

# Laos

## *Ethnicity in Laos*

### *Group selection*

*Percentages given for the different ethnic groups:* Lao 55%, Khmou 11%, Hmong 8%, other 26% <sup>(1767)</sup>

<sup>1767</sup> [National Statistics Center of the Lao PDR, 2006]

US State Department <sup>(1768)</sup> estimates are: Tai-Kadai language family (6 ethnic groups)–66.2%; Austro-Asiatic (Mon-Khmer and Viet-Muong) language family (30 ethnic groups)–22.8%; Hmong-Yao (2 ethnic groups)–7.4%; Tibeto-Burman (8 ethnic groups)–2.7%; other ethnic groups (including Vietnamese and Chinese)–0.9%.

<sup>1768</sup> [US Department of State, 2010]

*General constellation and group-by-group codification:* There are three major ethno-linguistic groupings in Laos which aggregate the 49 smaller ethnic groups. These are the Lao Loum (lowland), the Lao Thoeng (midland) and the Lao Sung (northern). The ethnic group coding below separates out the major group of each category and retains the Lao Theung and Lao Sung as residual categories for the smaller ethnic groups.

*Lao (incl. Phuan):* The Lao constitute the majority group in Laos. Traditionally, several smaller Lao-Tai speaking groups have been included in a general category of Lao Loum groups such as the Phu Tai, Lue, Nhoun, Yang and Saek. Lao currently dominate the political system of Laos despite official government policies espousing ethnic integration.

*Lao Thoeng:* The Lao Thoeng, or midland Lao, is the second largest ethno-linguistic group. The subgroups which make up the Lao Thoeng are mostly indigenous tribal peoples who lived in the region prior to the arrival of the Thai, Lao and Vietnamese. This group speaks Mon-Khmer languages and typically live apart from mainstream Lao society. In 1993, this category accounted for about 24 percent of the national population. 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 Kammu (alternate spellings include Khmou and Khmu) and Lamet in the north, to the Katang and Makong in the center, to the Loven and Lawae in the far south. As the largest Lao Thoeng group, the Khmou are coded separately here. Political changes in 1975 increased in the number of Lao Theung entering the national

and provincial administrations, though they still remain under-represented despite this improvement.

*Lao Thai:* This group includes the Phuthai (aka Lao Tai incl. White, Black and White Tai). Tribal Lao Tai live in the higher valleys and on the middle slopes of the mountains in northern Laos (and in adjacent areas of south-west China, north Thailand and north-west Vietnam). Tai 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 other characteristics, such as speaking distinct languages which are nevertheless closely related.

*Lao Sung:* The Lao Sung make up about 10 percent of the population, numbering some 585,000 (CIA World Factbook, 2007). These groups are Miao-Yao or Tibeto-Burmese speaking peoples who have continued to migrate into Laos from the north within the last two centuries. In Laos most highland groups live on the tops or upper slopes of the northern mountains, but some of these villages have been resettled in lowland sites since the 1970s. In order to eradicate opium production, an estimated 65,000 hill tribe people have been displaced from the mountains of northern Laos where the opium poppy thrives. The Hmong are the most numerous Lao Sung group, with villages spread across the uplands of all the northern provinces and are coded separately here. Mien (Yao), Akha, Lahu, and other related groups are considerably smaller in numbers and tend to be located in rather limited areas of the north. Smaller hill tribes sometimes included among the Lao Sung are Lolo, Ho and Kho (also known as Akha). The second largest Lao Sung group are the Yao (Iu Mien, Man or Mien). The Yao live mainly in Luang Nam Tha, Luang Prabang and Bokeo. Most are animists and continue to practise Chinese ancestor worship, though some are followers of Taoism, Buddhism and Christianity. Contrary to stated principles in the constitution and official government policies, the Hmong, Yao and other minorities generally do not have access to education in their own language, and they continue to be under-represented in many areas of public life, which tends to be dominated by the ethnic Lao.

*Hmong:* The Hmong 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. Several groups of Hmong who have been living in the jungle as fugitives since 1975, when the pro-US government they supported was defeated by the communists. Internally displaced and isolated, they face frequent military attacks. In December 2006, more than 400 members of the Hmong ethnic group surrender to the Lao authorities. Many thousands of Hmong Lao have tried to escape by fleeing over the border to Thailand. In a March 2007 report to the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Society for Threatened Peoples stated that there were over 8,000 Hmong refugees in a makeshift camp in Petchabun, Thailand. Many more refugees were believed to be hiding in other places in Thailand. According to Human Rights Watch, in May 2007, senior military officers from Thailand and Laos signed the Lao-Thai Committee on Border Security agreement, allowing Thailand to send Lao Hmong asylum seekers back upon arrival. Over the next month 194 Hmong were forcibly driven back over the border into Thailand. The Thai-Lao Committee on Border Security met once again at the beginning of September 2007 to decide the fate of the Hmong refugees at the camp in Petchabun and agreed to forcibly repatriate them to villages outside Vientiane, the Lao capital. In December 2009, Thailand deported an additional 4,000 Hmong back to Laos.

*Other groups:* Laos also has Chinese and Vietnamese minority populations which are approximately 1% of the population combined, though their exact number is difficult to ascertain. The ethnic Vietnamese tend to be concentrated along the Laos-Vietnam border areas and in the cities, whereas Chinese presence goes back centuries, tending to be concentrated in the cities of Vientiane and Savannakhet. While economically important, the size of these groups limits their political power.

### *Power relations*

Laos is a multi-ethnic society, with 49 official ethnic groups, in which the dominant ethnic Lao make up only one half the country's population. Even with the inclusion of smaller Tai speaking groups (Phuan, Tai Lü, etc.), the predominantly Buddhist Tai-Lao population comprises only slightly more than 60 percent of the total. Ethnic Lao dominated the central government of the royalist regime which ruled Lao since independence from France in 1953. Members of the well-integrated and predominantly urban Chinese and Vietnamese were able to obtain high positions in the government and other central institutions. Though the Royal Lao Government (RLG) did not pay much attention on proportional representation of ethnic groups in the provinces, representatives of larger ethnic minorities such as the Khmu or the Yao were given positions in the provincial administrations. An exception were the Hmong, of which roughly

two-thirds sided with the RLG to fight the pro-Vietnamese and pro-Communist Pathet Lao insurgents. The Hmong leader Vang Pao commanded RLG elite troops, supported by the CIA, and was de facto a kind of junior partner of the RLG, though he and his loyalists were not controlling certain ministries.

During the period of August to December 1975, the Pathet Lao forces seized absolute power in the whole country. 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) the only legal political party and Kaysone Phomvihane as prime minister. Each of the sixteen provinces (khoueng—see Glossary) is directed by a party committee, chaired by a party secretary who is the dominant political figure in the province. At a lower level are 112 districts (muang—see Glossary), further divided into subdistricts (tasseng—see Glossary), each with their own party committees. Administratively, subdistricts have been abolished in principle since around 1993, but implementation has been uneven across provinces. It is unknown whether subdistrict-level party committees have also been abolished. At the base of the country's administrative structure are more than 11,000 villages (ban—see Glossary), only some of which have party branches (<sup>1769</sup>). The constitution of the Lao People's Democratic Republic does not discriminate against any ethnic group. In contrast to most neighbouring countries, the national censuses in Laos (1985, 1995, and 2005) have paid great attention to ethnicity. The current regime tries to make sure that all major ethnic groups or nationalities (Lao: son phao) are represented in all relevant organs of government, state, and party. Though certain social and economic policies, such as the resettlement of hill populations, affect the lives of ethnic minorities, there is no policy of deliberate discrimination. Hmong groups have been fighting a low-level rebellion against the communist regime since 1975 and anti-government activities continued to be carried out by remnants of Vang Pao's Hmong in isolated and remote areas in northern central Laos.

2006-2009: The period of 2006-2009 is coded as consistent with the previous period. Choummaly Sayasone, the head of the ruling communist Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), was appointed by the National Assembly to succeed Khamtay Siphandon as president in June 2006. The LPRP is the only legal political party in Laos and holds 98 of the 99 seats in the assembly. Ethnic minorities continue to be particularly vulnerable given that the ethnic Lao largely control the Parliament and the upper echelons of government (<sup>1770</sup>).

<sup>1769</sup> [US Library of Congress, 1995]

<sup>1770</sup> [Minority Rights Group International]

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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 426: 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 427: Political status of ethnic groups in Laos during 1975-1990.

*From 1991 until 2013*

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 428: Political status of ethnic groups in Laos during 1991-2013.

## Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Laos

*From 1953 until 1975*

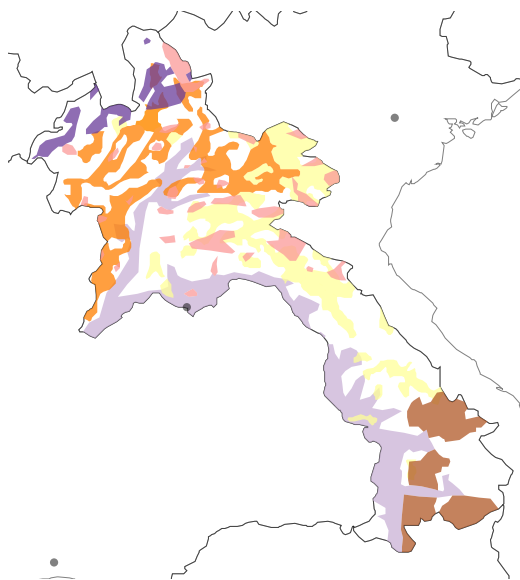


Figure 429: Map of ethnic groups in Laos during 1991-2013.

Group name	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Type
Lao (incl. Phuan)	41 493	Regional & urban
Lao Tai	36 290	Regionally based
Khmou	31 384	Regionally based
Lao Thoeng (excl. Khmou)	17 471	Regionally based
Hmong	14 186	Regionally based
Lao Sung (excl. Hmong)	7 740	Regionally based

Table 128: List of ethnic groups in Laos during 1953-1975.

*From 1976 until 2013*



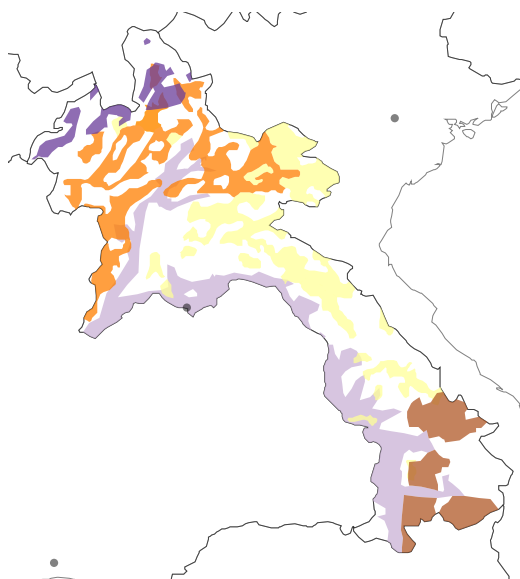


Figure 430: Map of ethnic groups in Laos during 1991-2013.

Group name	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Type
Lao (incl. Phuan)	41 493	Regional & urban
Lao Tai	36 290	Regionally based
Khmou	31 384	Regionally based
Lao Thoeng (excl. Khmou)	17 471	Regionally based
Lao Sung (excl. Hmong)	7 740	Regionally based
Hmong		Migrant

Table 129: List of ethnic groups in Laos during 1976-2013.

## *Conflicts in Laos*

*Starting on 1946-03-31*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of France	Lao Issara		1946-03-31			

*Starting on 1959-11-12*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Laos	Pathet Lao		1959-11-12			
Government of Laos	Neutralists		1960-12-13			
Government of Laos	LRM	Hmong	1989-08-25	Explicit	Yes	Yes

*Starting on 1982-06-16*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Laos	Government of Thailand		1982-06-16			