

Sport as politics and history

The 25th SEA Games in Laos

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Fig. 1. Spectators get into the national mood at the 25th SEA Games in Vientiane, Laos, December 2009.



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1. Siam was renamed Thailand in 1939.
2. For more on the founding of the SEAP Games, see Creak (forthcoming).
3. The Royal Lao Government had been scheduled to host the Games in 1965, but did not so for financial reasons. Not surprisingly, this was never mentioned in 2009.
4. *Vientiane Games*, 2 Dec 2009, p. 1.
5. Criticism was strongest on a blog called 25th SEA Games Laos (<http://25thseagames.blogspot.com/>), but the most vituperative comments were taken down before the Games began.
6. At the time of writing, the project has reportedly been moved altogether, to a location near the new National Stadium. *Vientiane Times*, 21 Jul. 2010.

Like the 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi and the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, the 2009 Southeast Asian (SEA) Games held in Vientiane were widely heralded in their host country as evidence of national achievement and progress. Yet, just like these much larger global sporting events, controversies threatened to turn the pride of the Games into embarrassment. Of particular concern was the fact that, despite significantly reducing the size of the Games, Laos – one of the smallest and poorest countries in Southeast Asia – depended greatly on foreign help to conduct them, especially from China.

As it turned out, the 2009 SEA Games were a grand, spectacular and unprecedentedly popular success for the country. Promoted as both a means and evidence of national development under the auspices of the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party, the Games reinforced the power of sport to consolidate nationalism, despite its paradoxes in Laos.

History of the SEA Games

The SEA Games grew out of the Southeast Asian Peninsula (SEAP) Games, founded by Thailand as a 'Little Asian Games' in the late 1950s. The event has been held every other year since 1959 (except 1963), in the 'odd' years between the Olympics and the Asian Games. Thailand's Olympic Committee established the Games with two objectives in mind: to increase the standard of sport and to promote regional solidarity.

Membership of the SEAP Games 'family' was restricted, however. Firstly, the Games were, as the name suggested, limited to peninsular Southeast Asia – Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Malaya, South Vietnam and Thailand. The one exception to this rule was Singapore, which was included. This conception of the region stemmed from notions of regional dominance embedded in Thai history. The Thai name for the event (*kila laem thong*) incorporated the geographical term *laem thong* – the 'Golden Peninsula'. As a character in a 1937 play by nationalist author Luang Wichit Wathakan declared: 'all of us on the Golden Peninsula are

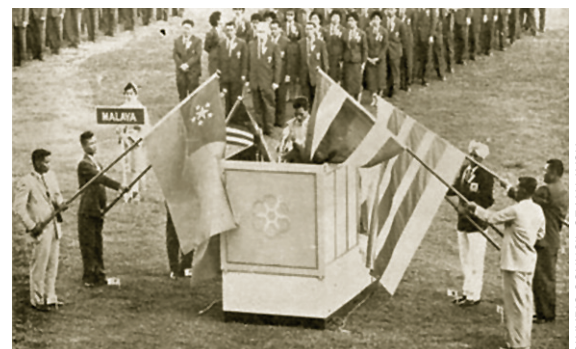
the same... [but] the Siamese Thais are the elder brothers' (Baker & Pasuk 2005: 129).¹ The second factor was Cold War anti-communism. Participants were either non-aligned (Burma, Cambodia) or anti-communist (the others), while North Vietnam, the only communist country on the 'Golden Peninsula', was absent. In short, the SEAP Games were founded on the basis of Thai-centric anti-communist regionalism in mainland Southeast Asia.²

Since then the Games have adapted to broader changes in the region. After Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam withdrew due to the revolutionary upheaval of 1975, the event was expanded to include Indonesia, the Philippines and Brunei. With the exception of Brunei, the countries participating in the renamed 'Southeast Asian Games' were members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the region's anti-communist bloc formed in 1967. Anti-communism also faded over time. Foreshadowing ASEAN's expansion in the following decade, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam rejoined the Games in the 1980s. These days the SEA Games include the ten ASEAN countries plus Timor Leste.

Echoing John MacAloon's (1984) foundational work on Olympic spectacle, the SEA Games have embodied changing ideas of regionalism while also providing opportunities to assert nationalism and act out the region's many rivalries (Figs 2-3). Together with the global and civilizing

Fig. 2 (below). Five issues of the SEAP Games Bulletin, 1959.

Fig. 3 (right). Pronouncing the SEAP Games oath, Bangkok 1959.



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Fig. 4 (top). Chairman of the 25th SEA Games Organizing Committee, Somsavat Lengsavat, on the cover of a commemorative issue of Target (November 2009), a Lao business magazine.

Fig. 5 (below). The official logo of the Vientiane 2009 SEA Games in Laos featuring the That Luang stupa, the most important Buddhist monument in Laos and the national symbol.

image of sport, this blend of national and regional themes seems to account for the event's endurance and adaptability over the past 50 years.

Excitement and controversy

Hosted by Laos for the first time, the 2009 SEA Games were embraced as a moment of national and nationalist triumph.³ The head of the Organizing Committee, Deputy Prime Minister and former Foreign Minister Somsavat Lengsavat (Fig. 4), declared that hosting would 'showcase the fine tradition of the country', boost tourism and attract foreign investment. Lao people could be 'proud that the Lao People's Democratic Republic has received the privilege and trust from SEA Games member countries to be the host' for the first time (Somsavat 2009: 33).

With almost 5,000 athletes participating in 25 sports and 383 events, the Games would be the country's biggest state spectacle in living memory, perhaps ever. A spokesman said: 'The SEA Games in Laos is a magnificent example of what sports can do... and Laos has joined the giants in this respect' (Thangarajah 2009). Despite the obvious difference in size, Vientiane 2009 was portrayed as a regional coming-out party, just as Beijing 2008 – still fresh in the memory – had announced China's emergence as a global power. More specifically, the SEA Games constituted a regional debut for the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, which has maintained a monopoly on power since the revolution of 1975. Somsavat reflected: 'The SEA Games is an important way of showing the development of Laos over the last 34 years'.⁴

Indeed, 'development' was the key theme of the Games. The Lao National Sports Committee's 'New Millennium' sports plan of 1999 stated that hosting the SEA Games was part of the country's socio-economic development plan. While the developmental benefits of the Games were not explained, sport is officially associated with 'development' and 'civilization' in Laos. The Games would supposedly embody these characteristics, and associate them with the ruling party-state.

More obliquely, the entire SEA Games endeavour resembled a huge development project of the sort that dominates Lao government rhetoric and activity. The event required the mobilization of substantial amounts of foreign capital to build facilities, including a US\$100 million Chinese-funded National Sports Complex on the outskirts of Vientiane (Fig. 6), a \$19m Vietnam-funded athletes' village (Fig. 7), and smaller stadia financed by the Asian Olympic Committee, South Korea, Thailand, Japan and Brunei. Roads and other infrastructure were also funded externally, especially by China. Each of these

'projects' (*khongkan*) was opened in a formal 'handover ceremony' (*phithi mop-hap*), of the kind that fills the state press whenever a dam, road or school is opened. Further reinforcing the feeling that the Games were a massive development project, government pronouncements repeatedly urged public 'solidarity' in hosting the Games (cf. High 2006).

Perhaps inevitably, however, the lead-up to the SEA Games was also blighted by controversy. In return for funding the new stadium complex, Chinese developers were granted a concession to develop a large parcel (reportedly 1,640 hectares) of prime land in Vientiane. The site was a stone's throw from the That Luang stupa, the country's most important Buddhist monument and national symbol, which featured, ironically enough, in the SEA Games logo (Fig. 5). With little official information available, rumours circulated that the development was intended to be an exclusive 'Chinatown' for 50,000 Chinese residents. Fuelled by anti-Chinese xenophobia and fears of inadequate compensation, public opposition prompted Somsavat to defend the plans in a rare news conference (McCartan 2008, Stuart-Fox 2009: 142–3).

This intervention did little to allay fears, however, and the stadium deal rapidly came to epitomise a far less positive side to state development policies in Laos. Web critics accused Somsavat of 'treason' (*khai sat*), based on the perception that his Chinese heritage made him unduly favourable to Chinese interests.⁵ The proposed development was scaled back but this raised the spectre of more debt when, already, state employees hadn't been paid for months because of the Games.⁶ One disgusted research informant denounced the government as a leech on society, 'sucking the people's blood'.

The small size of the Games also sparked controversy. Even with such substantial foreign assistance, limited facilities meant only 25 events were scheduled for Laos, compared with 43 events in Thailand in 2007. While Olympic sports such as gymnastics and basketball were cut, foreign journalists ridiculed the inclusion of novelty events such as fin swimming, in which swimmers motor along using a dolphin-like flipper (Letchumanan 2008).

Organizers played down the small size of the Games, employing the slogan that there were '25 events for the 25th SEA Games in Laos', and in reality all SEA Games feature eccentric events – usually ones the host expects to win.⁷ But regional rivals were unimpressed. Malaysia's sports minister dismissed the Lao event as a 'community games' (Singh 2009) while the Bernama press agency suggested the SEA Games were losing their 'glamour'. Organizers countered that Laos was 'a poor country with

Fig. 6 (below left). The new National Stadium, part of the US\$100m Lao National Sports Complex funded by a Chinese consortium in return for a development concession in central Vientiane – later moved to a less sensitive site.

Fig. 7 (below right). Entrance to the US\$19m SEA Games Village, funded by a Vietnamese company, reportedly in return for logging concessions and a hotel deal.





Fig. 8 (top left). Unofficial merchandise stalls sell counterfeit goods at low prices.

Fig. 9 (top middle). The slogan reads Lao su su! (Laos go go!).

Figs 10-12 (from top right to below). Fans get into the spirit.

7. *Vientiane Games*, 2 Dec. 2009, p. 1.

8. Prices were in Lao kip. These are approximate conversions.

9. In English, Somsavat was the 'chairman' of the Organizing Committee; in Lao he was *pathan* – 'president' or 'chief'.

10. *Viangchan gaem*, 8 Dec. 2009, p. 6 (in Lao); *Vientiane Games*, 8 Dec. 2009, p. 1 (in English).

11. For post-socialism in Laos, see Evans (1995: xi-xxxii).

12. Though difficult to confirm, it is possible that fans were taking their lead from Thailand, where portraits of the king have been a ubiquitous presence in recent years of political crisis.

13. *Viangchan mai*, 18 Dec. 2009, p. 1.

limited facilities' (Petty 2009), but this undermined the notion of national development championed by the ruling party. The *New York Times* summed it all up in one headline: 'Laos stumbles on path to sporting glory' (Fuller 2009).

Participating in national success

How, given these concerns, did the SEA Games in Laos turn out to be such a national triumph? The answer lies in the power of sporting events to create nationalist fervour that is both popular and participatory. I cannot say if individual pre-Games critics, such as residents near That Luang, changed their minds during the event itself. But the Games triggered widespread popular enthusiasm when, even days before, a lack of interest and derision had threatened to derail the entire undertaking.

From senior National Sports Committee officials to fans and market traders, Laotians repeated simply that they were 'proud' (*phum chai*) – not only to be hosting the SEA Games, but particularly proud of the Lao team, which won 33 gold, 25 silver and 52 bronze medals. The headline figure of 33 golds comfortably exceeded what had seemed an ambitious target of 25 – again for the 25th SEA Games! – and smashed its previous best of five in 2007. Like hosting the event itself, the phenomenal haul of medals was made possible by extensive foreign support, especially in the form of coaches and training camps, but this mattered little to fans. Though it failed to win a medal, the men's football team epitomized Laos's success, capturing the country's imagination as it made the semi-finals for the first time in decades. Star striker Lamnao Singto became an instant national hero, scoring twice against Indonesia to take the team through.

Throughout the Games national colours and nationalist imagery were ubiquitous in shirts, flags and slogans. Enterprising locals set up roadside stalls selling counterfeit goods (Figs 8-12). At less than one US dollar for a headband or a small flag, a few dollars for a shirt, and five for a large flag or twenty for a massive one, these goods were far more affordable than official merchandise.⁸ Participation was oral and aural. En masse at events and after football matches, fans chanted 'Lao su su! Lao su su! Lao su su!' ('Laos, go go!' or, literally, 'Laos, fight fight!'). This slogan became the rhythm of the Games as people clapped, blew horns and beat drums in time with it. Like all good slogans, it was also printed on t-shirts, headbands, and even cars. Blanket television coverage took participation into restaurants, markets and homes, not only in Vientiane but throughout the country. Even the phenomenon of Lao people watching Lao television was notable: the much slicker Thai TV is usually far more popular.

Support for the Games blurred the usual distinction between official and popular nationalism. The crowd erupted on several occasions when Somsavat's face was flashed onto the screen at the National Stadium or his name announced by officials. After winning gold in taekwondo, Phouthavong Outhasak instantly scaled the grandstand to embrace Somsavat first – and only then his parents. While the SEA Games united athletes, fans, organizers and politicians as participants in national success, Somsavat was literally and symbolically their 'chief' (*pathan*).⁹

These many forms of participation gave substance to the abstract concept of the nation. They constituted 'strategies of substantialization... through which "the imagined" becomes... a "structure of feeling" embodied in material

Alonso, A.M. 1994. The politics of space, time and substance: State formation, nationalism and ethnicity. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23, 379-405.

Baker, C. & P. Pasuk Phongpaichit 2005. *A history of Thailand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bernama 2009. Is the SEA Games losing its glamour? *Bernama*, 4 Mar. Available at http://www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v3/news_sports.php?id=394003 (accessed 4 Mar. 2009).

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Ekaphone Phouthonesy 2010. China surpasses Thailand as biggest investor in Laos. *Vientiane Times*, 16 Jul. Available at <http://laovoices.com/2010/07/16/china-surpasses-thailand-as-biggest-investor-in-laos/> (accessed 23 Nov. 2010).

Evans, G. 1995. *Laos peasants under socialism and post-socialism*. Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books.

– 1998. *The politics of ritual and remembrance: Laos since 1975*. Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books.

– 2002. Revolution and royal style: Problems of post-socialist legitimacy in Laos. In: Shore, C. & S. Nugent (eds). *Elite cultures – anthropological perspectives*, pp. 189–206. London: Routledge.

Fuller, T. 2009. Laos stumbles on path to sporting glory. *New York Times*, 5 Oct. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/06/world/asia/06laos.html> (accessed 6 Oct. 2009).

Grabowsky, V. & O. Tappe 2011. 'Important kings of Laos': Translation and analysis of a cartoon pamphlet. *Journal of Lao Studies*, 2(1): 1-44.

High, H. 2006. 'Join together, work together for the common good – solidarity': Village formation processes in the rural south of Laos. *Sojourn* 21: 22-45.

practice and lived experience' (Alonso 1994: 282). The zeal for the Games was especially striking as state-sponsored efforts to promote nationalism and revolutionary fervour in Laos have historically fallen flat (Evans 1998).

Remembering and forgetting

At another level of nationalist expression, fans and organizers invoked the memories of noted kings and revolutionary leaders, mythologized in recent years as national 'ancestors' (*banphabulut*) (Grabowsky & Tappe 2011). Football spectators held banners hailing players as 'descendants' (*luk lan*) of King Fangum, founder of the 14th-century Lao kingdom of Lane Xang, regarded in Lao history as the antecedent to the modern nation. After Laos beat Indonesia, the Lao-language *SEA Games* newsletter boasted: 'Fangum's descendants fought with all their heart to snatch victory'. The reference was omitted from the English-language report, presumably because it only held significance for the Lao.¹⁰ Chao Anouvong, the Vientiane king captured and killed after invading Siam early in the 19th century, was also remembered in the new name of the old National Stadium in central Vientiane. Like the statues of Fangum and Anouvong which have been erected in recent years, the new name exemplifies the increasing

'exploitation of Buddhist royalty' in post-socialist official Lao history (Tappe 2010).¹¹

Revolutionary leaders also featured prominently in the form of framed portraits (Figs 13-15). Like many other Lao athletes, boxer Milvady Hongfa clutched a portrait of Kaysone Phomvihane as she received her silver medal. Celebrating in the same way, her family in the crowd said they admired Kaysone as he was from Savannakhet, their home town in southern Laos. But this connection was lost on the crowd, who cheered simply for the man who, according to official Lao history, led the fight for 'liberation'. While portraits of revolutionary figures and current leaders are common in public buildings, public displays like these are unusual in Laos.¹²

Scholars have drawn attention to the 'inherently ambivalent' project of combining royalist and revolutionary motifs in the writing of state history (Grabowsky & Tappe, 2011). The birth of the revolutionary party-state consigned the monarch and the monarchy to a miserable end, severing Laos's strongest symbolic tie to pre-colonial royalty. But mass events like the SEA Games help to normalize the royal/revolutionary hybrid in the writing of post-socialist history, reinforcing the 'historical continuity' between royal and revolutionary heroes that the regime seeks to



Fig. 13. *Faces in the crowd.* Portraits of former party leaders (L-R): Kaysone Phomvihane, Nouhak Phoumsavanh and Khamtay Siphandone. Only Khamtay is still alive.

Fig. 14. *Boxing silver medallist, Milvady Hongfa clutches a portrait of Kaysone Phomvihane.*

Fig. 15. *Milvady's proud family with the same portrait.*

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Fig. 16. Overseas Lao delegations meet with the Lao PM, Bouasone Bouphavanh (centre). Note the Kaysone Phomvihane bust behind him, flanked by the national and hammer-and-sickle flags [Vientiane mai, 18 Dec 2009, p. 1]

emphasize (ibid.). Intellectual contradictions remain, of course, but these detract little from the social and cultural force of the royal/revolutionary story.

The SEA Games even drew tentatively on the pre-revolutionary period of royalist government (1949-75), which official history usually condemns as ‘neo-colonial’. This remembering required strategic acts of forgetting. Before the Games, Somsavat celebrated Laos as a ‘founding father’ of the SEA Games in 1959, but omitted the fact that ‘Laos’ had been the Kingdom of Laos, not the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. While such omissions are hardly surprising, it is unusual for the Royal Lao Government period to be acknowledged in positive terms.

The government also invited delegations of overseas Lao communities – formed from refugees who had escaped Laos after the revolution – to share in the ‘pride’ of the Lao SEA Games. At this moment of ‘national glory’, there was again one Laos and one national community, centred on the Lao homeland. Rapprochement could be intensely emotional: some visitors, returning to Laos for the first time, ‘cried with joy’ at the opening ceremony. Still, reconciliation took place strictly on the party’s terms, reinforcing its position as sole guardian of the Lao past. When Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh held a reception for the overseas delegations, delegates assembled beneath a Kaysone bust flanked by the national hammer-and-sickle flags (Fig. 16).¹³ According to one guest, Bouasone then treated the visitors to a lengthy monologue on the party-state’s ‘achievements’, a staple of official functions.

Like the portraits of dead revolutionary heroes, Kaysone’s gaze and Bouasone’s treatise encapsulated a sobering reality of the SEA Games. While the festive mood of the event resonated with the public, it was just as much a boon to the one-party regime that runs the country.

Laos in the region

The SEA Games are a regional event whose objective is to consolidate regionalism in Southeast Asia. Based on similar ideals of Olympic internationalism, this merits detailed examination. Here, however, I wish to focus on how universal themes of international solidarity have been embedded in regional histories.

A striking example occurred in a football match between Laos’s two larger neighbours, Thailand and Vietnam. Bedecked in red and yellow, the crowd cheered Vietnam as if it were the home team, booing the Thai team and the referee in equal measure (Fig. 17). Although Vietnamese tour companies had reportedly snapped up large bundles of

tickets, many, perhaps most, of the fans cheering Vietnam were Lao. A few I spoke to were of Vietnamese descent (as are many Lao), but many more said simply that they ‘hate Thailand more than Vietnam’. One woman said Thailand was ‘hard’ (*khaeng*) while Vietnam was ‘soft’ (*on*). Others said Vietnam and Laos were *ai nong kan*, (‘older brother/younger brother’), since both are communist.

On the face of it, these responses mirrored official policy. Whereas Laos’s ‘special relationship’ with Vietnam leaves little public space to express anti-Vietnamese feeling, Thailand is the opposite, having historically been the foil for Lao nationalism. But everyday attitudes contradict these positions. On the one hand, Lao people are often privately rude, and even racist, about their Vietnamese ‘brothers’; on the other, they share many cultural similarities with the Thais, consume Thai television on a daily basis, cross the border to work illegally or shop and, in many cases, have relatives living in northeast Thailand.

More importantly, then, the football match showed how people personalize national history. The Lao I spoke to were vociferous in their support for Vietnam, unanimously nominating it as their second team. This support was far too impassioned to be simply aping the official line. By contrast, research informants said they were sick of Thailand ‘looking down on’ (*du thuk*) them as uncivilized ‘country dwellers’ (*ban nok*). One fan told me: ‘We understand the Thais... the Thai and Lao languages are ninety per cent the same. But Lao people get along well with the Vietnamese’. Another informant, a friend of mine, couldn’t believe Thai TV’s shock at the anti-Thai attitudes: ‘I say you’re right [that we hate Thailand]! You didn’t know?’ Hosting the SEA Games – especially at a time of political crisis in Thailand – facilitated public expression of anti-Thai sentiment.

Passionate booing and declarations of ‘hate’ were also reminders that sport can give expression to a darker kind of nationalism. Here, however, something else seems to have been happening. Far more important to the Lao than to the Thais, the Lao/Thai relationship is defined by cultural and geographical proximity (along most of their long border the two countries are separated only by the Mekong River). Lao people may resent (perceived) Thai attitudes of superiority, but Thailand is an unavoidable and often positive part of everyday life in lowland Laos. Rather than hatred, this closeness has bred a love/hate relationship with Thai domination, especially since market-based reforms and the ‘re-traditionalization’ of the communist regime from the late 1980s has ‘blurred... the cultural boundary between the two countries’ (Evans 2002: 202). Informants laughed as they expressed their ‘hatred’ for Thailand, capturing this ambivalence. If indeed we define ourselves in terms of boundaries, booing Thailand and supporting Vietnam (which is much further away, geographically and culturally) defined the Lao of Vientiane as Lao and not Thai. As forms of national boundary-marking go, such actions are fairly safe and innocuous.

Dependence, autonomy and national success

The festival mood of the SEA Games was contagious, building perceptibly as the event progressed. By the Games’ end even the press of the wider region had joined in the chorus, hailing the success of the Games and urging other countries to learn from Laos (*Nation* 2009).

Yet, beneath the colour and excitement, this ‘success’ was mixed. On the one hand, the Games created an inclusive and joyous expression of national pride in a country where this has been rare. In this sense, the Lao youth, who embraced the Games especially strongly, had the opportunity to enjoy a euphoric and unusual experience. But the other big winner was the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, an authoritarian one-party regime that brooks no

Letchumanan, J. 2008. Laos want sports like shuttlecock, fin swimming in 2009 SEA Games. *Bernama*, 28 Apr. <http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v5/newsindex.php?id=329433> (accessed 29 Apr. 2008).

MacAloon, J. 1984. Olympic Games and the theory of spectacle in modern societies. In: MacAloon, J. (ed). *Rite, drama, festival, spectacle: Rehearsals toward a theory of cultural performance*, pp. 241–80. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.

McCartan, B. 2008. New-age Chinatown has Laotians on edge. *Asia Times Online*, 26 Jul. Available at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/JG26Ae02.html (accessed 19 Nov. 2009).

Nation 2009. First-time SEA Games host gives us a lesson or two. *Nation*, 22 Dec. Available at http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2009/12/22/opinion/opinion_30118918.php (accessed 22 Dec. 2009).

Petty, M. 2009. Games – Laos asks for support after ‘community games’ jibe. Reuters (accessed 12 Jan. 2009).

Singh, J. 2009. Minister gives SEA games thumbs down. *New Straits Times*, 4 Jan. http://www.nst.com.my/Current_News/NST/Sunday/Sport/2443329/ (accessed 12 Jan. 2009).



Fig. 17. Pro-Vietnamese crowd at Vietnam-Thailand football match.

Somsavat Lengsavad 2009. Interview given by H.E. Mr Somsavat Lengsavad, Standing Deputy Prime Minister, Chairman of the 25th SEA Games Organizing Committee. *Target* 40: 28-33.

Stuart-Fox, M. 2009. Laos: The Chinese connection. *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2009: 141-69.

Tappe, O. 2010. Inflation and iconography: The new 100,000 kip banknote in Laos. *New Mandala*. Available at <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2010/11/19/inflation-and-iconography-the-new-100000-kip-banknote-in-laos/> (accessed 19 Nov. 2010).

Thangarajah, E. 2009. Land-locked Laos ready to perform its sports miracle. *Bangkok Post*, 30 Aug. Available at <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/sports/22948/land-locked-laos-ready-to-perform-its-sports-miracle> (accessed 30 Aug. 2009).

opposition or dissent. Though the Chinese development at That Luang was ultimately relocated, the original plan was a reminder that senior officials often act unilaterally in Laos – against the advice of local authorities and certainly against the interests of the ‘people’ mentioned in the party’s name. The spontaneous joy of the Games may have momentarily united Lao across the country, but this glow soon faded into the everyday realities of authoritarian politics in Laos.

Though particularly in evidence in Laos, this double-edged quality is typical of major international sporting events. What made the Lao SEA Games especially fascinating was that the success of the Games – however this is defined – depended so heavily on foreign assistance.

This paradox is a reminder that the Lao have a long history of reconciling local dependence with autonomy. Lao kingdoms retained significant autonomy while paying tribute to one or more overlords; far from destroying Laos, French colonialism created the foundations of modern cultural nationalism along with the territory itself; the Royal Lao Government built upon this base, despite being subjected to the regional rivalries and crises of the Cold War; and, when their turn came in 1975, the Lao communists turned to Vietnam and the Soviet Union as they reshaped Lao nationalism along socialist lines. The enduring theme in this history has been the creation and consolidation of national identities through engagement with and dependence on foreign powers.

Building upon this heritage, the SEA Games reflected the party’s post-socialist strategy of fostering development through regional integration, foreign investment and foreign aid. In their conception, the Games were an explicit part of the National Sports Committee’s ‘New Millennium’ objective of fusing sport with national development; in

their funding, they followed the pattern of other foreign investment in Laos, the vast majority of which comes from Thailand, Vietnam and now most of all China (Ekaphone 2010). Indeed, despite not competing in a single event, China was the most important foreign country at the SEA Games. Its role demonstrated the irony that the regional grouping participating in the SEA Games (ASEAN) was different from the regional affiliation that largely funded them, and underscored China’s growing importance in contemporary Laos.

The balance between local dependence and autonomy can appear uneasy at times, threatening to collapse under the weight of its contradictions. The growing Chinese presence is no different. While investment in Laos offers capital and know-how, anti-Chinese sentiments raise uncomfortable questions about national sovereignty. Such concerns were highlighted in the ‘Chinatown’ controversy but are also more widespread, particularly in the north of Laos, where vast rubber concessions have been granted to Chinese investors. The Chinatown controversy showed that a tipping point exists, at which, though initially welcomed, externally funded development starts to be seen as a threat and local involvement with it viewed as ‘treason’.

Yet far from being undermined by these contradictions, the Lao party-state ultimately revelled in the SEA Games, projecting itself as the all-powerful and benevolent conductor of foreign forces, rather than a victim of them. In this world view, Laos’s foreign dependence demonstrated not a worrying lack of autonomy but an abundance of skill in harnessing investment and aid from the wider region. Thanks to this assistance, the Games became an unprecedented moment of national and nationalist success, not just for Laos and its people, but most of all for the ruling post-socialist regime. ●