a ‘leftist’ neutralist. See more discussion in Wolfson-Ford (2018, pp. 168–70).

15. Kongle was captain of the Second Paratroop Battalion of the RLA. Originally from one of the Lao Theung groups (Lao of the mountain slopes) of Muang Phalan in Southern Laos, he earned battlefield promotion at a young age and earned a wide reputation for trust and loyalty.

16. This was a planning meeting for the king’s funeral ceremony scheduled for the following year. King Sisavangvong had passed away in October 1959, and the elaborate funeral preparations took more than a year.

17. Ladwig discusses the position of Lao Buddhist Sangha during the Cold War in Laos between 1957 and 1960, including the Peace Through Neutrality movement under the leadership of Bong and others (2017, pp. 81–108).

18. Many existing works refer to this event as the ‘Battle of Vientiane’. However, Lao people talk about ton soek Kongle (the time of Kongle’s battle), especially before 1975. See more details in Chalermnit Press correspondent’s witness account (1961).


20. The author claimed that he was based in Vientiane for a couple of years leading up to the coup, and that he closely witnessed the events first-hand.

21. I suggest that the Voice of Peace and the Peace newspapers (endnotes 11 and 12) were the same paper published and distributed by the Peace Committee in 1957. This is because under the paper’s title “Peace”, it says “Voice of the Peace Committee”.

22. The booklet was first published in the Lao language in March 1960, compiled largely from extracted writings from LRS over the previous year. A French translation, Doctrine Lao ou Socialisme Dhammique pour l’instauration de la paix, was published the following year in Geneva (I have not seen the French version).

23. Lent provides an overview of the Lao press in the early 1970s. In addition
to listing the various private newspapers and periodicals, he mentions Lao Presse (Khao khosanakan) produced by the Ministry of Information at the time, which reproduced in both Lao and French stories from Agence France Presse. Lao Presse is perhaps the most utilized press source by historians for this period. According to Lent it was principally directed at diplomats and civil servants rather than a popular readership (1974, pp. 172–79).

24. Two recognized reports on the press in Laos produced by USIS were surveyed for this paper. One is the “Press Summary of Lao Language Press and Radio” (1958–60). This report is substantial, though its coverage of the vernacular press is much lighter weight than those given for other languages. In addition, because the vernacular text had been rendered in a summary form and oriented towards an English-speaking readership, much of the content was redacted. The other report is “Publications in Lao Language” (February 1960). This report only consists of press titles, their publishers and publishing details in vernacular and other languages at the time.

25. I obtained only one issue each of Siang Mahason and Anachak Lao (published 8 April 1960) and of Lao Nyai (5 December 1959) (these papers were mixed among catalogued pre-1975 newspapers from Laos that a Cornell Librarian brought to my attention). Additionally, the weekly Lao Hakxa Sat, owned by CDNI, appeared in both Lao and French editions. The latter is preserved in various libraries and has been well utilized.

26. For example, L’independent, Lao Hakxa Sat and Siang Mahason newspapers sold for 10 kip.

27. This included adaptations of high school texts with which all Lao who attended school were familiar (Thao Ken 1960).


29. From 20 July to 21 November 1960, only one issue is available (no. 517, 14 September). After this the content of the paper changed significantly, as Bong rejected the increasing closeness of the coup leadership to the Pathet Lao and the communist bloc.

30. See “Kongkoi” [Forest ghost] (n.d.).

31. The Vessantara Jataka narrates one of the Buddha’s past lives in which he gives away everything he owns, displaying the virtue of perfect generosity.

32. This story connects directly with the Neutralist coup. The students mention that a “Lieutenant Khamkieo” ordered his soldiers to provide safe passage for them to their homes afterwards. This same lieutenant is mentioned as leading a company on Kongle’s side during the battle of Vientiane, in December 1960 (Chaeng 2013, p. 96). It is not a coincidence that many
soldiers and students supported the coup—many of them had been directly involved in events like the fracas at the soccer game that stoked grievances against the government.

33. Note also that at around this time, in March 1960, the *Latthi Lao* booklet was published, emphasizing the adoption of Dharma to achieve peace. Much of the content of the booklet is directly lifted from the pages of *LRS*, reinforcing the conversation that the paper was already having with its readership. Far from isolated and incoherent, *Latthi Lao* represents the mood of the time among much of the politically engaged population.

34. I was able to locate neither media sources nor official figures regarding the number of people who came to listen to the speeches on 11 August 1960. However, on archival footage one can see masses of attendees. For further details see “General Kongle’s Coup d’Etat” (2015).

35. These are held as English translations and include speeches by other figures and from other radio stations (Cornell Library).

36. This attitude towards Kongle is partly in response to the fact that in the early 1980s he was briefly supported by China to harass Lao PDR forces from Xishuangbanna. This was facilitated in the broader context of the then China-Vietnam conflict.

37. Although having long ago abandoned politics, the Souvannavong family remains actively involved in the construction and architecture business in the Lao PDR.

REFERENCES


“Lao huam sampham: saeo saeo siang chakchan” [Lao unity: Churp churp...


