

BOOK REVIEWS

***Forsaken Causes: Liberal Democracy and Anticommunism in Cold War Laos.* By Ryan Wolfson-Ford. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2024. Hardcover: 294pp.**

The problem with clichés is that people take them seriously. Laos is the “battery of Asia”, so few in Vientiane entertain the thought of developing an export industry other than hydropower or minerals. One fact about Laos most foreigners know is that it was the most bombed country in history (per capita), so why should history begin before America’s bombs fell? Since 1975, it has been a one-party communist state landlocked between other dictatorial states, so was Laos’s soil not most fertile for authoritarianism?

Ryan Wolfson-Ford’s mission is to rescue Lao history from Western solipsism and communist propaganda. His thesis, which is aptly defended, is that democratic ideals and anti-communism developed in the mid-1940s were not foreign imports, that Laos built one of the most democratic forms of government in the region and that, as the Cold War descended on Southeast Asia, Laotians did not become “everybody’s pawns”, a claim once made by American intelligence (p. 5). As Wolfson-Ford puts it, “Lao democracy was advanced most by the Lao themselves” (p. 4). It was, he argues, “unique in Asia because it was established autonomously and not as a vehicle for continued colonialism” (p. 31).

The most interesting chapters are the opening ones, which explore the ideological formation of liberalism and anti-communism. In 1945, Lao Issara (“Free Lao”), a group of nationalists who had banded together in Thailand five years earlier, declared independence from France, but the revolutionaries fled to neighbouring Thailand

the following year as the colonialists returned. Before leaving, though, they had convoked a National Assembly, a political party, a national army and an egalitarian constitution. In exile again, Issara's intellectuals got on with theorizing while Issara's troops attempted raids on French forces.

Arguably the most important intellectual product of this period was a species of anti-communism (not adopted "to please any patron", p. 57) that saw Lao culture, traditions and Buddhism as the basic tenets, although heavily influenced by foreign thinkers. (The First Indochina War, when Vietnamese communists invaded Laos, would transform anti-communism into a more popular ideology, replete with the perennial fears of racial destruction by the Vietnamese.) Yet, Wolfson-Ford is at pains to stress that liberal democracy was also at the core of anti-communism. For instance, while many adherents were royalists, they saw the people, not the King, as the source of popular authority. As Issara's intellectuals wrote in a telegram in 1945, "If a king could not govern without a people, a people could perfectly government without a king" (p. 35). This set up a running contest between popular sovereignty and elite-led *mission civilisatrice* in the Royal Lao Government, which took full control of affairs after Laos attained its independence in 1953.

The chapters on post-1953 history deal with the ups and downs of self-rule as well as the contradictions of the democratic experiment, including the rather interesting interplay between the anti-communists and communists. The communist Pathet Lao occasionally engaged in elections, and it was them, for instance, who pressured the government to introduce universal suffrage during 1957–58. The central figure in this period was Prince Souvanna Phouma, the revolving premier, who spent his career trying to cut a neutralist path between right-wingers and communists. Civil war between the royal government and the Pathet Lao resumed in 1959, and Wolfson-Ford ably charts the course of this conflict. His later chapters deal with the brief return of democracy after the 1967 elections and the death of democracy after 1973, although he interestingly reveals that 1973–75 was "one of the most vibrant phases" of political life, with the birth of several new democratic movements (p. 193).

The common portrayal of 1945–75 (a black hole in the existing literature) is of a doomed interregnum between colonialism and

communism, and all attempts by centrists like Souvanna to hold back the waves of coups, mutinies and partisan warfare that were destined to fail. For some, the royal government was nothing more than a reaction to extremes, so it lacked its own motivation. However, rather than being a French creation propped up by the Americans, Wolfson-Ford shows that the Royal Lao Government and its leaders possessed novel ideas on nationalism, liberalism and political consciousness. Indeed, this book is essentially an intellectual history of the Laotian elite (and arguably the first of its kind). He ably refutes the notion that Laotians had little understanding of the differences between communism, democracy or other forms of government, a throwaway claim made in another recent book about the country.

His assertion that Laos's experiment with democracy was more organic and successful than in most other Southeast Asian countries opens itself up to debate (Filipinos would quibble with it), yet it is exactly the sort of argument that might tempt an undergraduate to consider a specialism in Laos or a professor to pen a follow-up. The only criticism from this reviewer is that the author and publishers might have forsaken the word count and indulged in a little more context. A non-expert would certainly benefit by first reading a more general history of Laos (perhaps Grant Evans's *A Short History of Laos*, 2002). Moreover, this is the sort of academic work that ought to be translated into the local language, ideally published in cheap, *samizdat* form (at US\$89, the average Laotian would be left with only spare change from their monthly paycheck). Indeed, the Laotian who entered school after 1975 and was raised on communist liturgy could do with an honest account of this period of their history as much as the curious foreigner.

More broadly, *Forsaken Causes* is a necessary reminder that Southeast Asians' desire for liberty and common decency has deep roots and that the region's experiments with democracy are not only of interest when they are supervised by the West or with communism when funded by Moscow or Beijing. Indeed, the Second Indochina War was not a Third World War heaped on the passive people of mainland Southeast Asia by outside powers but the Third World's War over what form of government the region's inhabitants wanted. Laotians' trial with democratic rule was homegrown and authentic—and, at times, successful but naturally

riddled with contradictions—yet so, too, were the reasons for its failure and the rise of a one-party state. One could do with being reminded of this every now and then, particularly since Laos only gets a look-in these days when it can be portrayed as a casualty of American or Chinese “imperialism”.

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