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Ryan Wolfson-Ford. *Forsaken Causes: Liberal Democracy and Anticommunism in Cold War Laos*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Martin Rathie\*

Ryan Wolfson-Ford's research into multi-party democracy and anticommunist activities in the Kingdom of Laos is a pioneering study for its substantial use of Lao language sources and giving voice to the domestic figures in Lao politics who would have otherwise been forgotten. *Forsaken Causes* is based on the author's 2020 doctoral thesis entitled "Ideology in the Royal Lao Government-era (1945–1975): A thematic approach." At 308 pages, the absence of maps and portraits of key figures mentioned in the book is a disappointment. The book provides an important counterbalance to Western-dominated narratives of Laos's twentieth century history. For too long, most mainstream histories of Laos, with the exception of Grant Evans's *A Short History of Laos*, have been produced by writers lacking a working knowledge of the national language and little more than a superficial utilization of primary sources. Hence, they gave scant treatment to Lao intellectual thought and the ideological edification of domestic actors.

Wolfson-Ford begins his analysis by investigating the "Origins of Democracy" in Chapter One. His focus is directed at the figures who rose to fame in the Lao Issara movement, which emerged in 1945. While the analysis is significant, it overlooks the intellectual debt owed to social progressives in neighboring Thailand, Cambodia, and Nationalist China. The author does well to trace the colonial roots of a Lao race threatened with extinction by communist forces—exacerbated by American security propagandists who came to Laos in the 1950s—and describe its permutation for political benefits. But by choosing to focus on the ethnic Lao elite, which constituted a minority inside a minority, when laying out the evolutionary trajectory of Lao politics, he overlooks mentioning the collective voting practices of many ethnic groups in Laos and fails to question how inclusive was the ideology of the new nation.

Wolfson-Ford praises the Royal Lao Government (RLG) for its free press. However, like most of mainland Southeast Asia, the Lao media of the twentieth century was dominated by printing houses owned by political leaders who were aided by foreign advisors. Hence, the

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scope of free expression is more limited than thought. Furthermore, the repression applied by the RLG against the publications of the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) showed that press freedoms were conditional.

Archival film footage from the 1950s portrays Lao elections as peaceful. The extent of violence and intimidation used by the RLG against the LPF in the 1958 election campaign is skipped over by Wolfson-Ford. The supporters of LPF candidates were killed extrajudicially and their relatives, mostly young women, were detained for questioning and threatened both physically and mentally. By April 24, 1960 we have security personnel patrolling polling stations, thus showing the sudden intrusion of the military into Lao politics. Moreover, the voting procedure lacked secrecy as it used photographic booklets which easily revealed the voter's choice.<sup>1)</sup> During the January 1, 1967 elections armed Royal Lao Army soldiers stood around voting booths in Vientiane, many of them located on the grounds of temples.<sup>2)</sup> Hence, this contrasts sharply with the safe, non-intimidatory image of Lao elections initially presented by the author.

In the second section Wolfson-Ford looks at "Democracy in Practice." He explains the concrete measures taken by Lao intellectuals to promote a national identity and to establish democratic institutions. However, the debt to the French in these processes is downplayed. The author explains his term "loyalist" which is used to describe Lao conservatives who preferred a gradual separation from French stewardship. Wolfson-Ford does well to point out that Pierre Somchine Nginn, a Francophile Lao-Khmer, became a key architect of modern Lao language and socio-political concepts (p. 47).

In Chapter Three Wolfson-Ford shifts his attention to the "Origins of Anticommunism," by putting forward the argument that Lao actors led the fight against communist interference. He traces this to a tract written by Katay Don Sasorith in 1948 (p. 62). The reviewer finds this standpoint hard to support when it was the French and the Americans who were pressuring the nations of Southeast Asia to be vigilant against Soviet expansionism. The role of Thai anticommunism also needs to be given more credit.

The fourth chapter of the book deals with "Universal Democracy" which by its very title sounds altruistic. This raises the question, "Were the RLG political leaders giving voice to universal values for domestic or foreign consumption?" The reviewer would argue that much of this rhetoric was lip service for foreign donors rather than grassroot supporters. Furthermore, it could be argued that many of these announcements were reactions to statements made by the LPF which always had a more progressive agenda. Wolfson-Ford details the formation of political parties following the 1949 amnesty given to followers of the Lao Issara and the loyalists' adoption of universal values promoted by the United Nations (pp. 81–82). He also brings attention to universal suffrage with the appointment of Mrs. Khampheng Boupha to the National Assembly in 1958 (p. 90).

In Chapter Five Wolfson-Ford combines "Anticommunism and Nationalism" as he seeks to

demonstrate that an aggressive posture towards communists and their sympathizers was perceived as behaving patriotically. This argument is only partly true as many Lao living inside RLG-controlled parts of Laos considered the Pathet Lao more loyal to the nation than politicians in Vientiane. The author traces the escalation of the border dispute between Laos and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1959, the cultivation of the Lao race myth by various intellectuals (p. 103), and the formation of conservative nationalist groups (p. 111). This section would have benefited from a parallel contrast with the LPF's multi-ethnic narrative of the Lao state.

The sixth chapter acknowledges the tragic lapse of "Democracy and Dictatorship" in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This topic is relevant to the present as we see democratic institutions under siege in various countries. In the case of the RLG, opportunists were exploiting the fear of communism to circumvent parliamentary procedures and generate huge personal profits. Wolfson-Ford follows the tragic course of Phoumi Nosavan and the growing entry of military figures into Lao politics (pp. 128–134).

In Chapter Seven Wolfson-Ford looks at "Anticommunism and Neutralism," a topic which has been touched upon by several academics. Neutralism stood up in the Lao public's thinking because it was linked to dynamic figures such as Bong Souvannavong, Kinim Pholsena and Kong Lae. The author focuses on the Kong Lae supporters who rallied to the RLG in 1963 and how Souvanna Phouma forged his own interpretation of neutralism to ensure his political survival. Special attention is given to Souvanna's decision to approve the bombing of communist forces, thus showing the war in Laos was not guided exclusively by the United States (p. 154).

The eighth section of the book is titled "Return to Democracy" which seems a flawed choice to the reviewer as the RLG never fully recovered from the lost opportunity of 1962's Second Coalition Government. Guided democracy would probably be a better description. The chapter describes efforts taken to redeem the RLG after the numerous coups of the 1960s. Wolfson-Ford points out how Souvanna maintained the semblance of liberal democracy by allowing the National Assembly to execute its powers more freely while cracking down against the Pathet Lao more brutally on the battlefield.

In the final chapter called "Death to Democracy" Wolfson-Ford briefly explains the collapse of the parliamentary system in Laos. He explains the rise of new political interest groups and the wind of change brought by enlightened students, mostly returned from Europe. This is a complex process as the Pathet Lao had a detailed, long-term program for the seizure of power which involved legal and armed means of persuasion. It did not rely heavily on the withdrawal of the United States from the region, and the fall of Saigon.

In his conclusion, titled the "Specter of Democracy," Wolfson-Ford points out the unique status of the RLG in the political geography of Asia. This is a natural logic but, unfortunately, we had to wait for *Forsaken Causes* to view its characteristics in suitable detail. The author is optimistic that elements of the RLG's democratic experience have some residual effect on Lao

political culture in the present.

The absence of maps and portraits of key figures mentioned in the book is a disappointment. The author's belief that the Vietnamese dominated and dictated to the Lao revolutionary movement is a weakness in this study. Lao of all political persuasions have been responsible for inviting various external influences. However, the Pathet Lao never traded Lao sovereignty and self-mastery off to the Vietnamese. They certainly made strategic agreements which gave the Vietnamese revolutionary forces privileged treatment. This should not be confused with the neocolonialism which was practiced by the US Embassy and the CIA. An important question to raise is why RLG figures of Lao-Viet parentage such as Katay Don Sasorith did not undergo the same racial vilification as Pathet Lao leaders?

Wolfson-Ford's study has opened the gate for research into the intellectual history of Laos. Early in the book the author declares his desire to skirt around the subject of patronage politics in Laos. However, to properly understand the dynamics driving these parties it is crucial to know their patrons and the historical baggage which they carried from the colonial and Lao Issara periods. The use of the term "flourished" to describe Lao democracy is too generous. Democracy was active in the provincial capitals located adjacent to the Mekong. For smaller towns and districts located upcountry democratic practices gave way to old-style clan politics. Given that there were ten coups carried out during the RLG period, it is naïve to say Laos had a stable democracy.<sup>3)</sup> The moderate approach of the Pathet Lao helped to maintain the parliamentary façade of the RLG when in reality regional military commanders functioned as warlords.

The main point that Wolfson-Ford wished to leave in the reader's mind was that the Lao people were agents of their destiny during the Cold War era while in partnership with various allies. I agree with the author's claim that the RLG leaders determined their own course more than has been accredited to them previously. However, the process of navigating various domestic hurdles has frequently relied on the council, military clout and finance of foreign powers. Wolfson-Ford and a new generation of scholars are making sure to promote Lao sources as a first step in better understanding the past and present of Laos. The good news is that there is a Lao National Archives in Vientiane which can be accessed by researchers, and thus there is great potential for more to be unearthed on this topic.<sup>4)</sup>

## Notes

- 1) Jacques Nevard, "Laotian Election Appears Orderly," *New York Times*, April 25, 1960, page 11
- 2) Lao News Agency Photographic Archives – Series of pictures from 1967 election
- 3) 1 in 1959; 3 in 1960; 2 in 1964; 2 in 1965; 1 in 1966; and 1 in 1973
- 4) It contains audio-visual materials, books and documents from the colonial, Kingdom of Laos and LPDR periods. Unfortunately, most of them are not catalogued. Hence, scholars will have to be patient to access only a fraction of the collection.