

# **Regime Renewal in Laos: The Tenth Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party**

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## **Introduction**

The year 2016 was a crucial one in Laos. According to an established five-yearly cycle, the year was punctuated by a series of key political events, foremost among them the Tenth Congress of the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). As on past occasions, the Tenth Party Congress took stock of the country's political and economic performance over the previous five years and adopted the country's next five-year National Socio-Economic Development Plan. Most importantly, it also elected the new Party Central Committee (PCC), the party's main decision-making body, together with the Politburo, PCC Secretariat and secretary-general. The congress was followed in March by elections for the National Assembly, which henceforth approved party nominations for the president and prime minister, who in turn appointed a new cabinet. Throughout this process, Laos occupied the chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), just its second time in the role, and in September played host to US President Barack Obama, the first sitting president to visit the country, when he joined the East Asia Summit.

While all these events were important, most consequential was the process of party renewal that culminated with the congress. Given the LPRP's grip on political power and the control its leaders exercise over Laos' rich reserves of natural resources—the main source of the country's rapid economic growth since the early 2000s—LPRP congresses represent critical moments of leadership renewal and transition. Even by these standards, last year's congress was particularly significant given the expectation that around half the positions in the 11-member Politburo would change hands. With old age finally catching up with the

revolutionary generation, most anticipated changes were due to retirement. At the top of the list was party secretary-general and state president, Choummaly Sayasone, and several of his ageing Politburo colleagues who seemed likely to follow.

The stakes were raised further by a plane crash in May 2014, which had taken the lives of another four high-ranking members of the PCC. These were Lieutenant General Douangchai Phichit, the party number six who was defence minister, deputy prime minister, and mooted as a possible secretary-general of the future; Thongbane Sengapone, the public security minister, PCC number 12 and member of the PCC Secretariat; and two more members of the PCC Secretariat—Soukhanh Mahalath (PCC no. 14), the mayor of Vientiane Capital, and Cheuang Sombounkhanh (PCC no. 14), chief of the Party Propaganda and Training Commission—who were likely promotions to the Politburo in 2016. All together, at least half of the party's top-16 ranked cadres from 2011 seemed likely to be replaced at a time when generational change was threatening to strip the party of prestige associated with the revolutionary generation's personal involvement in the '30-year struggle' (1945-1975).<sup>1</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to focus solely on the high-profile elections to the 11-member Politburo or even the 69-member Party Central Committee. While international news reports naturally focused on the most senior appointments, these ballots represented the final two phases of a four-stage process of renewal, which regenerated the party from the district level to the Politburo. As such, this paper adopts a holistic perspective, considering intra-party elections at the district and province/ministry level before moving to the PCC and Politburo elections. It then considers how this process delivered a new leadership exhibiting much continuity with the past, despite the high level of turnover, and lessons that could be derived in the fields of international relations and economics.

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<sup>1</sup> Tamaki Kyojuka, "Laos prepares for a changing of the guard", *Nikkei Asian Review*, 28 January 2016. <http://asia.nikkei.com/magazine/20160128-SHATTERED-HOPES/Politics-Economy/Laos-prepares-for-a-changing-of-the-guard>

The opaque nature of party activities means that analysis of this process remains tentative. Nevertheless, publicly available data reveals a tension between official principles of democratic centralism, according to which elections at lower levels feed delegates up the chain, and the party's institutionalized politics of patron-client relations, according to which party committees and leaders identify, nurture and promote talent to higher levels. While it is common to suggest that, in practice, democratic centralism works from upper levels down to enforce PCC decisions and maintain party discipline, this analysis suggests lower-level elections remained an important part of renewing the party. The balance between party electoral processes and patron-client relations functioned as a key aspect of the party's culture of regeneration and renewal.

### **Intra-party elections**

The first two stages of intra-party elections took place over a period of two years. The first phase of elections, which took place in meetings of all 146 district party committees across the country, occurred throughout 2014.<sup>2</sup> The district party meetings had two main functions: to approve the political reports of the district party committees and adopt their respective socio-economic plans for the next five years (2016-2021); and, more importantly, to choose delegates to attend the upper level meetings. In these elections, according to party statutes, members of district party cells were permitted to choose candidates freely according to the principles of democratic centralism.<sup>3</sup> In practice, members were made aware of which candidates, known as “targets for building” (*pao-mai sang*), had been anointed heirs to the

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<sup>2</sup> Pasason, “Samlet kongpasum khop kkanabolihannangarn sunkangphak kang thi kao samai thi kao” [The 9th session of the 9th plenary meeting of Party Central Committee completed], *Pasason Newspapers*, 24 November 2014. <http://pasaxon.org.la/Index/24-11-14/Content1.html>

<sup>3</sup> See Article 22 and 25 of Lao People's Revolutionary Party, *Kotlabiap khong phak pasason pativat lao: samai thi IX* [Statutes of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party] (Vientiane: Lao Youth Printing Service, 2011), pp. 53-54, 57

local leadership.<sup>4</sup> In this way, local party patrons ensured that their preferred clients were promoted at the district level, while still allowing party members to play a role in the process. By the year's end, Secretary-General Choummaly Sayasone, speaking at the ninth plenum of the PCC, issued an instruction directing that all district party elections must be completed by the end of January 2015.<sup>5</sup>

Once the leadership transition in the district party committees had been completed, the second phase of elections took place in 54 meetings of party committees representing the provinces, Vientiane Capital, ministries and ministry-level organs of the state and party. These meetings took place throughout 2015.<sup>6</sup> Regulated by party statutes, the most important duty of these meetings was to renew party committees through internal ballots, and to nominate delegates to attend the Tenth Party Congress in 2016.<sup>7</sup> Once again, while these ballots were officially open, they rewarded existing leaders and those members identified as heirs to the leadership. Significantly, they took place against the backdrop of a major cabinet reshuffle in July 2015, which, coming a year after the previous year's plane crash, the leadership used to pave the way to the congress. Unlike the 2014 district-level elections, which went largely unreported, province- and ministry-level elections received widespread press coverage. This second phase of elections ended with the public nomination of 685 delegates to represent party members across the country at the Tenth Party Congress in January 2016.

This preparation during the two years leading up to the congress served to regenerate leadership and consolidate party authority across the country. On the one hand, the meetings renewed the leadership from the bottom up by reshuffling cadres identified as future leaders

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<sup>4</sup> “Sang phak hai podsai kemkaeng” [To build a transparent and strong party], *Pasason*, 20 January 2016 <<http://www.pasaxon.org.la/index/20-01-16/content3.html>>

<sup>5</sup> *Pasason*, 24 November 2015.

<sup>6</sup> *Pasason*, 20 January 2016.

<sup>7</sup> See Articles 18 and 19, Statutes of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (2011), 46-47, 70-71.

into the various party committees. These committees would in turn provide political authority for the implementation of local five-year socio-economic development plans. On the other hand, the same meetings concluded with the selection of delegates to higher-level meetings, including the Tenth Party Congress. To ensure the leadership reshuffle took place in a satisfactory manner, the meetings were closely regulated and supervised. At the ninth plenum of the PCC in late 2014, Secretary General Choummaly Sayasone restated that the elections were to be correctly organized under the designated principle of party building.<sup>8</sup> In practice, this would mean the PCC Secretariat sending senior cadres such a Politburo member, a member of the organization or inspection commission to attend provincial and ministerial congresses. However, direct supervision by the secretary general is now uncommon.

### **The election of party secretaries**

The importance of intra-party elections was revealed by the election of province and ministry party secretaries to the PCC at the congress in 2016. This was not a matter of chance but a reflection of the statutory “duty” of each province and ministry committee, restated at the congress, to foster and put forward at least two leadership heirs for this purpose.<sup>9</sup> Table 1 shows 17 of the 69 cadres elected to the PCC, who had previously in 2015 been elected provincial or ministerial secretaries. The table includes the institution from which each secretary was elected, his/her executive role in that institution (according to the rule that party secretaries also hold equivalent executive or state positions), and his/her ranking in the PCC elected in 2016. This list is not comprehensive, being based on comparison between available press reports published during intra-party elections in 2015 and the PCC elected in 2016. But

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<sup>8</sup> *Pasason*, 24 November 2014.

<sup>9</sup> This regulation was read at the congress by the deputy head of the Central Party Organization Commission. See *Pasason*, 20 January 2016.

it is sufficient to reveal that much of the leadership reshuffle in the PCC was anticipated well in advance of the congress.

Name of party secretary elected or re-elected in 2015	Secretary's institution in 2015	Position	PCC rank in 2016
Lt. Gen. Sengnoul Xayalath	Ministry of National Defence*	Minister	12
Maj. Gen. Somkeo Silavong	Ministry of Public Security	Minister	14
Khamjane Vongphosy	Phongsaly province	Governor	34
Khamphouy Bouddavieng	Sekong province	Governor	37
Khammany Inthirath	Ministry of Energy and Mines	Minister	41
Oday Soudaphone	Khammoune province	Governor	42
Khongkeo Xaysongkham	Borlikhamxay province	Governor	43
Khemmani Pholsena (Ms.)	Ministry of Industry and Commerce	Minister	46
Saleumxay Kommasith	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Vice Minister	50
Somphao Faisith	Bank of Lao PDR	Governor	53
Bounchan Sinthavong	Ministry of Transport and Public Works	Minister	56
Sisouvan Vongchomsy	Saravan province	Governor	57
Phet Phomphiphak	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry*	Minister	58
Phongsavanh Sithavong	Xayaboury province	Governor	59
Khamphan Pheuyavong	Bokeo province	Governor	60
Vidong Sayasone	Vientiane province	Governor	62
Souphan Keomixay	Savannakhet province	Governor	66

Table 1: Comparison of results from 2015 intra-party elections and 2016 PCC elections.

Source: Data compiled from Lao News Agency (KPL), *Pasason*, *Vientiane Mai* and *Vientiane Times* from January 2015 to January 2016. (\*Note: Sengoul and Phet lost their posts in 2016).

Examples from three of the most influential ministries are worth highlighting. In the Ministry of National Defence, Lieutenant General Sengnoul Xayalath, who replaced Lieutenant General Douangchay Phichit as minister (initially acting) after the plane crash in

2014, was elected as secretary of the ministry in June 2015, and then number 12 in the PCC in 2016. Likewise, Major General Somkeo Silavong, who replaced the civilian minister of public security, Thongbane Sengapone, after the same incident, was elected party secretary in August 2015 before being elected to the PCC (number 14). Finally, in anticipation of his elevation to prime minister, Foreign Minister Thongloun Sisoulith handed his position as party secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to his deputy, Saleumxay Kommasith, who went on to be elected number 50 in the PCC (and appointed foreign minister in April).<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, there were exceptions. For instance, the Minister of Justice, Bounkert Sangsomsak, a former deputy foreign minister, failed to be elected to the PCC in 2016, despite being chosen the previous year as the ministry's party secretary, though he was later appointed minister for the Prime Minister's Office.<sup>11</sup> On one level, the exception might be explained as the result of a democratic vote at the congress, suggesting the election of a nominated heir apparent was not guaranteed. However, this is unlikely and it is more likely that his election was overturned with the intervention of the Central Party Organization Commission, a key organ of the Central Party Office responsible for personnel.

The party also seems to have intervened in Xaysomboun, a province northeast of Vientiane that remains sensitive due to an ethnic-Hmong insurgency that was recruited and trained by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to undertake secret operations in Laos during the Vietnam War. While this insurgency is most likely defunct, anti-government forces remain active. In 2015 the intra-party election in Xaysomboun ended with no new secretary being appointed, with the previous secretary, Sombat Yialaoher (who is ethnic-

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<sup>10</sup> Vientiane Mai, "Mop-hap nathi lekha khanabolihangnarnphak kasuang kantang pathet" [Hand-over foreign ministry's party secretary position], 31 August 2015 <<http://www.vientianemai.net/teen/khao/1/14690>>

<sup>11</sup> Pasason, "Samlet kongpasum nyai samasik phak onghanaphak kasuang nyutitham" [Ministry of Justice party committee meeting completed], *Pasason*, 28 October 2015 <<http://pasaxon.org.la/index/28-10-15/content2.html>>

Hmong), overlooked.<sup>12</sup> In 2016, however, two weeks after the Tenth Party Congress, Major General Thongloy Silivong, the former director of the Kaysone Phomvihane Military Academy, who had been elevated to number 40 in the new PCC, was named the new governor of the province. The replacement of an ethnic-Hmong civilian with a military cadre could be explained by the resurfacing of insurgency in the area, apparently targeting Chinese workers.<sup>13</sup>

### **Patronage networks and the rise of the princelings**

Intersecting with intra-party elections, another major factor that shaped pre-congress preparations was the rise of the ‘princelings’, the children, nephews/nieces and grandchildren of former revolutionary leaders. As Martin Stuart-Fox wrote on these pages a decade ago, the five-yearly cycle of party congresses is aimed at protecting the political interests of powerful figures within the ruling regime: “These interests have to do with how political power is concentrated and applied, which in Lao political culture is through patronage networks that take in not just extended families (through birth and marriage), but also close friends, business partners, and regional representatives”.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, it is commonly known that one cannot be elected to the PCC merely by being a loyal and competent party member—you need to have a backer. Like the rise of party secretaries, discussed above, the elevation of well-connected cadres was foreshadowed over the year preceding the 2016 congress, particularly in the cabinet reshuffle of July 2015. According to one estimate, 25 percent of the 2016 PCC was connected through birth or marriage to the families of famous revolutionaries.

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<sup>12</sup> Pasason, “Samlet kongpasum tua thaen samasikphak tua kwaeng xaysomboun ” [Xaysomboun party committee’s meeting completed], *Pasason*, 5 October 2015 <<http://www.pasaxon.org/la/index/05-10-15/content3.html>>

<sup>13</sup> “Lao authorities arrest 30 suspects in bus shootings”, *Radio Free Asia*, 21 April 2016. <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/lao-authorities-arrest-30-suspects-in-bus-shootings-04212016165419.html>

<sup>14</sup> Martin Stuart-Fox, “Laos: Politics in a Single-party State”, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 2007 (2007): 162.



While the most prominent of these was probably Xaysomphone Phomvihane, the eldest son of Kaysone Phomvihane (1920-1992) who was elevated to seven in the Politburo, the families of two of Kaysone's successors benefited in greater numbers.<sup>15</sup>

Most revealing was the network of the still powerful former party secretary-general and state president, Khamtay Siphandone. Having been elevated to the PCC at the Ninth Congress in 2011, Khamtay's son-in-law, Khampheng Saysompheng, was in 2015 transferred from governor of Luang Prabang province to minister of labour and social welfare.<sup>16</sup> As expected, he was then re-elected to the 2016 PCC, lifting his rank from 49 to 31. Not long before Khampheng took up his new position, his wife and a former deputy finance minister, Viengthong Siphandone, was promoted to president of the State Audit Organization, a precursor to her election (number 48) to the PCC. Most notably, in an earlier reshuffle, her brother, Sonxay Siphandone, was promoted from governor of Champasak province to minister for the Government Office.<sup>17</sup> At the congress, he was elevated from 34 in the PCC to number 11 in the Politburo, positioning him strongly to rise further in subsequent congresses.

The other revealing network was that of the retiring party secretary-general, Choummaly Sayasone. Like his predecessor, Choummaly built his political power through a long career in the military.<sup>18</sup> In recent years, the concentration of power in Choummaly's hands helped several family members gain promotions. In the cabinet reshuffle of mid-2015, the president's brother-in-law, Khammeung Phongthady, elected to the PCC in 2011, was

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<sup>15</sup> For this estimate, see Richard Taylor, "Reasons business should be optimistic about the Lao 10th Party Congress", *Linked In*, 29 February 2016. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/reasons-business-should-optimistic-lao-10th-party-congress-taylor>

<sup>16</sup> "NA approves cabinet reshuffle", *Vientiane Times*, 9 July 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Vientiane Mai, "Sapa huphong ao kansapson bukkalakon kongchaklatthaban" [National Assembly approves proposed government reshuffle], 9 July 2014 <<https://www.vientianemai.net/khao/12180.html>>

<sup>18</sup> Stuart-Fox, "Laos: Politics in a Single-party State".

reassigned from governor of Vientiane province to minister and cabinet chief of the President's Office.<sup>19</sup> This opened the way for his deputy and Choummaly's eldest son, Vidong Sayasone, to be elected to provincial secretary in September.<sup>20</sup> As expected, Vidong was later elected to the PCC (number 62). As if to balance his family's promotions with those of the Siphandone clan, the president's other two sons were also elevated. Phoxay Sayasone secured leadership of Kaysone Phomvihane district in Savannaket province before being elected the 7th-ranked alternate member of the PCC.<sup>21</sup> The last of Choummaly's sons, Phokham Sayasone, was elected party chief of Sisatthanak district in Vientiane Capital. Like those made from within the Siphandone family, these elevations provided interesting watch points for the next Congress, expected in 2021, when the princelings can be expected to gain further promotions.

### **The Tenth Party Congress and Leadership Transition**

The Tenth Congress of the LPRP took place from 18-22 January 2016, earlier in the year than has been customary, and was attended by the 684 party delegates and 400 "honourable guests".<sup>22</sup> According to the statutes of the LPRP, the 5-day meeting had five formal duties: to adopt the party's political report and the party-endorsed NSEDP (2016-2020); accept a report on the performance of the outgoing PCC of the Ninth Congress; amend the party statutes; elect the new PCC, from which the new Politburo and secretary general

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<sup>19</sup> *Vientiane Times*, 9 July 2015.

<sup>20</sup> K. Siluanglath, "kongpasum nyai phuthaen ongkhanaphak kwaeng viangchan khang thi sip at longduay phonsamlet an chopngarn" [Tenth Vientiane province party congress successfully completed], *Pasason*, 28 September 2015 <<http://www.pasaxon.org.la/index/28-09-15/content5.html>>

<sup>21</sup> Lao News Agency, "Kongpasum nyai khang thi sip khong phak leuak tang kao khanabolihannangarn sunkangphak sutmai" [The 10th Party Congress elects new Party Central Committee], *Lao News Agency*, 21 January 2016 <<http://kpl.gov.la/detail.aspx?id=9891>>

<sup>22</sup> "10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress opened today", *Lao News Agency*, 18 January 2016. <http://kpl.gov.la/En/Detail.aspx?id=9749>

would also be elected; and, finally, to adopt resolutions of the congress.<sup>23</sup> As usual, these duties were carefully choreographed to ensure the maximum appearance of stability.

The election of a new PCC and Politburo took place on the final two days of the congress. First, the 685 delegates, chosen by and on behalf of almost 270,000 party members countrywide, elected 69 full members of the new PCC (from 77 nominated delegates), as well as eight alternate or substitute members (from 11 candidates).<sup>24</sup> As we have seen, the preceding intra-party elections, patronage networks and interventions of the party leadership meant these elections were largely ceremonial, formalizing decisions that had already been taken. The small gap between the number of candidates and the number of positions confirmed that, in general, only those assured of election were nominated.

On the final day of the congress, the new PCC held its first plenum to elect a new 11-member Politburo, including the secretary general. In the event, there were four resignations, bringing to five (with Douangchay's death) the number of Politburo members that did not re-contest. Secretary General Choummaly stepped down according to the statutory requirement that the party leader cannot retain the position for more than two consecutive terms.<sup>25</sup> Despite there being no age restriction in the statutes, three other senior members of the Politburo resigned: prime minister and party number two Thongsing Thammavong; number six, Asang Laoly, who served as public security minister before becoming deputy prime minister in charge of public administration; and another deputy prime minister, Somsavath Lengsavad, widely associated with a number of agreements between Laos and China, including the USD6 billion 427-kilometer railway project connecting the southern Chinese city of

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<sup>23</sup> See Article 14 of Statutes of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (2011), pp. 36-37.

<sup>24</sup> Pasason, "*kongpasummyai kangti sip kongpak leuktang ao kana boliharn ngarn sudmai*" [The 10th congress selects new Party Central Committee], *Pasason Newspapers*, 22 January 2016 <<http://www.pasaxon.org.la/index/22-01-16/content1.html>>

<sup>25</sup> See Article 17 of the Statutes of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (2011), pp. 42.

Kunming to Vientiane, and the USD 256 million Chinese-made communication satellite, Lao Sat-1, launched in November 2015.<sup>26</sup>

Of the remaining six members of the ninth Politburo, five moved up the hierarchy. As expected, Bounnyang Vorachit was elected secretary general. Thongloun Sisoulith (number two), a long-serving deputy prime minister, foreign minister and prime ministerial heir apparent, leapfrogged the relatively weak ethnic-Hmong president of the National Assembly Madame Pany Yathorthou (three), presumably to align his party rank and expected executive role. Next came Bounthong Chitmany (four), former governor of Udomxai province, former long time serving Party Organization official, and current chief of the influential Central Party Inspection Commission, and Phankham Viphavanh (five), deputy prime minister, minister of education and sport, and former governor of Houaphan.<sup>27</sup>

Having been elevated to the Politburo in 2011, both Bounthong and Phankham emerged in much enhanced positions: the former as second-ranked member (behind Bounnyang) of the PCC Secretariat, as well as continuing as chief of the Central Party Inspection Commission; the latter as standing member of the PCC Secretariat, a role previously occupied by Bounnyang. On the other hand, the rising star of Bounpone Bouttanavong, a third up-and-comer elevated to the Politburo in 2011, dimmed. Bounpone, the cabinet chief of the Party Central Office, had with Phankham been promoted as a deputy prime minister in 2014, leading to speculation of a future role as prime minister or even secretary-general. Instead, he dropped out of the Politburo to PCC number 16, providing the main surprise among the ranks of the existing Politburo.

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<sup>26</sup> Nirmal Ghosh, “China's dream of rail link to S-E Asia coming true”, *The Straits Times*, 21 January 2016 < <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/chinas-dream-of-rail-link-to-s-e-asia-coming-true>>

<sup>27</sup> Lao News Agency, “The 10th Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party” (no date). <http://kpl.gov.la/En/Page/Politic/partyx.aspx>

Bounpone's demotion brought to six the number of new faces in the Politburo. First among these was Chansy Phosikham (six), a member of the PCC Secretariat and head of the influential Central Party Organization Commission, who rose to number six. Then came Xaysomphone Phomvihane (seven), a vice president of the National Assembly, though his appointment as chief of the relatively marginal Lao Front for National Construction suggested his climb up the ranks may have peaked. Unexpectedly, perhaps due to internal military dynamics, Lieutenant-General Chansamone Chanyalath assumed the eighth-ranked position in the Politburo, leapfrogging his minister and PCC Secretariat member, Lieutenant-General Sengnoul Xayalath (PCC no. 12).

The final positions in the 11-member Politburo reflected the meteoric rise of three cadres previously positioned between 31 and 34 in the PCC. Khamphan Phommathath, the former party secretary of Attapeu province, was elevated to number nine as well as being appointed to the PCC Secretariat; Sinlavong Khoutphaythoune, promoted to mayor of Vientiane Capital after the 2014 plane crash that killed his predecessor, was made number 10; and Sonxay Siphandone, the best positioned of the princelings—assuming Xaysomphone Phomvihane is unlikely to advance much further—was promoted to number 11. Combined with the elevation of Bounthong and Chansy, Khamphan's appointment to replace Bounpone as cabinet chief of the PCC Central Office securely ensconced the heads of the major party commissions in the Politburo.

### **National Assembly elections and the new government**

The next stage in the leadership renewal took place in March with new elections for the National Assembly. Populated almost entirely by party members, the National Assembly is typically dismissed as a 'rubber-stamp' parliament. There are many reasons, however, why authoritarian regimes conduct elections, and the National Assembly has become an important

component of the LPRP's pursuit of legitimacy.<sup>28</sup> As one of the only institutions where concerns over development projects and other controversies can formally be raised, the parliament has played an increasingly prominent oversight function, even if this does not extend to the role of the party itself. Likewise, as the legislative arm of the government, it occupies an important symbolic role as the party and state continue to talk about, and enact legislation in support of, making Laos a "rule of law state".<sup>29</sup> For the first time, moreover, ballots to elect Provincial and Vientiane Capital People's Councils accompanied the National Assembly election.

In the event, 211 candidates stood for election to 149 seats in the National Assembly, up from 132. Of these, a surprisingly small proportion—just under a quarter (48)—was standing for re-election; a similar number (50) were female. With little campaigning permitted, voters based their choice on candidates' published curricula vitae and stated issues of interest. With overt political matters strictly curtailed, local, economic and development issues dominated. Results followed a similar pattern to past elections: the overwhelming majority of elected deputies (144 of 149) belonged to the LPRP, the remaining five being independents; 41 were female (27 per cent), up slightly from 2011; and 30 (about 20 per cent) were said to be from non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups. Official statistics suggested a barely credible 97.9 per cent of 3.73 million eligible voters cast their ballots.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Lee Morganbesser argues that elections allow authoritarian regimes to collect information, pursue legitimacy, manage political elites and sustain patrimonial domination. Lee Morganbesser, *Behind the Façade: Elections under Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> The rhetorical features of the "rule-of-law state" in Laos are discussed in Simon Creak, "Laos in 2013: International Controversies, Economic Concerns and the Post-Socialist Rhetoric of Rule", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 2014 (2014).

<sup>30</sup> Phetsamone, "Women share almost 30% of the new National Assembly", *Lao News Agency*, 28 March 2016. <http://kpl.gov.la/En/Detail.aspx?id=11769>; Inter-Parliamentary Union, Lao People's Democratic Republic: Sapha Heng Xat (National Assembly), Last Elections. [http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2175\\_E.htm](http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2175_E.htm) (accessed 21 December 2016).

In the final stage of party-state renewal, the new National Assembly was charged with selecting a new president and vice president, before the president then nominated a prime minister and deputy prime ministers for the legislature's approval. The prime minister would then finally select his cabinet. In reality, executive appointments were carefully aligned with party posts and ranks determined in January's congress. Thus, as in the previous five-year period, the new party secretary-general, Bounnyang Vorachit, was made state president while his number two, Thongloun Sisoulith, took over as prime minister. Among other Politburo members, Pany (ranked three) remained president of the National Assembly; Phankham's (five) rise was confirmed in his election as state vice president; and Bounthong (four) and Sonxay (11) were made deputy prime ministers. The next generation of leaders looks likely to come from these men and perhaps the princelings. Lieutenant General Chansamone (eight) took over as defence minister, reflecting his elevation above Sengnouane, who became the vice president of the National Assembly (Table 2).

Rank, 2016	Name	Party position, 2016	Government position, 2016	Rank, 2011
1	Bounnyang Vorachit	Secretary-General; Politburo; Secretariat	President	3
2	Thongloun Sisoulith	Politburo	Prime Minister	4
3	Madame Pany Yathorthou	Politburo	President, National Assembly	5
4	Bounthong Chitmany	Politburo; Secretariat, Chief of Central Party Inspection Commission	Deputy PM	9
5	Phankham Viphavanh	Politburo; Standing Member of Secretariat	Vice President	11
6	Chansy Phosikham	Politburo; Secretariat; Chief of Central Party Organization Commission		13

7	Xaysomphone Phomvihane	Politburo; President, Lao Front for National Construction		17
8	Lt. Gen. Chansamone Chanyalath	Politburo	Minister of Defence	27
9	Khamphan Phommatham	Politburo; Secretariat; Cabinet Chief of Party Central Office		32
10	Sinlavong Khoutphaythoune	Politburo	Mayor of Vientiane Capital	31
11	Sonxay Siphandone	Politburo	Deputy Prime Minister	34
12	Lt. Gen. Sengnouan Xayalath	Secretariat	Vice President, National Assembly	
13	Kikeo Khaykhamphithoun	Secretariat, Chief of Central Party Propaganda and Training Commission		39
14	Maj. Gen. Somkeo Silavong	Secretariat	Minister of Public Security	

Table 2: Party and state positions of members of the Tenth Politburo and Party Central Committee (selected) of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (2016-2021). The top 11 ranks constitute the Politburo.

### **Continuity at the top**

Despite the significant turnover in personnel, the new leadership reflected efforts to preserve the status quo. Despite being just one year younger than Choummaly, 78-year-old Bounnyang Vorachit was the highest ranked among non-retiring members of the Politburo and satisfied a number of traditional criteria for party leaders. Like all previous secretaries general, he hailed from the south of the country and boasted a military career. He also possessed long experience of leadership, having been elected to the PCC in 1982, the Politburo in 1996, and serving as a governor of Savannakhet, mayor of Vientiane and prime minister. Just as importantly, he was well integrated into the patronage networks of his two predecessors, fellow southerners Choummaly and party elder Khamtay Siphandone. Having



profited handsomely from the unbridled expansion of the timber industry in the 1980s and 1990s, Bounnyang was also known to have close links with business groups, giving him little cause to upset neo-patrimonial ties between the party and business.<sup>31</sup> With Bounnyang's age suggesting he will be a stopgap leader, his election represented continuity with the old guard while the post-revolutionary generation takes final shape.

Slightly younger than Bounnyang, 70-year-old Thongloun Sisoulith, the new Politburo number two, also represented a safe bet. Having been foreign minister and a deputy prime minister since 2006, Thongloun was a polished performer on the international stage and preferred choice to replace Thongsing as prime minister during Laos' year in the chair of ASEAN. Making the presumptive prime minister number two in the party retained the alignment between party and executive roles. In addition, Thongloun possessed impeccable connections of his own, being a protégé of Khamtay and son-in-law of another party founder, the late Phoumi Vongvichit.

Among the next tier of leaders, Phankham was a former governor of Houaphan, the seat of the revolution, and a close ally of the previous Prime Minister, Thongsing Thammavong, who hailed from the same province. Likewise, Bounthong and Chansy followed well-worn paths to seniority as, respectively, chiefs of the Party's Inspection and Organization Commissions, which oversee internal party affairs in the areas of discipline and personnel. The military also retained influence despite the deaths of defence minister Douangchay in 2014 and his deputy, Sanyahak Phomvihane (another of Kaysone's sons),

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Rathie, "Histoire et evolution du Parti révolutionnaire populaire lao", in *Laos: Sociétés et pouvoirs*, ed. Vanina Bouté and Vatthana Pholsena, pp. 17-44 (Bangkok: Irasec, 2012), p. 38. Along with Thongsing, the outgoing prime minister and Party number two, Bounnyang also enjoyed a close association with the late Nouhak Phoumsavanh (1910-2008), another party elder from the south. Martin Stuart-Fox, "Family Problems", *Inside Story*, 19 January 2011. <http://insidestory.org.au/family-problems>

from a treatable disease the previous year.<sup>32</sup> Although the influence of the armed forces had started to wane over the past decade, as veterans of the 1945-75 war were replaced by a new generation of civilian technocrats, four serving officers (all ranked in the top 15 of the party) were made members of the Politburo or PCC Secretariat.<sup>33</sup>

In a final indication of continuity, the four retiring Politburo members—Choummaly, Thongsing, Asang and Somsavath—were elected advisors to the PCC. Although several retired leaders have obtained this largely ceremonial title in the past, the most recent appointee, Khamtay Siphandone, has remained highly influential. It remains to be seen whether the election of the four most recent advisors represents a face-saving gesture or will offer similar access to continued influence. Either way, these appointments add further evidence that the old guard does not intend to relax its oversight of the party's direction. On the other hand, Somsavath was apparently disappointed at the outcome, suggesting the decision not to stand for re-election was not his own.<sup>34</sup> This was significant given his close association with Chinese investment and development projects, which have generated increasing levels of anti-Chinese sentiment in Laos. As a result of Somsavath's exit, some pundits speculated that the new leadership would engage more cautiously with China.<sup>35</sup>

### **International relations and party-to-party aid**

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<sup>32</sup> “Major General Sannhahak Phomvihane dies”, *Vientiane Times*, 19 July 2013.

Anonymous, “Mystery surrounds death of key Laos officials”.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Rathie, “The History and Evolution of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party”, in *Changing Lives in Laos: New Perspectives on Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State*, ed. Vanina Bouté and Vatthana Pholsena (Singapore: NUS Press, forthcoming).

<sup>34</sup> Kyozyuka, “Laos prepares for a changing of the guard”.

<sup>35</sup> “Selection of new national leaders in Laos indicates tilt to Vietnam”, Radio Free Asia, 22 January 2016. <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/Laos-elect-01222016112729.html> Luke Hunt, “Leadership change in Laos: A shift away from China?”, *The Diplomat*, 25 January 2016. <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/leadership-change-in-laos-a-shift-away-from-china/>

In fact, speculation about the orientation of Laos' leadership—towards Vietnam or China—is a simplistic and often misguided exercise. While China has continued to grow in importance in Laos since relations were normalised in the late 1980s, the LPRP has long understood the importance of maintaining close relations with all of its neighbours, particularly the two communist nations with which it shares borders.<sup>36</sup>

This strategy was exemplified by the carefully crafted communiqué of the ASEAN Minister's Meeting in July, drafted under the chairmanship of the new foreign minister, Saleumxay Kommasith. Contrary to expectations—and in sharp contrast to 2014 in Phnom Penh, when no such statement could be settled on—the communiqué addressed tensions in the South China Sea in a manner that was acceptable to claimant countries (including Vietnam); non-claimant nations that enjoy strong trading ties with China (including Laos); and China itself.<sup>37</sup> While Laos' small size and economy means it will never compete with ASEAN's major powers for regional influence, this episode left a positive impression of how the country balances relations with much more powerful neighbours. As a *Nikkei Asian Review* reporter noted, Laos' adroit diplomatic skills could be observed in Vientiane's infrastructure: airports built by Japan; an international conference hall built by China; and the Mekong riverbank redeveloped by Korea.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Stuart-Fox, "Laos: Politics in a Single-party State".

<sup>37</sup> The relevant phrase was as follows: "We further reaffirmed the need to ... pursue peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)". Joint Communiqué of the 49th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Vientiane, 24 July 2016, p. 24.

[https://www.asean2016.gov.la/kcfinder/upload/files/Joint%20Communique%20of%20the%2049th%20AMM%20\(ADOPTED\).pdf](https://www.asean2016.gov.la/kcfinder/upload/files/Joint%20Communique%20of%20the%2049th%20AMM%20(ADOPTED).pdf).

<sup>38</sup> For praise, see Yusho Cho, "Laos showing off some diplomatic skills", *Nikkei Asian Review*, 14 August 2016. <http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/Laos-showing-off-some-diplomatic-skills>; for another recent example, see foreign support for the Southeast Asian Games conducted in Laos in 2009. Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015); Simon Creak, "Laos: Celebrations and Development Debates," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 2011 (2011): 107-128.

Less commonly observed, the contest for influence in Laos is also waged through party links with the “fraternal” communist parties of China and Vietnam. This competition was illuminated in the lead-up to the Tenth Party Congress, when the LPRP received multi-million-dollar support from both communist parties. In August 2013, at the request of the party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) approved grant aid of 400-million *yuan* (nearly USD 61 million) to build new facilities for the party.<sup>39</sup> The fruits of this aid—a grand new three-storey building at the party’s Vientiane headquarters (Kilometre 6), including a 1000-person capacity grand hall, two smaller conference rooms and offices—were unveiled last year. Overseen by a Chinese company, the 18-month, 295 million-*yuan* (USD 45 million) construction project was reported to be the CCP’s gift to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the LPRP (1955-2015) and the 40th year since the foundation of the Lao PDR (1975-2015). Most notably, the handover ceremony, attended by the Chinese vice minister of commerce, Zheng Xiangchen, and the Lao deputy prime minister, Phankham Viphavan, took place on 21 March to coincide with the 55th anniversary of diplomatic relations (1961-2016) between the two states.<sup>40</sup> The CCP aid also funded 25 smaller facilities for the party.<sup>41</sup>

Material aid is one of several ways in which the CCP has striven to promote a “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership” between the two parties. Another example is a bilateral agreement resulting in exchanges to discuss theoretical issues arising from the two countries’ efforts to “build socialism”. A joint seminar in September 2015, titled “New Creativity in Development and Social Administration”, in Kunming, Yunnan province, was

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<sup>39</sup> Vientiane Mai, “Vang sila leuk khongkan kosang samnakngan sunkangphak” [Stone laying ceremony for construction of Party Central Office], 16 February 2015 <<https://www.vientianemai.net/khao/13683.html>>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid; Phouviengkham, “Mop-hap khongkan korsang samnakngan sunkangphak pasason pativat lao” [Handover of Central Office of Lao People’s Revolutionary Party construction project], *Pasason*, 22 March 2016. <http://www.pasaxon.org.la/index/22-03-16/content3.html>

<sup>41</sup> *Vientiane Mai*, 16 February 2015.

the fourth such meeting since these contacts were initiated in the early 2000s.<sup>42</sup> In a further indication of the CCP's efforts, a special envoy arrived in Vientiane four days after last-year's congress to convey Secretary General Xi Jinping's congratulations to his newly elected counterpart, Bounyang Vorachit, and his wish to continue to enhance the "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership" between the two parties.<sup>43</sup>

In keeping with its oft-cited "special relationship" with the LPRP, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) seeks to maintain balance with the CCP's influence. In recent years, for example, the Central Committee of the VCP provided the Party Central Office with capacity-building grant aid—to fund information technology infrastructure for the six commissions of the party—valued at USD 3.5 million. According to reports, this aid was aimed at strengthening the capacity of the six bodies in research and administration and linking party committees in the capital, province and ministries.<sup>44</sup> The VCP also funded several buildings in the party's Kilometre 6 compound, including a new complex for the Lao Academy of Social Sciences.

If these dollar amounts are lower than CCP largesse, LPRP-VCP relations are also affirmed through rhetoric and ritual. For instance, during a visit to Laos in December 2015, the Vietnamese deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, Pham Binh Minh, awarded a number of medals—the Order of Independence (Class 2 and 3), Order of Labour (Class 3) and Order of Friendship—to senior cadres of his counterpart ministry for their "outstanding performance" in enhancing the special relationship and comprehensive strategic

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<sup>42</sup> "Samana kanpaditsangmai nai kanphattana lae khumkhong sangkhom" [Seminar on new creativity in development and social administration], *Pasason*, 23 September 2015

<<http://www.pasaxon.org.la/index/23-09-15/content2.html>>

<sup>43</sup> "Khana phuthaen phak kommunit chin doenthangma somsoei phonsamlet kongpasumnyai khangthi sip khong phak" [Chinese Communist Party's delegates come to congratulate the achievements of the 10th party congress], *Pasason*, 27 January 2016

<<http://www.pasaxon.org.la/index/27-01-16/content4.html>>

<sup>44</sup> "Mop-hap khongkan suainun onghan sunkangphak" [Hand-over supporting project for Party Central Office], *Vientiane Mai*, 29 May 2014

<<https://www.vientianemai.net/khao/11909.html>>

cooperative partnership between the two countries.<sup>45</sup> Such ceremonies are seen rarely, if ever, between the CCP and LPRP, and come on top of long-term relations forged through intermarriage, the presence in Laos of overseas Vietnamese, and the bonds of war.

The primacy of Vietnam's relationship can also be discerned from the observance of protocols after the LPRP Congress. Whereas the CCP's special envoy arrived four days after the congress, the special envoy of the secretary general of the VCP—the chief of the VCP's external commission—called on the newly elected chief of the Lao party, Bounnyang Vorachit, at the conference venue immediately after the congress concluded. That evening, the envoy called on the out-going secretary general, Choummaly Sayasone, at the Presidential Palace, typifying the warmth and familiarity that defines relations between the two parties.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, after being elected president in March, Bounnyang dutifully undertook separate trips to Vietnam and China, in late April and early May, respectively, to affirm his party's and government's relations with the VCP and CCP—in that order.<sup>47</sup>

Against this background, Barack Obama's high profile visit for the East Asia Summit represented little more than a sideshow, though one that was not without symbolic importance. For those with knowledge of US support for the Royal Lao Government (1949-1975), the symbolism of Obama in Luang Prabang, dressed in shirtsleeves and aviator glasses, sipping languidly from a coconut, was powerful. But for the vast majority of the population, which was born more recently and tends to steer clear of history, Obama's celebrity power represented the biggest draw card. Obama's main policy announcement, the

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<sup>45</sup> “Laos, Vietnam confirm continuous friendship and cooperation”, *Vientiane Times*, 5 December 2014.

<sup>46</sup> “Sahai lekhatikan nyai lae pathan pathet tonhap phutangnaphiset khong sahai lekatikan nyai phak kommunit viatnam” [Secretary general and state president receives special envoy of Vietnam Communist Party secretary general], *Pasaxon Newspapers*, 25 January 2016 <<http://www.pasaxon.org.la/index/25-01-16/content3.html>>

<sup>47</sup> “President Bounnhang visits Vietnam”, *Lao News Agency*, 25 April 2016. <http://kpl.gov.la/En/Detail.aspx?id=12424>; “Secretary General begins goodwill visit to China”, *Lao News Agency*, 3 May 2016. <http://kpl.gov.la/En/Detail.aspx?id=12644>

trebling of aid (to USD 90 million over 3 years) for the clearance of unexploded ordinance (UXO)—the legacy of US bombing during the war—also had symbolic value, but will make little more than a dent on this vast and on-going scourge. Although Obama and Bounnyang also inaugurated a broader “Comprehensive Partnership”, part of the United States’ so-called pivot to Asia, the election of Donald Trump in November suggested little would come of this. For the foreseeable future, Laos’ most important relationships will remain with countries closer to home, whose political and economic engagement in the country dwarfs that of the United States.

### **Economics and governance**

Besides electing the new leadership, the other major task of the Tenth People’s Congress was to take stock of the country’s economic performance. Here it was necessary to distinguish between the party’s political message and deeper analysis of Laos’ on-going economic transition, buried in the 8th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP) adopted by the congress. As in the past, the outgoing Secretary General Choummaly Sayasone’s political report firmly restated the aim of the party—despite rapid capitalist growth—to build towards socialism for the welfare of the people. By “creating favourable conditions for people to earn a living, as well as facilitate trade, investment and tourism”, he stated, the party had progressed over the past five years towards its mantra-like goal of lifting the country above least-developed status by 2020.<sup>48</sup> With the economy growing at an average of 7.9 per cent per annum—among the highest in the Asia-Pacific region—average per capita income had increased from USD 1217 in 2010/11 to USD 1970 in 2014/15, exceeding the targets of the five- and ten-year NSEDPs.<sup>49</sup> According to

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<sup>48</sup> “Party leader proud of accomplishments”, *Vientiane Times*, 19 January 2016.

<sup>49</sup> “Laos’s GDP constantly grows at 7.9%”, *Lao News Agency*, 18 January 2016.

<http://kpl.gov.la/En/Detail.aspx?id=16854>. For the comparison, see Ministry of Planning and

Choummaly, this fulfilled the party's pledge to create a strong, wealthy country; prosperous people; and a harmonious, democratic, just and civilized society—the official definition of the imagined socialist society.<sup>50</sup>

As Choummaly's political report made clear, the LPRP's main claim to legitimacy is rapid economic growth, driven primarily through the expansion of extractive resource industries of mining, hydropower and commercial agriculture. In this respect, Prime Minister Thongsing Thammavong's delivery of the 8th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2016-2020) foreshadowed more of the same. Although projected growth would drop slightly to 7.5 per cent per annum over the period of the 8th NSEDP, per capita income was forecast to increase to USD 3,190.<sup>51</sup>

Underlying these headline rates, however, was the persistent challenge of distribution. While poverty fell from 33.5 to 23.1 per cent of the population in the decade to 2012/13 (the most recent data available), helping Laos to meet its Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target of halving extreme poverty by 2015, this translated into the East Asia and Pacific region's second-smallest reduction in poverty relative to economic growth (0.47 per cent for every 1 per cent increase in GDP per capita). According to the World Bank, the reason for this sluggish return is the reliance on growth in the natural resources sectors, which are capital intensive but create relatively few jobs, thus resulting in small increases to employment and household consumption. Such inequity is not inevitable, however, the

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Investment, 8th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2016-2020) (Officially approved at the VIIIth National Assembly's Inaugural Session, 20–23 April 2016), Vientiane, June 2016, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Lao People's Revolutionary Party, "Ekkasan kongpasum nyai khang thi kao phak pasason pativat lao 2011" [Documents of the 9th congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party 2011], (Vientiane: State Printing House, 2011), p. 57.

<sup>51</sup> Singkham, "Continued, steady and sustainable growth highlighted at the 10th Party Congress", *Lao News Agency*, 18 January 2016. <http://kpl.gov.la/En/Detail.aspx?id=9776>



World Bank noted also that Laos compared unfavourably with resource rich developing countries that employ effective redistribution policies.<sup>52</sup>

The 8th NSEDP recognized these challenges as a barrier to achieving the party-state's much-cherished goal of “graduating” from LDC status by 2020. As in past years, high levels of foreign direct investment, particularly in the natural resources sector, were forecast to drive the growth necessary to reach the threshold level of gross national income. However, the NSEDP stressed, “government policies to diversify the economy beyond the extractive, natural resource-based industries are of critical importance” for achieving threshold levels in one of the other two criteria—human asset index and vulnerability to external shocks—as required for graduation.<sup>53</sup> Thongsing addressed this challenge in his speech to the Tenth Party Congress, noting the party's ambitious target of reducing the poverty rate to 10 per cent by 2020.<sup>54</sup> Achieving this target will be another matter, however, given the party's addiction to FDI-funded projects and the rent-seeking opportunities they present.

If the party's economic plans went to script, less expected was the party's effort at the Tenth Party Congress to highlight a “wide-ranging” campaign against corruption. According to the vision of “building a transparent and strong party”, Bounthong Chitmany's Central Party Inspection Commission was reported to have disciplined 567 party members in 2015, with 306 having had their memberships revoked due to corruption.<sup>55</sup> In a further report in September, the State Inspection Commission and Anti-Corruption Agency (also under Bouthnong), announced that one (unnamed) provincial party committee had been warned, seven district party committees criticised, three party units warned and three party units

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<sup>52</sup> World Bank Group, *Lao Economic Monitor: Challenges in Promoting more Inclusive Growth and Shared Prosperity*, May 2016, p. 38.

<sup>53</sup> 8th Five-Year NSEDP (2016-2020), p. 85.

<sup>54</sup> Singkham, “Continued, steady and sustainable growth highlighted at the 10th Party Congress”.

<sup>55</sup> “Sang phak hai podsai kemkaeng” [To build a transparent and strong party], *Pasason*, 20 January 2016 <<http://www.pasaxon.org.la/index/20-01-16/content3.html>>

dissolved due to corruption. The party's leadership role had been diminished by disclosure of embezzlement totalling almost USD 600 million and illegal logging of 300 million cubic metres.<sup>56</sup> Like the emphasis on distributing the fruits of economic growth, this unprecedented focus was aimed at increasing the party's legitimacy in the eyes of "the people", who have become increasingly jaded by corruption at all levels of Lao society. But, again, it will be more challenging to act. Despite the ramped up rhetoric, no senior leaders appeared to be among those expelled from the party despite the common knowledge that membership of the highest party organs provides unrivalled opportunities for rent-seeking and other corrupt activities.

## **Conclusion**

As age finally overtakes the last of the revolutionary generation in Laos, the long-forecast transition to a new generation of leaders is nearing completion. The process of regime renewal that culminated in the Tenth Party Congress, demonstrates the degree to which party's structures and processes have been designed to maintain party power and stability, on the one hand, but also to ensure elite prerogatives are not unduly challenged. Beginning in 2014, this renewal was completed and formalized in 2016, regenerating the party leadership from the level of the district right through to the Politburo. As we have argued in this paper, this process captured the tension between internal democratic processes, on the one hand, and patron-client relations, on the other. These patron-client relations extend from local party committees, identifying and putting forward their own "targets for building", to the most powerful families of the party leadership, including a new generation of princelings that are now strongly positioned to move further up the ranks. But as the four

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<sup>56</sup> The report mentions embezzlement in various currencies (4,145.86 billion Lao *kip*; USD 70.77 million; 381.68 million Thai *baht* and 539,515 Chinese *yuan*). "Kankuatka lat-tankan solatbangluang phop 700 kua paomai" [State inspection-anti-corruption identifies more than 700 targets], 29 September 2016 <<http://www.vientianemai.net/khao/16882.html>>

stages of party elections show, patron-client relations are also filtered through a party system that involves widespread participation of party members and committees across the country. This system divides power and its spoils between different patronage networks, families, levels of government and regional interests. Despite the recognition that corruption and a widening gap between rich and poor undermine the party's legitimacy, nothing that happened in 2016 suggested this system and the processes that ensure its renewal are likely to change in the near or foreseeable future.



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