

Laos

Ethnicity in Laos

Group selection

Laos is a multi-ethnic country officially encompassing 49 ethnic groups (²⁴¹⁹), which have been grouped primarily by language and location into one of three categories: the Lao Loum (lowland Lao), and the hilltribes constituting of the Lao Theung (upper Lao) and the Lao Sung (highland Lao) (²⁴²⁰; ²⁴²¹, 247-248). Based on this classification, we identify the following politically relevant groups:

- The lowland **Lao (incl. Phuan)** make up half of the total population and speak Lao-Thai languages.
- The **Lao Thai** including the lowland Phu Tai and several tribes who live in the higher valleys and on the middle slopes of the mountains in northern Laos (and in adjacent areas of south-west China, northern Thailand and north-western Vietnam). The tribes are usually categorized according to their traditional costumes: Tai Dam (Black Tai), Tai Khao (White Tai), Tai Deng (Red Tai). Other Tai tribes such as Tai Neua, Tai Phong, Phou Tai, Lue Tai, Yuan and Phuan have been characterized by location or their distinct languages which are nevertheless closely related.
- The Lao Theung, sometimes called **Lao Thoeng**, are mostly made up of indigenous tribal peoples who lived in the area prior to the arrival of the Thai, Lao and Vietnamese. This group speaks Mon-Khmer languages and they typically live apart from mainstream Lao society. The cultural and linguistic differences among the many Lao Theung groups are greater than those among the Lao Loum or Lao Sung. Groups range from the Khmou (alternate spellings include Kammu and Khmu) and Lamet in the north, to the Katang and Makong in the center, to the Loven and Lawae in the far south.
- The largest Lao Theung group, the **Khmou**, is coded separately here.
- The **Lao Sung** are Miao-Yao or Tibeto-Burmese speaking peoples who migrated southwards to Laos in the last two centuries. Most of these highland groups live on the tops or upper slopes of the northern mountains, but some of their villages

²⁴¹⁹ [National Statistics Center of the Lao PDR, 2006]

²⁴²⁰ [National Statistics Center of the Lao PDR, 2006]

²⁴²¹ [Levinson, 1998]

have been resettled to lowland sites since the 1970s. The subgroups and tribes include Mien (Yao), Lahu, Lolo, Ho and Kho (also known as Akha). The second largest Lao Sung group after the Hmong (see below) are the Yao (Iu Mien, Man or Mien). The Yao mainly live in Luang Nam Tha, Luang Prabang and Bokeo. Most are animists and continue to practise Chinese ancestor worship while some adhere to Taoism, Buddhism and Christianity (²⁴²²).

- The **Hmong** are the largest Lao Sung subgroup with villages spread across the uplands of all the northern provinces. They are subdivided into four main groups based on the dominating colours of some of their clothing: the White Hmong, Striped Hmong, Red Hmong and Black Hmong.

Power relations

1953-1974

Ethnic Lao dominated the central Royal Lao Government (RLG) which ruled Laos after it gained independence from France in 1953. They are coded as Senior Partner in this period. Hmong groups sided with the RLG to fight the pro-Vietnamese and communist Pathet Lao insurgents. The Hmong leader Vang Pao commanded RLG elite troops and was supported by the CIA. He can be seen as a de facto Junior Partner to the Lao-dominated RLG, though him and his loyalists were not in charge of ministries. The Hmong as well as the Lao Sung residual group are coded as Junior Partners.

Though the royalist regime did not explicitly promote proportional representation of ethnic groups in the provinces, representatives of larger ethnic minorities such as the Khmou or the Yao were given positions in the provincial administrations. Despite this, the Khmou, Lao Theung, and Lao Tai lacked executive power on the national level and are considered Powerless. The Khmou and Lao Tai are coded with Regional Autonomy in this period.

1975-2017

In 1975, the communist Pathet Lao took control of the government, ending a six-century-old monarchy and instituting a strict socialist regime closely aligned to Vietnam (²⁴²³). King Savang Vatthana abdicated, was later arrested and died in captivity. The Lao People's Democratic Republic was proclaimed, with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) as the only legal political party and Kaysone Phomvihane as prime minister (²⁴²⁴).

The ruling LPRP continues to be the only constitutionally permitted party and holds 98 of 99 seats in the national assembly. The constitution does not discriminate against any ethnic group but it is foremost the Lao majority which is involved in national politics and economic development (²⁴²⁵, 248). They are continuously given Senior Partner status.

²⁴²² [Minority Rights Group International, 2010]

²⁴²³ [Central Intelligence Agency, 2018]

²⁴²⁴ [US Library of Congress, 1995]

²⁴²⁵ [Levinson, 1998]

In early 2016 the party congress elections led to an increase in members of ethnic minorities in the Central Committee, the Politburo as well as in the cabinet of ministers (²⁴²⁶, 17). However, the replacement of a considerable part of the party's leadership was essentially the consequence of older party leaders' retirement and did not decrease the LPRP's authoritarian rule (²⁴²⁷, 206; ²⁴²⁸). New members were appointed and elected if they were considered loyal to the party. Therefore, the political cleavage in Laos is determined by party loyalty rather than by ethnic origin, although decision-making positions in national politics are still predominantly held by ethnic Lao. Hence, although ethnic minorities are included in the government - which justifies a power-sharing coding - it is unclear if their commitment to their ethnic group is strong enough in order to support minority interests against the will of the majority of ethnic Lao in the LPRP. The government's attempts to enhance ethnic equality are only pursued in line with economic development projects and where it does not interfere with the power of the LPRP itself (²⁴²⁹, 8; ²⁴³⁰, 2; ²⁴³¹, 11).

The political changes in 1975 increased in the number of Lao Tai, Lao Theung, and Khmou in the national and provincial administrations. This is reflected in their Junior Partner status, while the Lao Sung are rendered Powerless.

Several groups of Hmong lived in the jungle as fugitives after 1975, when the pro-US government they had supported was defeated. They were frequently attacked by the military. Hmong groups continued to fight a low-level rebellion against the communist regime and anti-government activities were carried out by remnants of Vang Pao's Hmong in isolated and remote areas in northern central Laos. In December 2006, more than 400 members of the Hmong ethnic group surrendered to the authorities while thousands attempted to flee to Thailand. However, they were deported and forcibly repatriated to villages outside Vientiane, the Lao capital, in the course of the following years.

Ethnic Hmong - especially those living in remote rural areas of central and northern Laos - still face violent attacks by the Lao People's Army (LPA) and are subject to resettlement programs detrimental to their livelihood (²⁴³², 8; ²⁴³³, 4; ²⁴³⁴, 8; ²⁴³⁵). The government further denies medical and humanitarian organizations access to the Hmong (²⁴³⁶, 59). While some ethnic Hmong hold leadership positions in the government, their appointment must be considered tokenistic and does not seem to improve the overall situation for this ethnic group (²⁴³⁷, 12). Thus, they are coded as Discriminated.

Numerous reports speak about acts of discrimination conducted by officials against Christians (²⁴³⁸, 7; ²⁴³⁹). It is difficult to distinguish between religious and ethnic motives behind such repression as they often overlap, as for example in the case of the Hmong people. It is conjectured that at times religious motives might mask underlying ethnic discrimination (²⁴⁴⁰, 5; ²⁴⁴¹, 2).

²⁴²⁶ [US Department of State, 2017]

²⁴²⁷ [Gunn, 2017]

²⁴²⁸ [Sayalath, S. Creak, S., 2017]

²⁴²⁹ [FIDH, 2017]

²⁴³⁰ [Sims, 2015]

²⁴³² [FIDH, 2017]

²⁴³³ [Freedom House, 2016]

²⁴³⁴ [UNHRC, 2014]

²⁴³⁵ [Unrepresented Nations Peoples Organization, 2017]

²⁴³⁶ [Country Watch, 2017]

²⁴³⁸ [Unrepresented Nations Peoples Organization, 2017]

²⁴³⁹ [Human Rights Watch, 2017]

²⁴⁴⁰ [FIDH, 2017]

²⁴⁴¹ [USCIRF, 2016]

Note: In 1991, a new coding period is introduced with slightly adjusted group sizes. This does not affect power relations.

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Political status of ethnic groups in Laos

From 1953 until 1974

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Lao (incl. Phuan)	0.5	SENIOR PARTNER
Lao Tai	0.14	POWERLESS
Lao Thoeng (excl. Khmou)	0.12	POWERLESS
Khmou	0.11	POWERLESS
Hmong	0.1	JUNIOR PARTNER
Lao Sung (excl. Hmong)	0.03	JUNIOR PARTNER



Figure 502: Political status of ethnic groups in Laos during 1953-1974.

From 1975 until 1990

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Lao (incl. Phuan)	0.52	SENIOR PARTNER
Lao Tai	0.13	JUNIOR PARTNER
Lao Thoeng (excl. Khmou)	0.12	JUNIOR PARTNER
Khmou	0.11	JUNIOR PARTNER
Hmong	0.09	DISCRIMINATED
Lao Sung (excl. Hmong)	0.03	POWERLESS



Figure 503: Political status of ethnic groups in Laos during 1975-1990.

From 1991 until 2017

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Lao (incl. Phuan)	0.55	SENIOR PARTNER
Lao Thoeng (excl. Khmou)	0.12	JUNIOR PARTNER
Lao Tai	0.12	JUNIOR PARTNER
Khmou	0.11	JUNIOR PARTNER
Hmong	0.08	DISCRIMINATED
Lao Sung (excl. Hmong)	0.02	POWERLESS



Figure 504: Political status of ethnic groups in Laos during 1991-2017.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Laos

From 1953 until 1975

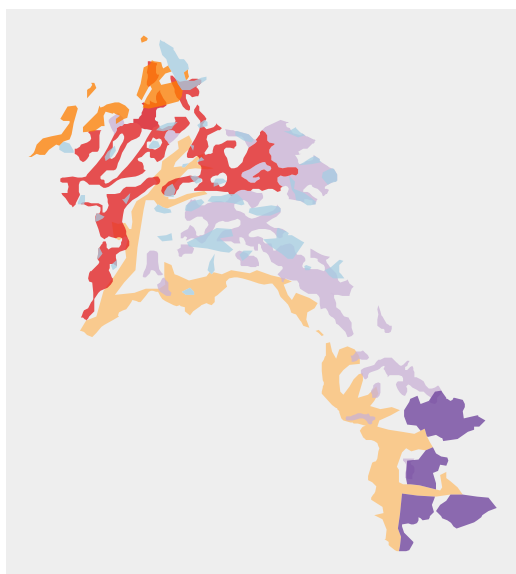


Figure 505: Map of ethnic groups in Laos during 1953-1975.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■ Lao (incl. Phuan)	41 493	Regional & urban
■ Lao Tai	36 290	Regionally based
■ Khmou	31 383	Regionally based
■ Lao Thoeng (excl. Khmou)	17 471	Regionally based
■ Hmong	14 186	Regionally based
■ Lao Sung (excl. Hmong)	7 740	Regionally based

Table 172: List of ethnic groups in Laos during 1953-1975.

From 1976 until 2017

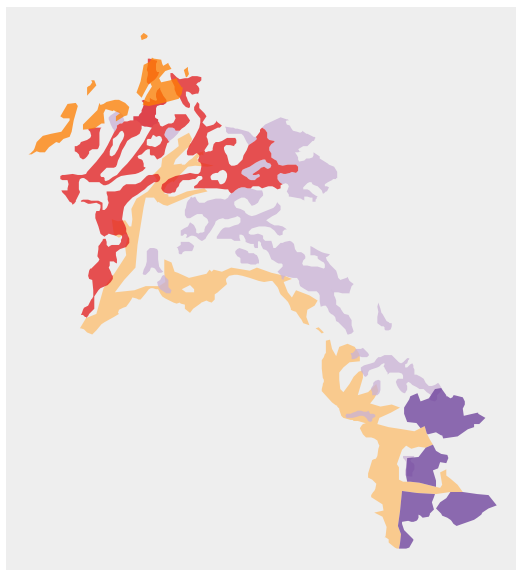


Figure 506: Map of ethnic groups in Laos during 1976-2017.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■ Lao (incl. Phuan)	41 493	Regional & urban
■ Lao Tai	36 290	Regionally based
■ Khmou	31 383	Regionally based
■ Lao Thoeng (excl. Khmou)	17 471	Regionally based
■ Lao Sung (excl. Hmong)	7 740	Regionally based
Hmong		Migrant

Table 173: List of ethnic groups in Laos during 1976-2017.

Conflicts in Laos

Starting on 1946-03-30

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of France	Lao Issara		1946-03-30			

Starting on 1959-11-11

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Laos	Pathet Lao		1959-11-11			
Government of Laos	Neutralists		1960-12-12			
Government of Laos	LRM	Hmong	1989-08-24	Explicit	Yes	Yes

Starting on 1982-06-15

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Laos	Government of Thailand		1982-06-15			