CHAPTER I
CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT

Geographical Importance

Laos, a landlocked country of 97,000 square miles, is bordered on the north by China, in the south by Cambodia, and in the east by Vietnam and the west by Thailand and Burma. Due to its very location, Laos has been a buffer state between its neighbours and a place for conflicting interests. Being on the route to China from the Annamite gives Laos a geo-political significance.

Except the Mekong river valley, most of Laos is characterized by rugged land and mountainous terrains. The Annam Cordillera making the boundary of eastern Laos is a "formidable and historic barrier to movement." 1 Upper Laos along with the Shan State of Burma and North-Western provinces of Thailand forms a vast upland. 2 This wide highland is an extension to the Yunnan Plateau of south-western China. The fragmented nature of terrain and


forest-forming higher ridges make the communication difficult. The control over these areas by the government forces was minimal due to inaccessibility of the area. These highlands are sparsely populated. The plain of Jars is 3,600 feet above the sea level.

The Mekong River entering Laos near Muong Sing village forms the western boundary of Laos. Between Vietnam and Savannakhet, the Mekong is navigable. Through this river, much of trade and communication with Thailand is carried out. Like other rivers of mainland Southeast Asia (the Song Koi, the Irrawady and the Chao Phraya), human habitation is found primarily in the middle and lower courses of the Mekong.3

The mean annual rainfall ranges from 50 to 90 inches in Laos.4 The rainy season lasts from May to October, and the dry season from November to April. The military activity closely follows this cycle, the former helping better equipped and air supplied government troops, the latter comparatively lightly armed Pathet Lao and Vietnamese soldiers.5

Ethnographic Structure

The population of Laos comprises of various ethnic groups. It makes the nation-building process far more complex.

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3 Ibid., p. 414.
4 LeBar and Suddard, n. 1, p. 23.
The foreign powers have also been exploited the ethnic differences. The highland tribes have been instrumental in "the internationalization of the internal wars". Desire for autonomy by the tribals and behaviour of the lowlanders towards them has caused much trouble. The fact that various ethnic groups are not confined to the existing political boundaries also adds to the problem.

In official parlance, the people of Laos have been divided into four groups: "Lao, Lum, or Valley Lao; Lao-Tai or Tribal Tai, Lao Theng or Lao of the Mountain Sides (instead of the derogatory term Kha) and Lao - Sung or Lao of the mountain tops (Mao and Yao)."

The largest single ethnic group is Lao people of the Tai stock. The Tai people in the seventh century, under pressure from the Chinese moved from Yunnan and settled in the river valleys of the Irrawaddy, the Chao Phraya and the Mekong. It reached its peak in the thirteenth century after the attack of Kublai Khan, the founder of Yuan dynasty in

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8 Ronald Provancher, Mainland Southeast Asia: An Anthropological Perspective (California, 1975), p. 36.
Indochina. The rulers of Laos have been the people belonging to this group. So, the aspiration of the non-Lao people was not reflected in the ideas and aspirations of the Lao elite. The Lao people's settlement is found mainly on the valley of the Mekong. They number about half the total population of Laos, which is between third and four million. But in Thailand, their number is about five million. 9

Another group from the same migration, the tribal Tais settled on the northern mountainous region between the Mekong and the Red River. The names given to these hill-farmers 10 by the ethnic Lao connote an 'inferior' status. 11 Though linguistically, they are similar to the Lao, the tribal Tais have a general suspicion of the Lao. This made them vulnerable to the Pathet Lao propaganda. The Tai-Meo and Viet Bac autonomous zones of North Vietnam were pointed by the Pathet Lao as the proof of the autonomy and self rule granted to the tribes by the Communists. 12


10 The different names given are: Tai Dam (Black Tai), Tai Deng (Red Tai), and Tai Khao (White Tai).

11 LeBar and Suddard, n. 1, p. 40.

between the tribal Tais and the valley Tais was to such a great extent that the tribals had a long history of raids on the valley people. The tribal Tais number about thirty-five thousand.

The 'Khas', meaning slave in the Lao language were one of the early migrants to Laos and belonged to Mon-Khmer stock. They number about one hundred and fifty thousand in Laos.\(^{13}\) These uplanders such as Khmu and Lamet are found in the mountain slopes of the north and the Loven, Bru and So are found in the southern part. The Khas and the tribal Tais desire for autonomy was exploited by the Pathet Lao. Thus the Pathet Lao obtained the supply route and a base in the northeastern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua. The Khas were used as slaves by the Lao people. Till the 1960s they were forced to work under the Lao without any remuneration.\(^{14}\) The Khas along with the tribal Tais constituted about forty per cent of the population but they were not represented in the National Assembly of Laos till 1967.\(^{15}\)

Coming to Laos in the middle of the 19th century from southern China, the Meo-Yao group settled on lands above

\(^{13}\) Provencher, n. 3, p. 162.

\(^{14}\) LeBar and Suddard, n. 1, pp. 73-74.

\(^{15}\) Halpern and Kunstberger, n. 12, p. 241.
three thousand feet. The Meos number about sixty thousand and the Yaos about five thousand in Laos. The Meos practise shifting cultivation. They live in scattered villages on the top of the mountains. The Meos were divided in two factions; one forming the clandestine army under General Vang Pao and the other fighting for the Pathet Lao under Faydang. The Meos are the largest producers of opium. When these people move from one village to another, poppy cultivation is the only criterion for selecting a particular portion of land. Conflict of interest over the opium trade has been the major factor behind the anti-Pathet Lao posture of the Meos.

There are other ethnic minorities also in Laos, who are not politically significant. Their number is very small. There are groups of Tibeto-Burmans of such tribes as Akha, Lolo and Lahu living close to Burmese and Chinese borders. The Lolo-speaking mountain villagers descending from the Chinese are called Ho in Lao language. The Akha


17 Provencher, n. 3, p. 167.


19 LeBar and Suddard, n. 1, p. 43.
tribes are to be found on the same areas as that of Lolo as well as in Yunnan and adjacent parts of Vietnam. In the urban centres, there are Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian and Pakistani businessmen. The foreign Asians in Laos number about 40,000.20

Early History

Kambuja, the vassal state of Funan up to the end of the sixth century had its capital, Shresthapur at Bassac in southern Laos.21 The northern Kambuja was called by the Chinese in the eighth century as Wen-tan, a name reminding Vientiane.22 At the end of eleventh century A.D., the Playao kingdom appeared between the Mekong and the Chao Phrya rivers. The Tai migration had already started. In 1253 A.D. Kublai Khan captured the capital, Ta-li of Non Chao kingdom; after which the migration accelerated. This resulted in reinforcing the earlier Lao migrants to capture power. Lao chronicles speak of earlier Lao migrants ruled by non-Lao rulers in Luang Prabang and upper Mekong region.

Lan Xang Empire

It was only in the fourteenth century that Laos

20 Ibid., p. 33.


22 Ibid.
emerged as a unified state under Fa Ngum. Fa Ngum had been driven out from his native place of Luang Prabang along with his father, who was a prince. Fa Ngum was raised at the Angkor Court and married the daughter of Cambodian King Jayavamadiparamesvara. With the backing of Cambodian army, he started his conquest in 1353 A.D. The element of foreign help that Fa Ngum received became a general feature of the politics of Laos afterwards. The envoys of Tran-minh, Lu Chief of Sip Song Panna and the King of Ayutthaya concluded an alliance with him stating that people from the same ethnic origin should not fight. Fa Ngum's empire, Lan Xang, extended as far as northern Cambodia, Chieng Mai and Korat Plateau in Thailand. Temporarily, it appeared one of the basic problems of Laos, that is, maintaining internal unity was resolved. The Lan Xang empire lasted as long the principalities of Annam, Champa, Angkor, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Chieng Mai and the Shan States were militarily weak. In 1479, Laos was attacked by Vietnam. The Vietnamese marched to

26 LeBar and Suddard, n. 1, p. 41.
Luang Prabang along the same route that saw the coming of Viet Minh in 1953 and 1954. Suzerainty was imposed on local principalities. In 1563, the capital was transformed to Vientiane, but the rivalries between the royal family provided the pretext for intervention by the neighbours. In 1565, Burma occupied Luang Prabang. The unity of Lan Xang was restored in 1592 only to survive for another century. After the death of Souliigna Vongsa, the empire began to disintegrate. It was divided into the Lan Xang kingdom of Luang Prabang, the Lan Xang kingdom of Vientiane and Champassak.

In the coming struggle, Vietnam, Thailand and to a lesser extent Burma played decisive roles which was made easier by the conflict of various principalities. With the help of Annamese army, the nephew of Souliigna Vongsa, Sai Ong Hue marched to Vientiane in the year 1700. Vientiane became a vassal state of Annam. Luang Prabang recognised the suzerainty of Thailand in 1778. After sixty five years of independence, Champassak became dependent.


on Thailand in the same year. Over suzerainty of various kingdoms of Laos, the long duel between Vietnam and Thailand started.

**Thai-Vietnamese Rivalry**

Just as no Vietnamese state could afford to have a hostile Plain of Jars and the surrounding areas, Thailand desired friendly regime on west bank of the Mekong. In the mainland Southeast Asia, these two countries had become stronger. Laos as well as Cambodia had lost their pre-eminence. The Thai-Vietnamese duel over Laos in the nineteenth century was reflected in modern times also.

In 1826, the King of Vientiane, Chao Anou had declared war on Bangkok. It ended in a fiasco and in turn there was destruction of Vientiane by the Thais. The Thais moved deeper into Laotian territory in search of Anou, who had taken refuge with Emperor Minh Mang of Vietnam. However crisis cooled off, but not until the Vietnamese general's warning to the Thais, "...we shall be compelled to protect our people and our interest and believe, if there shall be a fight between us I can assure you that we shall throw in

30 Viravong, n. 23, p. 143.
31 Coedes, n. 23, p. 17.
32 John K. Whitmore, "Thai-Vietnamese Struggle Over Laos", in Adams and McCoy, n. 16, p. 57.
all forces at our disposal." Anou was again restored but his second attempt to have a fight with the Thais saw his flight to the principality of Xieng Khouang, where he was delivered to the Thais by its ruler, Chao Noi. Angered at Noi's action, his territory was annexed by the Vietnamese and he was executed in Vietnam. Anou was held captive in Bangkok. In 1836, Luang Prabang was publicly proclaimed as a vassal of Bangkok. Champassak had also lost its autonomy after accepting Thai suzerainty. Later on, the Thais gained an upper hand. The Vietnamese were more busy in dealing with the French, who were slowly gaining foothold in Indochina.

**French Conquest of Laos**

Till this time, except the visit of a Dutch trader, Gerrit van Wysthoff in 1641 and a Jesuit, Giovanni-Maria Leria; there was no contact with the Europeans. Under Napoleon III, there was a spurt in colonial activity of France. It adopted a policy leading to French conquest of Indochina. France had a long tradition of intense

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33 Quoted in Viravong, n. 28, p. 128.
34 Toye, n. 27, p. 21.
35 Tate, n. 25, p. 474.
colonial passion. This became more aggressive. The vast potential of Chinese market prompted the French to have colonies in Indochina. There was the rivalry with England for entering Yunnan. The national pride was also an added factor. In fact, the taproot of French imperialism was national pride in Indochina. The activities of Roman Catholic missionaries and the desire to compensate the loss in India were also contributing factors in the colonisation of Indochina by the French.

Saigon was captured in July 1861. In June 1862, by a treaty with Tu-Duc, the Emperor of Annam, the French got three provinces of Cochin-China and the right to penetrate the interior by way of the Mekong river. In 1863, the King of Cambodia had accepted French protection. By August 1883, the French completed their conquest of Tonkin delta. Protectorate was imposed in all the remaining parts of Vietnam. Laos was the next to come under the

French. The French conquest of Laos was the last stage of French colonialism in Indochina.

The man responsible for bringing Laos under French control was an employee of Cochin-Chinese Postal and Telegraph Service, Auguste Pavie. In a sense, "Laos was Pavie's gift to France". In 1885, Thailand following the French advance reduced the King Oun Kham of Luang Prabang to a governor's status. Later on, it sent a military expedition under the pretext of protecting the principality from the Ho tribes and took the royal Viceroy as a hostage. By the agreement of 7 May 1876 between the Thais and the French, the former sanctioned the post of Vice-Consul to the French in Luang Prabang. Auguste Pavie was named for the post.

In the period between 1886 and 1893, there was fierce rivalry for the Mekong valley between France, Britain and Thailand. The aim of the British was to keep the French at a safe distance by keeping the buffer between them and the French in northern Burma and Laos, intact. Thailand was eager to hold what it had. The French desired

to expand and were hopeful of gaining access to China through the Mekong that would boost their commercial interests. The British were aware of the French motives. Petit Luguenin, the British representative in Bangkok wrote: "...it is probable that they (the French) will claim as the proper boundary the watershed between the Mekong river and the streams which face into the Gulf of Tonquin." Meanwhile, crisis in Luang Prabang had become acute when Deo Van Tri, the leader of the Tai federation began to sack the city to avenge the kidnapping of his brother by the Thais. The life of the King was saved by Pavie himself. He also persuaded the King to give up useless Thai protectorate in favour of a French protectorate. 45

At the outset of his second mission (1889-91), Pavie got an expanded staff and financial support. The colonial enthusiasts in France were pressing for an aggressive operation. Francois Deloncle, a consular officer in his report on French policy in Indochina wrote on 19 July 1889:

Today, as in 1884, there is no other possible policy. It should be adopted without hesitation, for if we delay further Siam's audacity will increase by the measure of our indecision. Before long she will have gone so far that it will be too late to fight her on the Mekong;

44 British and Foreign State Papers, 1895-96 (London), vol. 87, p. 192.

45 Dommen, n. 42, p. 10.
then we shall have to go to the heart of the matter and, willy nilly, occupy Bangkok to save our empire. (46)

It was decided that border agreements would be made on the spot bringing Thailand gradually to recognise the boundary as it was there. It was in the role of empire builder that Pavie started his second mission in Laos. In 1892 he was appointed Charge d'Affaires with the rank of a consul-general in Bangkok. Following the incidents between the French and the Thai troops in 1893, France threatened to bombard Bangkok. Thailand in vain tried to induce Britain to intervene. Two gunboats of the French sailed up to Bangkok. Thailand was given an ultimatum on 12 July 1893. The British ambassador in Paris wrote:

"The Siamese Government were (sic) now in possession of an ultimatum, a pen-ultimatum and ante-penultimatum. In fact, the word 'ultimatum' had completely lost its meaning, for each new one seemed to procreate a successor." Thailand accepted the ultimatum.


48 British and Foreign State Papers, 1887, vol. 8, p. 345.
The resulting Franco-Siamese treaty of 3 October 1893 established the French protectorate over Laos. Article 1 of the treaty stipulated thus: "The Siamese Government renounces all claims on the territories of the left bank of the Mekong and on the islands of the river." The French Empire, now extended from the coast of Vietnam to one of Mekong throughout the whole length of Laos. When the British gave up the idea of buffer zone in Laos, the French got control over the east bank of Mekong in exchange for guaranteeing the security of the Mekong valley. In 1904, a treaty between the two European powers -- France and Britain -- redefined in explicit terms their respective spheres of influence; the French sphere was recognised to have advanced westward from the Mekong to the Chao Phrya and south to the Gulf of Thailand, that of British was to the west of the Chao Phrya and the Gulf. Later on, in exchange for the twenty-five kilometer neutral zone along the Mekong's west bank, Thailand gave provinces of Champassak and Sayaboury to the French in 1904 and 1907. Thus through a span of fifty years (1857-1907), France completed the conquest of Indo-China.

49 Ibid.
50 Alfred W. McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos, 1893-1945", in Adams and McCoy, eds., n. 16, p. 75.
51 Hirschfield, n. 43, p. 40.
The Indochinese Union was created in 1907 out of four protectorates - Annam, Tonkin, Laos and Cambodia - and the colony, Cochin-China. It violated every one’s identity by fragmenting Vietnam into three parts and “dumping into the common hopper, the kingdom of Laos and Cambodia”.  

French Administration

Once the bubble of the Laotian El Dorado burst in 1890s and when the French realized that there was no easy profit to be made, Laos became the “neglected step-child of Indochina”. Colonial policy was formulated and directed from the Governor General’s residence at Hanoi. Laos often appeared as a Vietnamese colony as the administration was manned by the Vietnamese bureaucrats. The interest of Laos was subordinated to that of Vietnam.

The French used the method of “Divide and Rule”. France declared that Kammoon and Allo regions belonged to Annam. It gave the province of Steng-Treng (Lao: Xieng Ting) to Cambodia. The twelve principalities belonging to the ancestors of Lao Kings (Jua-Pan-Tang-Hue) was given to

53 McCoy, n. 50, pp. 81-82.
Tonkin. The treatment of Lu federation and the six cantons of Sran Naga province also gives a sorry picture of colonial sagacity.

A system of "cross racial administration" was used putting various ethnic groups against each other. The French used the "traditional racial hierarchies where they were strong, reinforced them where they were weak, and created them where they did not exist". In the mountainous regions, except for the Lao Sang, almost every village had a professional Lao. The principle was imposed that the mountain villagers 'owed' a living to any Lao. There is a proverb among the Khas: "As a tree has leaves, so a Lao Tenh must have a Lao Lum." Heavy tax, porters, opium and road work was demanded from the tribes. M.A. Lavalée has described the exploitative attitude of the fellow colonial officials: "...that this savage race, indolent, superstitious, non-progressive, can be called upon to play an important role in Indo-China. It seems that they will be of no use for our civilizing actions, for which they will create nothing but obstacles."

56 McCoy, n. 50, p. 80.
The Tai and Lao intermediaries administered the Meo tribes.

In the lowland areas, the provinces were divided into districts (Muong) and sub-districts, the head of which was Tasseng or Cong. The French in collaboration with Tasseng exploited the villagers. The villagers were virtually slaves of Tasseng. Above the Tasseng was the Noi King, the Chief of District. He along with the Tasseng would be more rapacious than in the past because there was a modern military machine to support him. The colonial masters did not encourage national language and local education. A student had to go to Phnom Penh or Hanoi, and for a better education a Lao elite used to go to France. As the number of the Vietnamese immigrants, who were technicians and petty officials, increased, much of the secondary education was received by the children of these immigrants. In the whole decade of thirties, fifty-two Lao completed education at Lycée Pavie in Vientiane, as against ninety-six Vietnamese. Two thirds of primary and assistant teachers in 1945 were Vietnamese. The Laotians were made to forget their own national script and were prescribed a system of

59 Toye, n. 27, p. 45.

romanization so that the Lao would not be able to read Thai-Lao books from other side of the Mekong.\footnote{61 Manich, n. 55, p. 303.}
The Lao had to learn their history as designated by the French for their (the French) political reasons. Only one per cent of the total population was getting elementary education by 1945.

The French built up the "Route Coloniale 13" linking the towns along the Mekong from Vientiane to Pakse. The Royal Road linking Vientiane and Luang Prabang through Ban Namme, Vang Vieng and Sala Phou Khoun was completed in 1943. The French tried hard to build up a road from Vientiane to Saigon through the Annamite Chains giving much hardship to local population. The demand for labour became so heavy in Phong Saly Province between 1917 and 1924 that the people of whole districts fled till the work was over.\footnote{62 G. Ayme, Monographie du Ve Territoire Militaire (Hanoï, 1930), pp. 125-7.}
The hospital constructed in Vientiane and the clinics of the provincial capitals served the Europeans and a few Lao elite. During the last decade of the French rule, the number of medical facilities declined.\footnote{63 Charles Rochet, Pays Lao, le Laos dans la tourmente (Paris, 1946), p. 61.}
The French tried to abolish slavery but were partially successful.
The policy of "assimilation" was a total failure in Laos like other Indochinese countries. Indochina did not become what France had intended. It "remained a part of Asia, the more so as the First World War, the Russian Revolution, modern Japan and the Chinese revolution set their seals on the history of Asia." Whatever little the French did in Laos, the French period in Laos stands out as a dark chapter in the development of that country.

Laotian Nationalism

It is a strange paradox that in spite of the oppressive rule, Laotian nationalism did not take as solid a form as the Vietnamese nationalism did. This lies in the very nature of the Laotian society. There are multitude of nationalities with different languages and customs. Part of the country was in the hands of the Thais and some were vassals of Annam and Tonkin. However, the period up to the outbreak of the Second World War was not of a rosy one as some authors have put it. The period between 1933 and 1945 saw the outbreak of rebellions led by tribes and individual groups.

65 For example, Dowman, n. 42, p. 12. Toye, n. 27, p. 42. LeBar and Suddard, n. 1, p. 17.
From the lowland Lao, there was no direct resistance. The Lao were used to centralized authorities. The French were clever in taking advantage of charisma of Lao Kings, ruling through a hierarchical structure and "defining all of their demands in terms of traditional Lao customs". Still, the resentment was there. The insurrection led by Phocodout, a district chief in Savannakhet province was crushed in 1903 after two years of struggle.

The uplanders did not easily succumb to the harsher demands of the French colonial masters. The first resistance came from the Aloc and Loven tribes (the Khas) of the Polovens plateau, who resented the French attempt to collect taxes and regulate commerce. The resurrection led by Ong Keo and Komadem gained such a momentum that June Femy, the French Commissioner asked for reinforcement saying: "It is a general uprising, all the villages on the plateau are deserted, the rebels have formed seven groups, stronger than 1,000 men each." Komadem carried on the struggle after the assassination of Ong Keo as a result of treachery, in which Chao Nhoun, the Governor of Champassak had a hand. It was crushed in 1936 after thirty-five years struggle.

66 McCoy, n. 50, p. 87.

The result of the struggle influenced Laotian politics later on. Komadom's son became the Vice Chairman of the Pathet Lao and Nhony's son was right-wing leader, Boun Oum.

Under the leadership of Va Na Poum revolt against the French broke out in 1908 in the Lu areas of Phong Saly and Nam Tha provinces. After his death, Phra Ong Kham took the leadership. The revolt was suppressed by a costly military expedition. There was also the Neo uprising under Tiao Pha Pachay (1919-1922) spreading to Xieng Khouang, Sav Neua and Luang Prabang provinces. Most of the rising of uplanders was due to the French curbing of existing tribal pattern and appointing of Chiefs bypassing the tribal leaders. For example, among the Lamets of Lao Theng (Kha) tribes, the French appointed one man as Chief. The Lamets resisted this as the village was traditionally ruled by a council (lem) rather than a single man.

All these insurrections were unsuccessful as these were isolated ones. There was no connection among the different factions. However, the rebellions generated a militant tradition useful to Laotian nationalism. The

68 Ayme, n. 62, pp. 113-14.
struggles did not remain isolated as the French themselves promoted a larger movement called "Lao Movement" for the unification of whole of Laos. There had been the emergence of Pan Thai movement. The Laos were reminded of their Tai race. "Your kinsman live in a free country with free institutions. They are your own people, separated from you only by the false frontier of colonialism", their leaflets said. Thailand was also sore over the fact that it had ceded its territory earlier to Indochina. One authority rightly says:

"The territorial dispute between Thailand and the Vichy government in Indochina was the culmination of a long and bitter affair." With Japanese mediation, France ceded Sayaboury and part of Champasak province to Thailand.

71 McCoy, n. 50, p. 92.


74 The Japanese completed their occupation of Indochina in July 1941. Thailand had entered into a treaty of friendship with Japan on 12 June 1940. Thailand with Japanese encouragement claimed territories west of the Mekong. The Vichy government did not oppose the Japanese war plans. The economic resources of Indochina were put at the disposal of the Japanese. Japan also obtained the right to station troops. In return, the French Civil Service and Security Forces were left intact. The Vichy government also ceded 21,000 square miles of Laotian territory to Thailand. The imperial powers drew the boundaries of Asia for their interest. J.H.V. Prescott, Map of Mainland Asia by Treaty (Carlton, 1975), p. 515.
This caused much resentment. The Governor General Admiral Decoux used the Laotian nationalism to counterbalance the Pan-Thai movement. He wrote:

An intense and dangerous Thai propaganda was developing along the Mekong river against us, and the question was posed whether our Laotian protégés...might yield to the solicitations of Bangkok...The Lao propaganda...developed, in all forms, the exalted theme of the "great Lao homeland" which will one day group all of the children, temporarily separated, of the vast family under the folds of the French flag. (75)

France realized that without Laotian response, it might lose Laos to Thailand. Charles Rochet, the Director of Laotian Public Education was chosen for the task of generating Laotian nationalism. He aroused the sentiments of patriotism among the young elites as one Lao explains in his membre:

No Lao teachers, students, or farmers, will ever forget the name Charles Rochet. We cannot ever forget this man who was very different from other French....M. Rochet gave a start to the young Lao who are now helping their country....We were all disciplined, which gave us the feeling that Lao can rule themselves rather than the French or the Vietnamese and also we speak the same language. (77)


76 In Thailand, maps have been showing Laos, Cambodia and parts of Vietnam as Thai territory. See, Crosby, n. 72, p. 114.

There was not much of ideological motivation behind the organized resistance to colonial masters in Laos unlike Vietnam. Except a few Lao elite going abroad for study, the Lao elites did not feel the impact of various movements going on in different countries. It was the external threat that shaped Lao nationalism in 1940s than any other factor and that the Lao elite like a client chose, as they did in the past, their patrons. A limited independence either under Japanese or Thai patronage seemed feasible. Some also looked to the Vietnamese. The southern elite, traditionally linked to Thailand saw the coming of the Japanese as an end to French colonialism. They thought that the "French protective umbrella might be withdrawn and that the future of Laos would have to be determined by Lao themselves." In 1940, the students of the College Pavie plotted an abortive anti-French coup in Vientiane under the leadership of Than Sayasithaena. Some sought to use the weakened position of France in exacting concessions for Laos. In a letter to Admiral Decoux, Souphanouvong landed the

78 Nina S. Adams, "Patrons, Clients and Revolutionaries", in Adams and McCoy, eds.; n. 16, p. 100.


80 Souphanouvong is the half-brother of Souvanna Phouma and Phetsarath, all descendants of Luang Prabang royal family. They are cousins of the ex-King, Siravong Vong.
Franco-Indochinese collaboration benefitting both the sides.  

The Japanese coup de grâce on 9 March 1945 opened new vistas for the Laoians and multiplied their choice. The Japanese declared the colonial regime as over. The resistance movement of the French collapsed and the handful escaped to the mountains managing to make their path northward over trails to China. They declared themselves for the Free French. Unlike Vietnam, the leadership was less sophisticated and there was divergence of opinions on the manner of keeping the integrity of Laos. Some like Oun Sananikone, who was working as an officer in Thai army favoured to rely on Thailand. Sananikone was assured that after the victory of the Allies, his unit would "liberate Laos with weapons provided by the Allies through the Free Thai". Men like Nhoyer Abhay and Katay Don Sesorith favoured Japanese alliance. Lao Chalerm Abjay's new journal, advocated the union of Yellow Races. There was also the pro-French group of Prince Say Khan. Oun Sananikone recalls: "In contacting the people in the country to ask for cooperation in driving the French out of the territory, there were many people who objected, for the reason that they had served the French well and besides

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31 Indochina, no. 133, 13 March 1943, quoted in Nina S. Adams, n. 78, p. 102.

the French were already in different straits. 33 His brother Ngon Sananikone was also in this group. Another group influenced by the Vietnamese communists favoured a greater degree of political and social change. They also shared with the Viet Minh movement a common goal, i.e. complete independence from the French. 34 The pro-French King, Sisavong Vong and the Crown Prince, Savang Vatthana delayed the Japanese ultimatum proclaiming independence from the French and ordered a mass uprising.

In the south, Prince Boun Oun was revolting against the Japanese. The Lao-Pen-Lao movement led by Phoumi Nosavan, Oun Sananikone and Tham Sayasithsena had close links with the Free Thai movement. The Free Thai Movement started by Seni Promjo in the United States was organized in Thailand by Pridi Panomyong and Thaweep Runyaket. 35 There was also the "Lao Phuom" movement, a militia composed of former members of Rochett's Lao movement. Prince Phetsarath, had in his mind that the division of the kingdom was not proper; he had already refused the French offer of ruling Vientiane separately from Luang Prabang. 36

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33 Ibid., p. 12.
34 Langer and Zasloff, n. 79, p. 27.
35 Ray, n. 73, p. 95.
36 Munich, n. 55, pp. 322-3.
The Japanese surrendered on 14 August 1945. In the wake of Japanese capitulation, there was no unanimity of opinion among the Allies with regard to the policy to be followed in Indochina. The United States wanted the prevention of French return to Indochina. President Franklin D. Roosevelt told the Secretary of State Cordell Hull in 1944 that "nothing to be done in regard to resistance groups or in any other way in relation to Indochina". Roosevelt's plan to put the area under an international trusteeship was abandoned because of British reluctance. But after the Japanese surrender the new President Harry S. Truman told General de Gaulle that the French return to Indochina would not be prevented. The French were determined not to give independence. The French General Jean Leclerc told: "I did not come back to Indochina to give Indo-china back to the Indo-Chinese." 

Lao Issara

In Vientiane, Captain Fabre contacted Phetsarath to make arrangements for French re-entry. To this,

Phetsarath refused and declared independence on 1 September 1945. Backed by the Lao Issara (Free Laos) committee, he declared the unity of all Lao territories on 14 September. The King inspired by the French Colonel Imfeld had telegraphed him (Phetsarath) against the move. The Crown Prince and Boun Oum were also against this. The traditional rivalries within the Lao elite explained the divergent approaches. Boun Oum, a southerner had suspicion of the Royal family of Luang Prabang. The King Sirivong Vong's conflict with Phetsarath's father Boun Khong went as late as 1904, when Sirivong was chosen by the French as the King and not Boun Khong. Sirivong dismissed Phetsarath both as Prime Minister and Viceroy on 10 October 1945. A new government known as Lao Issara was formed two days after. The New National Assembly on 20 October voted the King as deposed. In Luang Prabang, a demonstration was held in support of Lao Issara. Phya Khammo headed the government. Abhay became the Minister of Education, Sasornith and Souvanna Phouma became Ministers of Finance and Public Works respectively. Souphanouvong was given due recognition because of the strength he had mustered behind him. He held the key posts of Minister of Defence and Foreign Affairs and was appointed as the Commander of the Lao army.

92 Toye, n. 27, pp. 80-81, additional note l.
Souphanouvong along with Kaysone, Komadam, Nouhak, and Payadang had nurtured the Communist movement in Laos. The movement was commonly referred to as the Pathet Lao afterwards. From the very beginning, the movement had received help from the Vietnamese. In the Central Committee of Indochinese Party, which was formed in 1930, there was a Laotian member named, Khun Song. Souphanouvong had met Ho Chi Minh, who had advised him to "seize the power from the colonialists". According to the Deputy Director of the Gia Phong Quan (Liberation Army), Tran Van Dinh, Souphanouvong was accompanied by himself (Dinh) and six other Vietnamese officers. This group recruiting about 1,500 soldiers had gained control of central Laos. They got a rousing welcome on 1 November 1945 at Vientiane. Souphanouvong's position was difficult because of the presence of the Vietnamese officers. Michel Caply, an officer of the 'Free French', who was present in Laos held the opinion that the Viet Minh had a say in the policy.


94 Burchett, n. 57, p. 253.

95 Tran Van Dinh, "The Birth of the Pathet Lao Army" in Adams and McCoy, eds., n. 16, pp. 425-6. However, Samakone in his memoirs said that Souphanouvong had a retinue of twenty people, of which sixteen were Vietnamese military advisers. See, Lao Issara, n. 82, p. 35.
formulation of this nascent Communist organization. 96

French Re-occupation of Laos

The re-entry of the French nipped in the bud any hope for Lao Issara Government giving independence to Laos. In South Vietnam and Cambodia, the French had secured bases. The Agreement of 6 March 1946 with Ho Chi Minh had released the French troops. Prince Boun Oum also backed the French troops. Souphanouvong, who was wounded at the battle of Thakhek had withdrawn to Thailand along with his forces. Tran Van Dinh, who was asked by Souphanouvong to represent him in the Lao Issara Government had organized Tong Bo Than Mua Lien Quan Lao Viet (Lao-Viet Allied Army General Staff). 97 The French took over Vientiane on 24 April 1946. On 23 September when the French tricolour fluttered over the last provincial capital of Bon Hœuf Sai, the French reoccupation of Laos was complete. Later in April 1946, the Lao Issara Government had fled to Thailand after mounting a series of cross-border raids. 98 Sisavong Vong was crowned under the French auspices by 24 April 1946. Khammoe, the Prime Minister of Lao Issara Government expressed the hope that they would

97 Tran Van Dinh, n. 95, p. 433.
The Lao Issara had lost the first round with the French. An exile government under Petsarath was set up in Bangkok.

In her colonial policy, France had stressed the Jacobian concept of the "one and indivisible" republic. General de Gaulle had signed the Brazzaville Declaration of January 1944 which states: "The aims of the work of civilization accomplished by France in her colonies rule out all idea of autonomy... (the idea) of self-government in the colonies is out of question." The Declaration of 24 March 1945 had proposed the idea of Indochinese federation within the French Union. The modus vivendi signed by Crown Prince of Laos with the French on 27 August 1946 confirmed a unified Laos. The French, however, retained control over political, military and economic affairs. The constitution promulgated by the King on 11 May 1947 provided considerably less power. By the Franco-Lao Convention of 19 July 1949 independence of Laos was recognized by the French and Laos remained as an Associated State of the French Union.

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99 Lao Issara, n. 82, p. 49.


Foreign Affairs remained in the hands of the French. This Convention had closely followed the Élysée Agreement of 8 March 1949, which gave a restricted independence to Vietnam. The French wanted a quite rear area while their fight with the Viet Minh went on, hence the concession to Laos.

**Rift in Lao Issara**

Most of the Lao elite were in Thailand, while these developments in the mother country was going on. The Lao Issara leaders were making cross-border operations from Thailand. The local Thais were also giving support to the Lao Issara. Gradually the dissensions among the Lao Issara leaders grew regarding the development in Laos. As it had become obvious that it would not be possible to gain independence without the help of foreign powers, there was wrangling over the choice. The Laos Issara leaders had turned to the United States for material help but without success. **103** Souvanna Phouma was conscious of the weakness of the Lao Issara Government and advocated the returning of the group to a "reconciled and unified nation". **104** Phetsarath was advocating for a Royal government. Souphanouvong's faction was in favour of an armed struggle.

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103 Dommen, n. 42, p. 22.

104 Si laouk na Champassak, Storm over Laos (New York, 1961), p. 15.
with the help of the Viet Minh for total independence. The views of Souvanna and Phetsarath were reconcilable as the two had a distrust for the Vietnamese. The rift was inevitable. Souphanouvong was busy with the military affairs concerning the independence struggle, when other Lao Issara leaders were brooding over the problems of limited independence under the French. Souphanouvong followed the idea of protracted struggle of Ho Chi Minh based on the villages. A network of guerrilla units was established throughout Laos. At this point of time, the international communism was monolithic. The Marxists did not view the independence granted to countries like India, Burma, Pakistan, Indonesia etc. as real. Zhdanov, one of Stalin's lieutenants, spoke in September 1947 in the Conference of the European Communist parties in Poland that there was a crisis in the 'colonial system'.

Souphanouvong's action might be due to the general line followed by international communism, which considered these countries less than independent. This was the cause of his estrangement with other Lao Issara leaders and not the rejection by a French mettise or the influence of his wife.

as suggested by Langer and Zasloff. The Lao Issara Government had expelled Souphanouvong on 16 May 1949. It dissolved itself on 25 October 1949 announcing that the aims of Lao Issara had been achieved by the Franco-Laoian Convention. The leaders went back to Laos. Phetsarath did not go as he was irreconcilably anti-French. The leaders in Laos soon began to have lucrative business alliances. Nina S. Adams rightly says: "A lack of ideology and social concern allowed the easy transformation of a moderate political nationalism keyed to the achievement of Laotian independence into an increasingly political, economic, military and psychological dependence." Though the Pathet Lao also were seeking external assistance, "the elements of patronage was strongly modified by the shared ideology".

Souphanouvong had already set up a separate political front for the Lao Issara guerrilla army in February 1949, e.g., Progressive People's Organization.

106 Langer and Zasloff, n. 79, pp. 42, 61. The traditional rivalries among the princes might have been a factor but there was an ideological and pragmatic element in Souphanouvong's action. Starting from the premises that his Vietnamese wife Le Thi Khynam was a commoner, it has been ascribed that her influence on him was strong. On the other hand, she belonged to a bourgeois family. Tran Van Dinh, n. 95, p. 427. It is difficult to gauge her influence on him, her background notwithstanding.

107 Halpern, n. 77, p. 7.

108 Nina S. Adams, n. 78, p. 119.

109 Ibid.
He trekked through the jungles of Laos and in October 1949 joined Ho Chi Minh atTueyn-Quang, the Viet Minh headquarters. On 13 August 1950 the 'First Resistance Congress' was held. The resistance government of Pathet Lao (Lao State) was set up and its political organ, the 'Neo Lao Issara' (Lao Free Front) was founded on the same date. The Congress adopted a twelve-point manifesto stating that the Pathet Lao would drive out the French and form a coalition government. Souphanouvong was the Prime Minister of the new government and President of the Neo Lao Issara. Phoumi Vongvichit was the Deputy Premier. There was increasing co-operation between the three revolutionary forces of Indochina. This Vietnamese-Khmer-Lao alliance provided "a semblance of a legal rationale for the commitment of North Vietnamese volunteers to fight on the side of the Pathet Lao, just as Chinese 'people's volunteers' had fought alongside the North Koreans in Korea". The increasing activities of the Neo Lao Issara proved helpful for the Pathet Lao in its struggle against the French. The political consciousness

112 Fall, n. 33, p. 193.
of the people was raised as Phoumi Vongvichit said:
"The colonialists' fallacy could no longer cheat them." \[113\]
An organised apparatus was developed to fight the French with the help of the Viet Minh. The Pathe\-et Lao adopted the following principle for the continued armed struggle; building up of armed forces while fighting, capturing weapons from the enemy, promoting guerrilla warfare, opposing the raids of enemy and finally attacking him in occupied zone. \[114\]

**Collapse of the French Rule**

Laos was recognized by Britain and the United States on 7 February 1950 followed by Thailand. \[115\] Laos also signed a peace treaty with Japan along with other forty-five nations at San Francisco. It gained membership in some of the agencies of the United Nations. The Government of Phoumi Sanomkone signed an agreement on economic aid with the United States on 9 September. These recognitions gave Laos an international status. Bigger things were happening in the next door Vietnam. The victory of the Chinese Communists in October 1949 had altered the course of Vietnamese nationalism. The Government of Ho Chi Minh was recognised both by Peking and Moscow on

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114 Ibid., p. 53.

January 1950. Both gave armed support to the Viet Minh. China had concluded a military agreement with the Viet Minh in the mid-1950s. The cold war rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States deepened in the Korean and Indochina war. The outbreak of these two wars were seen by Moscow as "manifestations of American aggression". The United States viewed with concern the "threat" from a monolithic Communist world and to it the Indochina was no longer a local struggle but a "Communist attempt at conquest and subversion".

A National Security Council memorandum said:

> In any event, colonial-nationalist conflict provides a fertile field for subversive communist activities, and it is now clear that southeast Asia is the target of a coordinated offensive directed by the Kremlin. In seeking to gain control of southeast Asia, the Kremlin is motivated in part by a desire to acquire southeast Asia's resources and communication lines, and to deny them to us. (119)

It began to help the French by giving the military aid. In 1951, the United States military aid to France in the


Indochina war had been half a billion dollars. 120

In the winter of 1952-53, the Viet Minh turned their attention to Laos, which was garrisoned by 3,000 French troops and 12,000 Lao Territorials commanded by Colonel Boucher de Crevecœur. 121 The military thrust to Laos was made earlier with the help of the Pathet Lao guerrillas in the form of food, forces, and intelligence and the co-operation from the same tribes living on both sides of the border. The north-eastern province of Sam Neua was captured in April 1953. Another Viet Minh battalion was thirty miles from Luang Prabang on 23 April. A Resistance Government at Sam Neua was set up by Souphanouvong on 19 April. In southern Laos, the Viet Minh and the Pathet Lao troops were undertaking indoctrination among the non-Lao ethnic people. The Royal Lao Government's (KLC) control ceased over Sam Neua, Phong Saly and the Khao-inhabited territory as far as southern provinces of Savanakhet. Faced with serious difficulties posed by the Viet Minh, the French began to negotiate with Souvanna Phouma, the Premier of the KLC for greater autonomy to the Laotians than granted in the 1949 Convention. On 22 October 1953, the Franco-Laotian Treaty of Friendship was signed, which accorded Laos full

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120 Dean Acheson, Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department (New York, 1969), p. 359.

121 Domen, n. 42, p. 40.
independence and its membership in the French Union as sovereign equals. The Commander-in-Chief, General Navarre had fortified Dien Bien Phu in November-December 1953 so as to stall the Viet Minh progress in Luang Prabang. The Viet Minh began to encircle Dien Bien Phu, where the French had committed the mistake of putting their best troops cut off from the main source of supply. The collapse of Dien Bien Phu on 7 May 1954 ended the French colonial rule in Indochina. The RLG's war effort according to its resources had been greater than that of Cambodia and Vietnam. But backed by the Viet Minh, the Pathet Lao from Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces struck a terror to the RLG.

Convening of the Geneva Conference

Ho Chi Minh had offered in November 1953 an armistice and negotiations with the French. The Soviet Union had become restrained in its support to Vietnam. It was in favour of a negotiated solution. Moscow was seeking a less turbulent course in Southeast Asia. As one authority on the Soviet foreign policy has said that the Vietnamese were "sacrificial lambs of a basic turn in


124 For details of the Soviet disengagement in this period see, McLane, n. McLane, n. 117, pp. 466-72.
Soviet foreign policy that had been under consideration for some years and now was consummated". 125 George Bidault, the French Foreign Minister wanted to force Ho Chi Minh to negotiate not from a position from strength. Bidault was hopeful of the French victory. He told the United States Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, at the Bermuda Conference in December 1953: "We do not want to miss any chance to end the war, but at the same time we do not intend to end it any cost.... In particular, we have no intention of negotiating directly with Ho Chi Minh." 126 But the Communists, Socialists and a few Christian Democrats including a large number of French newspapers were clamouring for a negotiated solution. Worried at by the public opinion, the French Government asked Bidault to convene a conference. At the Four-Power Conference (France, Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union) in Berlin from 25 January to 13 February, it was decided to call a conference in Geneva on 26 April 1954 to discuss the question of Korea and Indochina. The United States was reluctant. It was hopeful of a military solution. Dulles spoke on 29 March 1954:

Under the conditions of today, the imposition on Southeast Asia of the political system of Communist Russia and its Chinese Communist ally,

125 Ibid., p. 473.

by whatever means, would be a grave threat to the whole free community. The United States feels that possibility should not be passively accepted but should be met by united action. This might involve serious risks, but these risks are far less than those that will face us a few years from now if we dare not be resolute today. (127).

He began to organize a united front for intervention. The British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, objected to this as the retaliatory action would be useless and it might mar the prospects of peace at Geneva. Britain along with France thought that Dulles’s sole concern was “overthrowing of Red China”. France was opposed to resorting to any united action before the Geneva Conference. Nevertheless, it wanted the American military help to save Dien Bien Phu. On 5 April 1954 France had asked for unilateral help from the United States. Dulles turned down the proposal saying that it would not be possible to render any help without the Congressional approval and “full political understanding with France and other countries”. Bidault replied that the position of the United States was fully understood and “unfortunately the time for formulating


coalitions has passed". In a last desperate attempt Bidault tried to persuade the United States to save Dien Bien Phu. Washington refused. The United States Army Chief of Staff, General Mathew Ridgway later on wrote that his report to the President "played considerable, perhaps a decisive part, in persuading our government not to embark on that tragic adventure." A day after Dien Bien Phu fell, and the Indochinese session of the Geneva Conference began on 8 May 1954.

131 Ibid., p. 40.