



Getting ready for the 1MSP

## **History and key facts on Lao PDR**

Laos was once known as the Ancient Kingdom of Lane Xang - Land of a Million Elephants, which existed from the 14th to the 18th century.

After a period as a French protectorate, it gained independence in 1949. Laos in the 1950s looked forward to building a modern nation, but was soon faced with the facts of poverty and the reality of geography which placed Laos in the middle of the Cold War. US aid poured into Vientiane for development, but caused corruption and an unwarranted growth in the power of the military. Many Lao opted for a policy of neutrality, while a small Lao communist movement opposed any alignment with the US. This movement was backed by the North Vietnamese who were determined to use trails through Laos to gain access to South Vietnam. A series of military coups and counter-coups in Vientiane in the early 1960s allowed the Lao communists to grow and they made significant inroads into the Royal Lao Government's control of the country. Alarmed, America began its air war, and Laos became caught up in the Vietnam War.

The War displaced tens of thousands of refugees inside Laos. The highland province of Xiengkhuang became a major battleground between Vietnamese and Lao Communist Party on one side, and the Royal Lao Government and American bombers on the other. Meanwhile Lao society was maturing, and the 1960s had seen the growth of an intelligentsia that was critical of its rulers. Much of this criticism disappeared with the communist victory. Economic crisis in the early 1970s coupled with America's desire to retreat from Indochina saw the Royal Lao Government enter a coalition government with the Communist Party in 1973. The failure of this agreement together with the continued presence of North Vietnamese troops and America's withdrawal of financial and military support ensured the collapse of the Royal Lao Government.

As such, the Lao People's Democratic Republic was proclaimed in 1975. Today, the country's executive power is controlled by the president, Lt General Mr. Choummaly Sayasone, who is assisted by the Prime Minister, Mrs. Bouasone Bouphavanh, who in turn is in charge of the Council of Ministers. Legislative power belongs to the National Assembly, whose members are elected by the people for a five year mandate.

Laos is a landlocked country in South East Asia that covers an area of approximately 236,800 square kilometres. About two thirds of land area is mountainous. The

Mekong River forms a large part of the western boundary with Thailand, whereas the mountains of the Annamite Chain form most of the eastern border with Vietnam. In the north it borders with China and Myanmar, and in the south with Cambodia. The total population is estimated at 6.7 million (2008 figure), making Laos the least populated country in South East Asia.

The Lao economy is heavily dependent on investment and trade with its neighbours, Thailand, Vietnam, and, especially in the north, China. Subsistence agriculture still accounts for half of the GDP and provides 80 percent of employment. Only 4 percent of the country is arable land, and 0.34 percent used as permanent crop land, the lowest percentage in the Greater Mekong Subregion. Rice dominates agriculture, with about 80 percent of the arable land area used for growing it. Approximately 77 percent of Lao farm households are self-sufficient in rice.

The economy receives development aid from the IMF, ADB and other international sources, and foreign direct investment for development of the society, industry, hydropower and mining, most notably copper and gold. Tourism is the fastest-growing industry in the country. Economic development in Laos has been hampered by 'brain drain', with a skilled emigration rate of 37.4 percent in 2000.

Laos is rich in mineral resources but imports petroleum and gas. Metallurgy is an important industry, and the government hopes to attract foreign investment to develop the substantial deposits of coal, gold, bauxite, tin, copper and other valuable metals. In addition, the country's plentiful water resources and mountainous terrain enable it to produce and export large quantities of hydroelectric energy. Of the potential capacity of approximately 18,000 megawatts, around 8,000 megawatts have been committed for exporting to Thailand and Vietnam.

Laos has predominantly two seasons, one wet and one dry. The dry season usually starts in October and lasts through May. November through to January are often a little cooler, which offers visitors an extremely comfortable travelling climate, although a good sweater and warm socks might be needed, especially if you are travelling up north.

The primary religion in Laos is Buddhism. Lao people follow Theravada Buddhism, also known as "The Teaching of the Elders".

Laos has 49 officially recognised ethnic groups, inhabiting all over the country.

The official language is Lao.

The time zone is GMT +7.

Source:

- A Short History of Laos: The Land In Between, by Grant Evans (2002)
- Destination Laos 2010, by the Lao National Tourism Administration ([www.destination-laos.net](http://www.destination-laos.net))
- Wikipedia: [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laos](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laos)

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