

LAOS

Hmong

Activity: 1953-2020

General notes

NA

Movement start and end dates

- The Hmong called for the establishment of an independent state in a rebellion in 1919. The insurrection ended in 1921 with the establishment of an autonomous district by the French and by the early 1920s “mutual trust had developed, and the Hmong became mostly pro-French” (Minahan 2002: 741).
- We found no self-determination activity until after WWII. According to Marshall & Gurr (2003: 6), the movement re-emerged in 1945. Since Laos did not become independent from France until 1953 we code the movement from 1953.
- Violence, partly for ideological motives and partly motivated by self-determination, continued for decades after 1953 (see below). Minahan (2002: 741) reports an independence declaration in 1966. Baird (2018: 35) suggests that a rebel group called Chao Fa aimed at the establishment of “a Hmong state or Hmong autonomous area” (Baird 2018: 35). UCDP reports that an organization named ELEO (“Ethnic Liberation Organisation of Laos”) has made claims for regional autonomy for the Hmong.
- While the movement is no longer violent, it is ongoing (Hewitt et al. 2008; Lee 1982; Marshall & Gurr 2003, 2005; Minahan 2002; MAR; Scott 1990; UCDP; RFA 2021). [start date: 1945; end date: ongoing]

Dominant claim

- The pursuit of an independent Hmong state seems to have been the dominant claim or at least long term goal. Already during the 1919 rebellion, the Hmong had called for the establishment of an independent state. Further evidence of a claim for independence is provided by the 1966 declaration of independence of Meoland, an independent Hmong homeland in southern and central Laos (Minahan 2002; Minorities at Risk Project). Global Security also states that some Hmong are secession-minded.
- Note: The Minorities at Risk Project states that most of the tribals seek autonomy, and not self-rule, for Hmong-majority areas. This is corroborated by Baird (2018) and UCDP. Overall, the evidence we found suggests that independence was the dominant claim; or at least both were similarly prominent. In either case, we would code independence as the dominant claim. [1953-2020: independence claim]

Independence claims

- As established, independence claims have been present since 1919 (Minahan 2002) and also after 1953 (Baird 2018) – with the attempt to establish an independent “Meoland” in 1966 (Roth 2015). In 1985 Chao Fa was reorganized into the Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos (ELEO) and sought to “establish an autonomous region for the Hmong” in the northern provinces of Laos (Photius 1994). The strategic aims of the group do not contradict the existence of independence claims – although we note that the movement has increasingly embraced the idea of autonomy in

recent years (Minahan 2002). More recently, the “Hmong ChaoFa federated state” and the “Hmong Kingdom ChaoFa State” have called for the creation of a Hmong state that is two-thirds the size of present-day Laos. [start date: 1945; end date: ongoing]

Irredentist claims

NA

Claimed territory

- This territorial claim remains highly ambiguous. The Hmongs are located in northern Laos, primarily in the Vietnam-Laos border area. Under French colonial rule, the Hmong had agitated for a separate state, to which the French responded by creating an autonomous district in the region bordering Vietnam, which did not survive post-independence (Roth 2015: 365). In 1966, Hmong attempted to establish an independent “Meoland” in central and southern Laos, with backing from the CIA (Roth 2015; MAR). This attempt failed, and the Hmong have faced severe and lasting repression from the Laotian government due to their perceived association with the USA (MAR; UNPO 2017). It seems that in part due to this repression, Hmong have been reluctant to make explicit claims for territorial autonomy or secession. The clearest territorial claims come from two groups named the “Hmong ChaoFa federated state” and the “Hmong Kingdom ChaoFa State”, which have called for the partition of Laos along highway 8 at the 18 degree parallel (Hmong Chao Fa State 2020; Hmong Chaofa Federation State 2008). This would result in a Hmong state that is more than half the size of present-day Laos. It is unclear how representative this relatively recent claim is of the broader movement, but we code it nonetheless due to a lack of better information, but we flag this claim as ambiguous. We base our coding on the maps published by the aforementioned organizations, using data on the administrative units flagged in these maps from the Global Administrative Areas database (GADM 2019).

Sovereignty declarations

- In 1966, the Hmong declared the independence of Meoland, an independent Hmong homeland in southern and central Laos (Minahan 2002; Minorities at Risk Project). [1966: declaration of independence]

Separatist armed conflict

- In SDM 1.0, we coded HVIOLSD in 1960-1961 and 1963-1973. However, the first war involved two (at least initially) Communist groups, Pathet Lao and the Neutralists, who in 1960-1961 fought against the Royalist government, and in 1963-1973 the Pathet Lao fought against the government. Scott (1990: 116) notes that the Hmong fought the Pathet Lao guerillas and North Vietnamese regular forces in their homeland, particularly from 1960-1964, and in the process incurred over 30,000 casualties; this suggests the Hmong were involved in the violence, but not on the rebel side.
 - o Note: Marschall & Gurr (2003) code armed conflict in 1945-1974 while the MAR rebellion score is above two in 1955-1974. However, the Marschall & Gurr (2003) coding notes make clear this was due to Hmong resistance to the Communists, who at the time were not in power. This is not separatist violence as defined here, therefore.
- In 1975, Pathet Lao took over the government. Sambanis & Schulhofer-Wohl (2019) code a civil war in 1976-1979. Most of the violence occurred in 1976-1977 according to SSW: “Throughout 1976 and 1977 there was fighting between small rebel groups in the South and North. In South: resistance fighters entered through Thailand. In North, CIA’s Hmong “Secret Army” was active (Stuart-Fox 1997, 177). Most of the Hmong resistance is attributed to those who were part of the

Chao Fa, new religious resistance group led by Pa Kao Her in early 1976. Members of the Chao Fa were originally part of the “secret army” led by Vang Pao (Stuart-Fox 2008, 130). Hamilton-Merritt suggests that the Chao Fa mysticism grew out of desperation in the face of chemical attacks by the government (Hamilton-Merritt 381). According to Stuart-Fox, the group was active in 1976-1977 before many fled to Thailand as a result of government reprisals.”

- The SSW coding notes suggest that the HVIOLSD threshold is met for the Hmong dyad, though a substantial number of deaths was caused by genocidal tactics of the government.
- While most of the violence appears to have occurred in 1976-1977, SSW follow COW and extend the civil war code to 1979.
- UCDP/PRIO treats this as a conflict over government (and only covers the conflict in 1989-90). However, obtaining autonomy for Hmong-majority areas is a goal shared by most of the tribals. In addition to seeking greater opportunities to improve their economic status, group members are concerned about protecting the opportunity to practice their religion and culture. We code the violence as ambiguous due to mixed motives.
- The SSW coding notes suggest that low-level conflict may have started already already in 1975 (possibly even 1974, though Pathet Lao was not formally in power then, suggesting this would not count as LVIOLSD): “1974-1975: Violence began with Pathet Lao fighting against the Hmong, but the Hmong quickly evacuated and fled to Thailand. Souvanna Phouma also “[wished] to avoid bloodshed,” and thus concessions to Pathet Lao were made along the way. The student demonstration in May was not put down by the government, and Souvanna Phouma was criticized for his “role in facilitating the Pathet Lao seizure of power” (Stuart-Fox 1997 161).” However, the evidence is too ambiguous. [1953-1975: NVIOLSD; 1976-1979: HVIOLSD]
- In the early 1980s, Hmong insurgency seems to have been minimal. By 1979, the Hmong rebel groups had fled to Thailand to escape the war, and “about one-third of the entire Hmong population eventually fled the country” (Stuart-Fox 1997: 177). According to Lee (1982), the Hmong resistance had largely petered out by 1979 due to government-led atrocities. Vang Pao of the “secret army” formed the Lao National Liberation Front (LNLF) in 1981, but only launched small-scale sporadic attacks. None of our sources suggests separatist violence above the threshold. [1980-1984: NVIOLSD]
- Marshall & Gurr (2005) report that armed conflict restarted in 1985. MAR’s rebellion score is four between 1985-1996, indicating “small-scale guerilla activity”. However, UCDP/PRIO codes a low-level armed conflict involving a group called LRM (Lao Resistance Movement) in only two years: 1989-1990 (LRM is Hmong-dominated). According to UCDP/PRIO, those are the only years in which the 25-deaths threshold was met; this is the best information we could find and we therefore follow UCDP here.
- Hewitt et al. (2008) suggest continued LVIOLSD until 2004 and, possibly, even 2006; however, case evidence suggests that the Hmong insurgency, while continuing at very low and sporadic intensity, had effectively ended (see e.g. UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia). We therefore code an end to LVIOLSD in 1996. We code the LVIOLSD period as over mixed motive as UCDP considers it a conflict over government.
- There was a massacre in April 2006, but this was an instance of one-sided violence against the Hmong (see Amnesty International).
- We found several reports for violence after 2012 but no reports for separatist violence above the threshold.
 - RFA (2021) reported an incident in November 2015 involving an armed group likely to be Hmong and government troops resulting in the deaths of four civilians and three soldiers (RFA, 2021).
 - By 2017, shelling of Hmong locations was reported to have intensified, but the same article also highlights the group’s dwindling numbers and their lack of capacity to fight back (Made 2017).
 - UNPO (2018) reports a violent incident between 15 – 23 October 2018 that resulted in the deaths of at least five Hmong Chao Fa.
 - UNPO and RFA report an escalation of violence in 2021, but this is beyond our temporal threshold.
- [1985-1988: NVIOLSD; 1989-1990: LVIOLSD; 1991-2020: NVIOLSD]

Historical context

- The Hmong have been pushed southwards by expanding Han Chinese over the course of hundreds of years. There were regular wars between the Chinese and the Hmong, particularly during the Qing dynasty in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hundreds of thousands of the Hmong settled in the South-East Asian countries of Vietnam, Laos, Burma and Thailand (Minahan 2002; Minorities at Risk Project; Minority Rights Group International)
- At the end of the nineteenth century the French took control of Laos and Vietnam. The French granted the Hmong a semi-autonomous status but required taxes and labor. In 1919 the Hmong rebelled against French taxes, forced labor and the colonial authority's attempt to control opium production. The rebellion was called the Chao Fa rebellion (meaning "Lord of the Sky") (Roth 2015: 364). The rebellion was ended in 1921 and the Hmong were granted an autonomous area near the Vietnamese-Laotian border. The Hmong turned pro-French and during Japanese occupation, a larger fraction supported France in taking back the territory (Minahan 2002; Minorities at Risk Project; Minority Rights Group International).

Concessions and restrictions

- During the Vietnam War, the Hmong, who saw communism as a threat to their autonomy, were recruited by the United States to form a secret army to fight the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao. According to Prados (2006), the Hmong had a semi-autonomous status during this period. Following the Pathet Lao victory in 1975, the communists took revenge on the Hmong for their collaboration with American forces. Hmong groups resisted at first but eventually retreated into the hills (UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia; UNPO 2008). This was accompanied by political, economic, cultural and social discrimination of the Hmong (Minorities at Risk Project). Furthermore, the Hmong's semi-autonomous status appears to have been abolished in 1975 as we found no reference to an autonomous status (autonomy) beyond 1975. Hence, we code an autonomy restriction in 1975. [1975: autonomy restriction]
- In 2003, the Laotian government amended the Constitution so as to protect inter-ethnic solidarity and equality "irrespective of ethnic group" (Article 35). However, no concrete steps seem to have followed, so we do not code a concession (see Minority Rights Group International).

Regional autonomy

- The Hmong only had a semi-autonomous status until 1975. This is not enough for us to code them as regionally autonomous. This is confirmed by EPR, which does not code the Hmong as regionally autonomous either.

De facto independence

NA

Major territorial changes

- Laos became independent in 1953, implying a host change. [1953: host change (new)]

EPR2SDM

<i>Movement</i>	Hmong
<i>Scenario</i>	1:1
<i>EPR group(s)</i>	Hmong
<i>Gwgroupid(s)</i>	81201000

Power access

- We follow EPR. [1953-1974: junior partner; 1975-2020: discriminated]

Group size

- We follow EPR. [1953-1974: 0.10; 1975-1990: 0.09; 1991-2020: 0.08]

Regional concentration

- MAR provides conflicting information (they are coded as spatially concentrated but without a regional basis). We rely on EPR, which codes the Hmong in Laos as concentrated until 1975 and as not concentrated thereafter. Note: EPR applies less strict criteria for a group to be considered concentrated, but that is the best data we could find. Notably, Minahan (2002: 738) does not provide exact figures. [1953-1975: concentrated; 1976-2020: not concentrated]

Kin

- There are numerically significant kin groups in Vietnam (Hmong), Thailand (Hill Tribes), and China (Miao) (see EPR; MAR; Minahan 2002: 738). In addition, Minahan (2002: 738) mentions 140,000 Hmong in the United States. [kin in neighboring country]

Sources

Amnesty International. <http://www.amnesty.org.au/news/comments/527/> [January 3, 2015].

Baird, Ian (2018). "Different Hmong Political Orientations and Perspectives on the Thailand-Laos Border." *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs*, Summer 2018 Issue: 29-36.

Cederman, Lars-Erik, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min (2010). "Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel: New Data and Analysis." *World Politics* 62(1): 87-119.

CIVICUS Monitor (2021). "Reprisals Against Hmong, Religious Freedom Violations and Search for Sombath Continues." *CIVICUS Monitor*, November 11. <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/11/01/reprisals-against-hmong-religious-freedom-violations-and-search-sombath-continues/> [July 21, 2022].

CIVICUS Monitor (2022). "Political Dissident from Laos Finds Refuge as Ethnic Hmong Indigenous People Remain at Risk." *CIVICUS Monitor*, March 18. <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2022/03/18/political-dissident-laos-finds-refuge-ethnic-hmong-indigenous-people-remain-risk/> [July 21, 2022].

- GADM (2019). Database of Global Administrative Boundaries, Version 3.6. <https://gadm.org/> [November 19, 2021].
- Global Security. "Laos Hmong Insurgency." <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/laos2.htm> [December 16, 2014].
- Hewitt, Christopher, and Tom Cheetham (2000). *Encyclopedia of Modern Separatist Movements*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Hewitt, Joseph J., Jonathan Wilkenfeld, and Ted R. Gurr (eds.) (2008). *Peace and Conflict 2008*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Hmong Chao Fa State (2020). "The Hmong Kingdom Chaofa State." <https://www.hmongchaofastate.com/about>.
- Hmong Chaofa Federation State (2008). "Congress of World Hmong People." <http://www.hmongza.com/applications/core/interface/file/attachment.php?id=23450>.
- Lee, Gary Y (1982). "Minority Policies and the Hmong in Laos." In Martin Stuart-Fox (ed.), *Contemporary Laos*, pp. 199-219. St. Lucia: Queensland University Press. <http://uniyatra.com/hmongnet/hmong-au/hmong82a.htm#resistance> [January 12, 2014].
- Made, Jan (2017). "Hmong face military in Laos jungle in fallout from Vietnam war." *RFI*, December 5. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/assault-04012021160502.html> [July 21, 2022].
- Marshall, Monty G., and Ted R. Gurr (2003). *Peace and Conflict 2003: A Global Survey of Armed Conflicts, Self-Determination Movements and Democracy*. College Park, MD: Center for International Development and Conflict Management, p. 60.
- Marshall, Monty G., and Ted R. Gurr (2005). *Peace and Conflict 2005: A Global Survey of Armed Conflicts, Self-Determination Movements, and Democracy*. College Park, MD: Center for International Development and Conflict Management.
- Minahan, James (2002). *Encyclopedia of the Stateless Nations*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, pp. 738-743.
- Minorities at Risk Project (2009). College Park, MD: University of Maryland.
- Minority Rights Group International. *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples*. Laos – Lao Sung. <http://www.minorityrights.org/4019/laos/lao-sung.html> [December 16, 2014].
- Minority Rights Group International. *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples*. Laos – Background. <https://minorityrights.org/country/laos/> [July 21, 2022].
- Photius (1994). "Laos – The Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos". *Photius*. The Library of Congress Country Studies; CIA World Factbook. https://photius.com/countries/laos/national_security/laos_national_security_the_ethnic_liberatio~40.html#:~:text=The%20Ethnic%20Liberation%20Organization%20of%20Laos%20is%20the%20largest%20opposition,Sky%2C%20or%20God's%20Disciples. [February 08, 2023].
- Prados, John (2006). *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Radio Free Asia (RFA) (2021). "Lao Government Troops Launch New Assault Against Hmong at Phou Bia Mountain". *Radio Free Asia*. January 4. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/assault-04012021160502.html> [July 21, 2022].
- Roth, Christopher F. (2015). *Let's Split! A Complete Guide to Separatist Movements and Aspirant Nations, from Abkhazia to Zanzibar*. Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books.
- Sambanis, Nicholas, & Schulhofer-Wohl, Jonas (2019). "Sovereignty Rupture as a Central Concept in Quantitative Measures of Civil War." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63(6): 1542–1578.
- Scott, George M. Jr. (1990). "Hmong Aspirations for a Separate State in Laos: The Effects of the Indo-China War." In: Ralph R. Premdas, S. W. R. de A. Samarasinghe, and Alan B. Anderson (eds.) *Secessionist Movements in Comparative Perspective*. London: Pinter Publishers, p. 116.
- Stuart-Fox, Martin (1997). *A History of Laos*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) (2017). "Hmong" <https://unpo.org/downloads/2346.pdf>.
- Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) (2018). "Hmong: Alarming Crackdown on the ChaoFa in LPDR", October 29, <https://ucdp.uu.se/additionalinfo/246/0> [July 21, 2022].

- Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) (2021). “Hmong: UNPO submits ChaoFa Hmong case to UN Genocide Prevention Office”, October 28, <https://unpo.org/article/22167> [July 21, 2022].
- Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). ‘Government of Laos – Civilians’. *Conflict Encyclopedia*. <https://ucdp.uu.se/onesided/959> [July 21, 2022].
- Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). ‘LRM – Lao Resistance Movement’. *Conflict Encyclopedia*. <https://ucdp.uu.se/additionalinfo/246/0> [July 21, 2022].
- Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). *Conflict Encyclopedia*. http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdatabase/gpcountry.php?id=90®ionSelect=7-Eastern_Asia# [December 16, 2014].
- Vogt, Manuel, Nils-Christian Bormann, Seraina Rüegger, Lars-Erik Cederman, Philipp Hunziker, and Luc Girardin (2015). “Integrating Data on Ethnicity, Geography, and Conflict: The Ethnic Power Relations Data Set Family.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59(7): 1327-1342.