

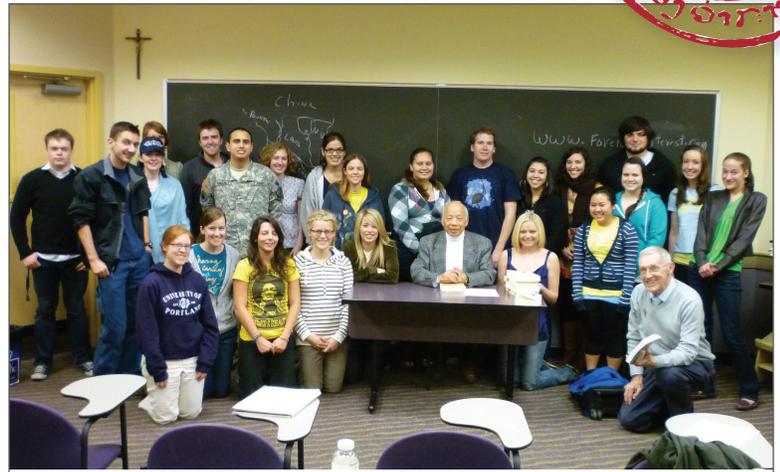
# I LITTLE SLAVE

Volume II: Dr. Bounsang Khamkeo talks about governance in Laos.



*Dr. Bounsang Khamkeo's life illustrates a compelling story of survival in his native country, Laos (Lao People's Democratic Republic). He has held prestigious positions in the highest levels of LPDR and suffered in the lowest depths of despair inside Lao political prisoner camps. Now a U.S. citizen, Dr. Khamkeo is working to bring democracy and human rights to his homeland. The following interview is the second in a series conducted by a growing group of supporters who are working to bring his story to film.*

***Thirty-five years ago, most people believed the vision of the Marxist Lao People's Revolutionary Party which established the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos) would never change. How true is that today?***



*Dr. Bounsang Khamkeo (center behind desk) discussed his life's experience with Dr. Claude Pomerleau's Political Science class at the University of Portland, Portland, Oregon, March, 2010.*

I believe in the philosophy of “impermanence”.

Everything evolves, according to Buddhist teaching. The communist regime in Laos will be replaced by another more democratic form of government, not because its Politburo members are willing to reform, but because the system does not work any longer since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Laos's Marxist-Leninist ideology cannot continue as it is today because there are too many contradictions and too many moral and political weaknesses.

Let's first examine the contradictions:

- Between the Party's proclaimed promise to exercise the rule of law and that the Party is above the law.
- Between the Party's proclaimed adherence to socialism and its mix of free-market economic principles.
- Between its ideal utopia of a classless society and of a new privileged social class.
- Between, on the one hand, “the... people to be the masters of the country” and on the other, the ideological absolutism of a one-party state.
- Between, on the one hand, the official collective way of life and on the other, increasingly differing opinions among the people who are ready to protest against dictatorship and their rising awareness of badly needed individual liberty.
- Between the Party's proclaimed respect for the U.N. Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the Party's reliance on prisons for its security.

Now consider the moral and political weaknesses:

- This regime came to power in 1975 claiming to be committed to rid corruption and Western social decadence, known as the American way of life. Now it is well-known that the new privileged social class, or new masters, cling onto power to gain wealth. Many ranking party and government officials adopt Western values.
- The Party once sought to change the feudal thinking of millions of people at every level of society. Now it buys their tolerance of its monopoly of political power with private business.
- The Party once fought fiercely for national independence. Now Laos is under the influence of Vietnam.
- The Party chanted national unity. Now it arrests pro-democracy advocates, Laotian Christians, and hunts minority ethnic groups, particularly the Lao-Hmong, former CIA combatants during the Vietnam War.
- The Party championed democracy. Now it mandates total acceptance of all its policies.

## ***Do you think foreign countries have contributed to some changes in Laos?***

Sure, they have played a crucial role in Laos's new political, economic and social landscapes. Since the demise of the Soviet Empire in 1991, Laos has lost the socialist bloc's support. To sustain its regime, Laos turns to its former enemies, the capitalist bloc. The free world agrees to help and put pressures on Laotian government for change. Over the years, European Parliament and U.S. Congress have adopted several resolutions urging Laos for reform. And worldwide organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have pushed for democratization, as well as human rights.



*Dr. Bounsang Khamkeo served as Executive Secretary of the Laotian Mekong Committee, the former official trade delegation of the LPDR in Southeast Asia during the 1970s.*

***President Obama declared that Laos had “ceased to be a Marxist-Leninist country”, a designation that prevented financial support by the U.S. Export-Import Bank for businesses operating in Laos. What is your assessment about Laos's current regime?***

Laos's new economic orientation is based on capitalist dogma applied by a communist party that has half an eye on communism and takes over capitalist ideas they condemn in order to ensure its own survival. According to a high-ranking Laotian official in visit in Paris, today Laos takes the worst practices from capitalism and keeps in place the worst practices from socialism.

***Why you advocate and demand democracy and human rights?***

As a former political prisoner of the Party, I understand deeply that we have an extremely short moment of life passing through an endless time. During my stay in this world, I want to do good things as Winston

Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” I cannot be either unrelated to Laos or unconcerned with what is going on in Laos.

Promoting democracy and freedom has nothing to do with revenge. Its essence is rather the safeguarding of human dignity. We live in a global village where we are all connected to each other. So any man's suffering or death diminishes me, because I am part of humanity. Therefore, I want to use the rest of my life, knowledge, experience and network to help in giving dignity back to oppressed Laotian people, solving problems and empowering more people to materialize their dreams.

***Will Laos evolve toward democracy?***

You should pose this question to the Laotian government, not to me. However, I can tell you we have no reason to be pessimistic. Along with some developments, social inequality, serious corruption, human rights violations, human trafficking, and Lao-Hmong ethnic cleansing policy, complex problems in Laos will emerge one by one. I do not believe that Laotian government has the ability to handle these issues without participation of exiled true patriots. If democracy and competitive elections with multiple parties are not allowed to grow freely and the judicial system does not become more independent a serious political crisis will erupt again.

Since the Cold War ended, the general trend was democracy and many developing nations in the world moved toward liberty. Laos is not an exception and Laotian people ask for human rights. This process has been not all smooth sailing. Overall, the speed of democratic movements in Laos is somewhat positive. Today the Politburo members are in a defensive position. They find it difficult to prevent people from organizing for democracy or action and are coming to rely more and more on their ability to attend to the wants and needs of the ever-growing unsatisfied masses. What these masses desire is more foreseeable government transparency, administrative capacity, clean government and fair legal system.

Laotian people inside the country have done their parts in claiming democracy, exiled Laotians have performed their responsibilities as well but they still need international cooperation and assistance. Therefore, democratic countries have moral duty to continue to work to encourage democratization in Laos.

First, Western democratic governments should give higher priority to human rights issues in their Laotian policy. This is not just a matter of ideology; it is a matter of the collective interests of global peace and stability and economic prosperity.

Second, foreign private entrepreneurs doing business in Laos should yield a huge social benefit as well as an economic return on investment if Laotian authorities observe basic human rights.

Third, non-government organizations (NGOs) in Laos that have already demonstrated increasing efficacy in their operations should have a more clear summary analysis of the needs of people and not the Party, and should create more opportunities for an open society and for citizen activism to develop.

***Freedom House's Annual Global Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties of 2009 states Laos is near the bottom of its rating scales. Do you think so?***

I am positive. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Today in Laos, many high-ranking party and government officials have sent their children to study in the USA, France, Canada or Australia, and open bank accounts there. These people say things they do not believe in. They have lost trust in communist leadership. Ask them if there is a radical change in Laos, would they immigrate to live in Vietnam which they love so much?

***According to human rights' groups arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life is still a commonplace in Laos, and prison and detention center conditions are still harsh. What do you think of U.S. Department of State's Human Rights Report on Laos published this year?***



*Laotian dragon at Buddhatham-Aram temple in Portland, Oregon*

From my prison life experience I can tell you that this report is very well documented and describes in detail and with accuracy prison conditions. The current administration is perfectly aware of human rights violation in Laos. This is a positive stand in its Laotian policy. To solve human rights issues in Laos, I hope strongly that this administration will take concrete measures to initiate dialogue between Laotian government and exiled Laotians.

***In November, 2009, there were peaceful protests in Vientiane. What happened to the hundreds of detainees?***

As you know, on that day, around three hundred people tried to converge on Vientiane to petition the government but they were arrested by the police. Among them nine people were put in prison. The petitions related to grievances over loss of land, abuse of power, corruption and lack of economic and social support. Today we still do not know where they are or they are dead. The free world and human rights watch call on the Lao government to release the nine peaceful protesters. Amnesty International considers them as prisoners of conscience, arrested solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression.

Trying to monitor human rights in a closed communist country like Laos is extremely difficult. However, a friend in Paris called and told me that the detainees had been incarcerated first at Sam Khe Prison in Vientiane and might be sent to a remote secret prison soon.

***What do you suggest for the current crisis and what are your means to achieve your goals?***

Every conflict has two losers. Conflict is an enormous failure of understanding, of the possibilities, and a lack of imagination. I believe in dialogue and in democracy, for democracy naturally leads people to negotiate rather than to confrontation.

The concept of using violence to bring peace is not in my mind, for violence breeds only violence. Therefore, I will use peaceful means to achieve my goals for necessary change, but the change must come from insiders and we outsiders only provide moral support.

I understand well that the eleven Politburo members fear any new thinking that challenge their current position. That is mistaken, but even worse, they have been infected with a paranoia that makes them think that is a plot against them. The lies they tell themselves are killing them.

However, to end any conflict, one side must come forward first in a spirit of peace and attempt to bridge the gaps. This does not mean conceding to the others' demands, relinquishing that which is rightfully ours, or abdicating our position of power. It simply means stopping the retaliatory violence and stepping forward—with peace, love and brotherhood in our heart—to work for a peaceful and mutually beneficial solution.

***Can your good cause succeed in the near future, and who are your supporters?***

As I explained earlier at Answer 1, everything evolves in the nature and in human society. My just cause will win, and the half communist and the half capitalist way of governing of the Party will lose. We have a great chance to have a strong Laotian community abroad alongside of us in this long struggle. This dynamic community of 500,000 people has enjoyed a high standing of life, education, skills, and has focused its attention on the problems caused by the ruling communist party. Exiled Laotians are parts of the solution.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic is rather a republic of the Party than a Lao People's Democratic Republic since it's actually a republic that suppresses free thinking and forces people out of their land or put them into prisons. Remember, the Party cannot legitimately represent the Laotian people, nor is the Lao People's Democratic Republic equals to Laos.

The closing ceremony with fireworks of the 2010 SEA Games (South East Asian Olympics) in Vientiane was dramatic, but it cannot camouflage the failure of the governance of the Party. Laotian people are suffering from insecurity, injustice, poverty, and indignity. I continuously hear of oppressed citizens, military and police officers, public civil servants and teachers who have not received their salary for months. I am sent reports from farmers who have lost their lands to the government. I am contacted by former and current political prisoners and their families. And I see the results of the unemployed working class people, who go to work in Thailand, with 35 percent forced into prostitution. These are the people who support me.



*Dr. Bounsang Khamkeo (far left), with some of his local supporters who established the "I Little Slave" film project (left to right): the Venerable Phom Phanthavong, a Buddhist monk at Buddhatham-Aram temple; Dr. Robert Textor, professor emeritus of Anthropology at Stanford University and Southeast Asia expert; Ambassador Harriet Isom, who served as U.S. Ambassador to Benin and Cameroon after serving as Charge d'Affaires in Laos from 1986-1989; and Joel Haugen, former Congressional candidate and high school science teacher who currently owns and operates a digital mapping service; in Portland, Oregon, 2010.*

True patriot Laotians living abroad support me.

World human rights loving people support me.

With the support of oppressed Laotian citizens inside the country, true patriot Laotians living abroad, and world human rights loving people, I am confident that my just cause will prevail. Therefore, I visualize lightning flashes flicker on the horizon in Vientiane, faint but there. I predict a hopeful opening waiting for the triumph of human rights in Laos.

*March, 18, 2010*



For more information about Dr. Khamkeo's work, check out the "Projects" section at *Foreign Interest* ([www.foreigninterest.com](http://www.foreigninterest.com)). To be added to the project's email list, write to: [projects@foreigninterest.com](mailto:projects@foreigninterest.com). Be sure to add "ILS Project" in the subject line of the email.