

World Watch Research

Laos:

# Background Information

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**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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## Contents

Copyright and sources .....	1
Map of country .....	2
Recent history .....	3
Political and legal landscape .....	3
Religious landscape.....	5
Economic landscape.....	6
Social and cultural landscape.....	9
Technological landscape .....	12
Security situation .....	13
Christian origins .....	13
Church spectrum today.....	14
Further useful reports.....	14
External Links .....	14

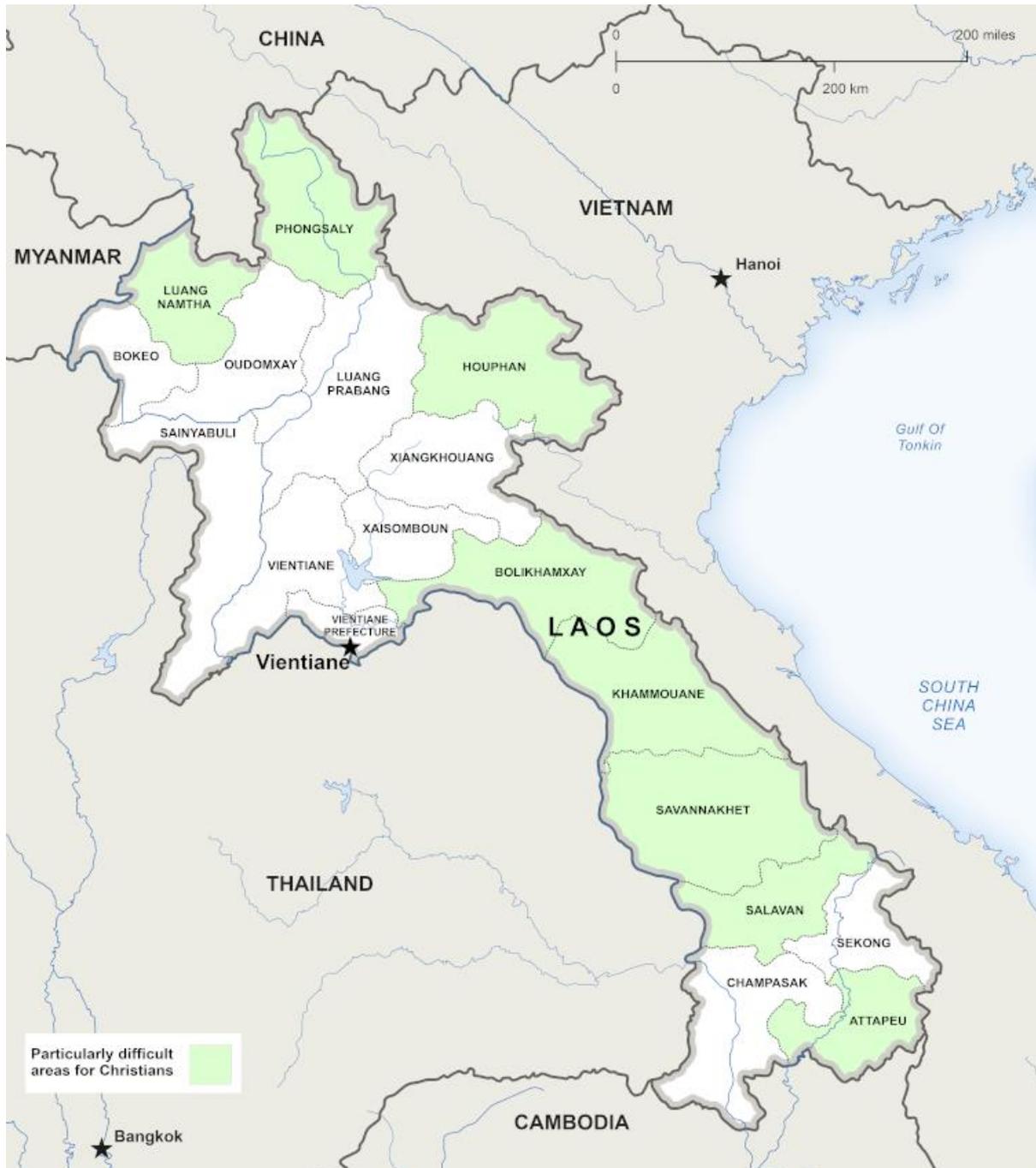
## Copyright, sources and definitions

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Laos: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
7,737,000	224,000	2.9

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

## Recent history

Laos was a French colony until 1953. A power struggle ensued until Communist forces overthrew the constitutional monarchy in 1975, heralding years of isolation. After the changes in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s, Laos began opening up its economy from 1986 onwards. Despite economic reforms, called the "New Economic Mechanism", the country remains poor and heavily dependent on foreign aid.

Laos has slowly opened up to its neighbors and the international community. It hosted the SEA Games in 2009 and joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2013. The country continues to come down very harshly on any perceived dissent (which includes Christian faith, especially outside the state-approved churches). On the other hand, Laos desperately needs development and economic growth, and foreign investment will need increasing openness. This is one of the reasons why Laos has hosted several UN Special Rapporteurs and consultants, as well as others from ASEAN and the EU. According to the World Bank Laos overview, development is well underway and Laos has become one of the fastest growing economies in the East Asian and Pacific region, despite being heavily affected by COVID-19, as can be seen by the depreciation of its currency. However, this growth depends greatly on its big investor and neighbor, China, and comes at the cost of increasing dependency and an environmental toll (see below: *Economic / Social and cultural landscape*).

The central Communist authorities are not the main problem for Christians (although restrictions do get passed down from the central administration too), therefore it is not to be expected that having a new Prime Minister will have any effect on Christian life (see: *Political and legal landscape*). The difficulties Christians face come mainly from the local authorities and village leaders who are more concerned with guarding and preserving ethnic practices and keeping up the Communist management style and bureaucracy, as well as keeping the peace in the villages. The killing of a pastor in October 2022 and other subsequent killings came as a shock to the small Christian community and has been a vivid reminder that a growing Christian church does not sit well with local authorities, especially in rural areas. Several incidents of church leaders being arrested or detained and of Christians being expelled from their homes and villages have also confirmed this.

## Political and legal landscape

The Communist Party does not plan any changes or even democratic reforms. There is little real hope that religious freedom as stipulated in the Lao Constitution will actually be observed and respected right down to village level. Being influenced by two larger neighbors which for several years now have been increasingly emphasizing Communist values (China and Vietnam), Laos is looking to them for examples of how to keep society in check. With its increasing clout in the Laotian economy, China will gain more influence, so any development in the direction of more freedom should not be expected anytime soon. At the same time, the Laotian state seems increasingly hard-pressed to deliver even [basic services](#) and none of its published official statistics are encouraging (The Diplomat, 8 May 2024). However, it would be an exaggeration at this stage to talk about a possible coming collapse.

The election of [new Prime Minister](#) Sonexay Siphandone in December 2022 will most likely bring only limited change, if any (RFA, 4 January 2023). In his inaugural speech, Siphandone, who has a military background, promised to "raise the spirit of the revolution to the highest level". This may translate into a stronger reliance on Communist ideology, but the government and the Communist Party have

very concrete issues to tackle: Apart from rampant inflation and a high depreciation rate of the local currency (see below: *Economic landscape*), drug trafficking (see below: *Social and cultural landscape*) and human trafficking remain other big challenges and are politically sensitive matters. The fact that the authorities [rescued](#) hundreds of trafficked Laotian citizens, including women from the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (which is one of the major development projects set up with the help of China), illustrates the political challenges the government is having to face up to (UCA News, 23 December 2022). Laos is also a basis for the growing [illicit industry](#) of illegal gambling, cybercrime and money-laundering. This takes place in the border regions in particular, as well as elsewhere in Myanmar, Cambodia and Thailand (Pro Publica, 5 October 2023). Laotian authorities are trying to curb these industries and appease Chinese demands by apprehending and [handing over](#) Chinese national fraud suspects (The Star Malaysia, 23 April 2024).

Local and provincial leaders in particular are slow to implement laws from the central government and supervision is weak. Although there seems to be some effort to improve the way of governing the people of Laos, the Communist Party prefers to stick to its traditional patterns of ruling, i.e., nepotism and corruption when it comes to the economy, and opaqueness and restrictions as far as political and social matters are concerned. The authorities place high emphasis on controlling and even indoctrinating the population via the media (which cannot be called 'free' at all) and to [clamp down](#) on citizens voicing complaints or concerns on social media (UCA News, 1 March 2021). At the same time, in practice, village laws, frequently based on traditions and beliefs, trump all national laws (including the Constitution) and will usually dominate all legal and political considerations. However, reports of central authorities intervening for the rights of religious minorities (as for Christians, see above: *Specific examples of positive developments*) are encouraging, but do not yet represent a trend.

Since nearly half of the population belong to ethnic minorities, keeping a close watch on them is important to the government, especially as there had been skirmishes with the Hmong minority before. The ultimate control of the country and its people remains in the hands of the Communist government. There is no room for expressing different views or for staging demonstrations due to the government's draconian level of control in combination with local religious leaders.

### **Gender perspective**

Lao laws are predominately gender-balanced, although effective implementation of laws is lacking. Despite the 1990 Family Law outlawing forced marriages and polygamy, forced marriages are prevalent under customary law, particularly among the [Hmong](#) ethnic group ([The Laotian Times, 25 March 2022](#)). In Hmong culture, polygamy is permitted for men (when the wife is unable to bear children); and it is permitted in Khmu culture if the couple do not have a boy. The Family Law further stipulates the legal minimum age of marriage as 18 but permits early marriages for children aged 15-18 in 'special and necessary cases' (Article 9). Laos has one of the highest child marriage rates in the region, with such marriages occurring most commonly in rural areas, and among Hmong, Mon-Khmer and Chinese-Tibetan ethnic groups. According to [Girls Not Brides Laos](#) (accessed 5 August 2024), rates are high for both girls (33% are married by 18) and for boys alike (11% married by 18).

## Religious landscape

Laos: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	224,000	2.9
Muslim	9,400	0.1
Hindu	6,400	0.1
Buddhist	4,171,000	53.9
Ethnic religionist	3,171,000	41.0
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	18,800	0.2
Atheist	23,500	0.3
Agnostic	69,500	0.9
Other	42,560	0.6
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to WCD estimates (accessed May 2024), 53.9% of the population are Buddhist, mainly following the Theravada teachings. Buddhism serves as a connecting hub for the whole of society and it is closely linked with nationalism. 41% adhere to ethnic religions (Chinese folk religion not included) related to their ethnic or tribal ancestry, and are similar to religions practiced in Thailand. Several folk traditions have been incorporated into Buddhism, so that the numbers given above should be understood as overlapping. Folk traditions for example venerate special places like rivers or trees, natural phenomena and include ancestral worship. Animistic practices like honoring the spirits or ancestor worship have a very strong influence in society, especially in rural areas, and serve as a source of pressure on Christians: People not taking part in animistic practices, exclude themselves from the community and will be taught what it means to be an outsider.

The country is still in the tight grip of the Communist Party and therefore religion is something the authorities generally see as hostile and in need of being controlled. While Buddhism is accepted as being part of the country’s heritage to a certain extent and the animist religions are seen as ineradicable superstitions, Christianity is generally seen as being foreign, linked with Western values. and an enemy of Communism, especially in the villages. The government recognizes Christianity as one of the four official religions in Laos. Whereas at the national level, there is an increased cooperation between the government and the registered Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), such recognition is still lacking at village level, and even more so for Christians not under the LEC umbrella.

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Laos](#)):

- “LEC leaders continued to say growth in church membership exacerbated tensions within some communities, particularly among villagers who were wary of minority religions, which often reportedly resulted in new Christian members being harassed for abandoning their traditions, typically Buddhist or animist.”

The death of [longtime president](#) of the LEC, Reverend Dr. Kamphone Khountapanya, on 3 January 2022 (Christian Conference of Asia, 18 January 2022), left a gap hard to fill. The new leader is not as experienced and only time will tell how well he is able to navigate the balance between church needs and government demands.

Laos is one of the few Theravada Buddhist countries in the world, following the oldest existing Buddhist tradition. But how does this ancient faith system fit in with the national leadership's Communist ideology? There is a close connection between society and the influence of Buddhism, temples and monks. Buddhist temples are not just religious centers; they also serve as focal points for community life, especially in rural areas, and most Buddhist men spend some time of their lives in a temple – ranging from a few days to longer periods of time. It is expected from men to follow this tradition and it leads to a natural bond with Buddhism, monasteries and the authority of monks. Another reason why temples are so important for community life is that many provide free education.

## Economic landscape

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Laos](#) (updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Gross National Income (2017 PPP USD):** 7.745 USD
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** The rate of multidimensional poverty stands at 23.1%, a further 21.2% are listed as being vulnerable to poverty. Measured by Laos' national poverty line, 23.4% of the population can be seen as poor.
- **Remittances:** Remittances make up 1.5% of the GDP.

According to [World Bank Laos data](#) (accessed 5 August 2024):

- Laos is classified as a lower-middle income country.
- **GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international USD):** 7.948 (2022)
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 1.3% (2022)
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day:** (2017 PPP) 30% (last available data from 2018).

Despite the considerable economic growth of the country since the economic liberalization of 1986, when the Communist Party decentralized control on the economy and encouraged the start of private enterprises, Laos is still one of the least developed countries in the world. It had been on track to being promoted to a higher category in 2024, the United Nations ECOSOC [announced](#), (removing it from the category "Least Developing Countries") if Laos could continue its growth rate levels (RFA, 18 April 2018). Those efforts were thwarted by the arrival of the COVID-19 crisis, although Laos is less connected internationally than other countries. Laos now hopes to '[graduate](#)' to the next level by 2026 (UN Committee for Development Policy, 26 February 2021). In 2024, the government [pledged](#) to achieve this status by announcing an array of measures (Laotian Times, 16 February 2024).

In its [Laos overview](#) (last updated in April 2024), the World Bank gives insights into the economic challenges the country is facing. Particularly challenging remains the high inflation rate, combined with a strong depreciation of the Lao kip against the USD:

- "The Lao kip depreciated by 23% against the US dollar between January 2023 and February 2024, a factor feeding high inflation, which stood at 25% in February 2024, with core inflation at 26%. Food and transport price increases were the key drivers."
- "The Lao PDR's macroeconomic situation remains challenging. Long-standing structural vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by soaring public debt and weak public revenues. The national currency, the kip, depreciated during 2023, while average annual inflation is expected to remain above 20% for a third consecutive year. This situation affects poorer people most seriously and progress in poverty reduction is estimated to have stalled. Economic growth is forecast to pick up to 4% in 2024, though the outlook remains subject to high economic uncertainty. Tighter monetary and fiscal policies and renewed efforts to enforce foreign exchange restrictions have had little impact in restoring macroeconomic stability. Limited foreign exchange liquidity, and hence a weaker kip, put pressure on external public debt servicing, which constrains fiscal space and exacerbates financial sector vulnerabilities. Growth over the previous two decades had been predominantly driven by large-scale investments in capital intensive sectors, particularly in mining and hydropower. However, these investments failed to support job creation, and some entailed considerable environmental costs. Moreover, public investment in the power sector has been mostly financed by external debt, often on commercial terms, gradually jeopardizing macroeconomic stability.

In its [Household Welfare Monitoring](#) (8 April 2024), the World Bank provides more details, also including how the numbers translate into challenges Lao households and small businesses are facing:

- **Macroeconomic instability has persisted.** Inflation has stabilized but remains high. The protracted period of high inflation has changed the labor market landscape, affected household living standards, and undermined human capital development.
- **Employment continued to expand** in the second half of 2023. Workers shifted from services, which were most affected by kip depreciation and high inflation, toward agriculture and manufacturing.
- **Wage growth accelerated** in the second half of 2023 but was not sufficient to compensate for inflation. Wage employment and unpaid family work declined, while the number of self-employed workers increased.
- **Family business activities increased**, providing income sources that could keep up with inflation. Average profit rose by 22% over 2023, almost keeping pace with the inflation rate of 24%. However, nearly 40% of businesses did not see profits increase, implying that their real incomes declined.
- **Agricultural businesses outperformed non-farm businesses.** About half of crop-producing households grew crops for sale. Cassava was a major cash crop for 33% of crop producers.
- **Growth in per capita household income accelerated** in the second half of 2023, increasing by 25% over the year. However, over 40% of households saw their income lag behind inflation.

- **Inflation:** In the second half of 2023, the proportion of households that felt significant impact from inflation increased, but declined among high-income households. Scaling up own-food production and switching to cheaper food remain the most common strategies for coping with food inflation. However, more households are engaging in additional income-generating activities and taking loans. Many low-income households continue to reduce food consumption to cope with price increases, underscoring their vulnerability to persistent high food inflation. Only 10% of these households reported receiving government assistance to help them cope. 34% of high-income households report reducing education spending, compared to 45% of low-income households. Persistent inflation is expected to widen the human capital gap across income groups. More than half of households cited high inflation and kip depreciation as the most pressing issues for the government to address.
- **School dropout rates** remain high at 5%, with boys from low-income households having higher instances of dropout. Financial reasons — inability to pay for school or the need for children to work and support the family — are the primary cause.
- **Food security improved** among rural and low-income families between December 2022 and January 2024, but not among urban and high-income families.

Additionally, in all the economic and social development achieved so far, there remains an enormous gap between urban and rural areas, the latter being the least developed particularly in terms of infrastructure (including electricity, water, sanitation, etc.). As the income gap grows, so does the potential for social unrest. Due to rampant corruption and cronyism (i.e. partiality to long-standing friends), only the country's leadership benefits from economic gains and most citizens are left in poverty, bad health conditions and with a growing inflation rate. All this is reflected in the poverty statistics as well as in the numbers for vulnerable employment and malnourished children (see below: *Social and cultural landscape*). Although a far-reaching anti-corruption campaign has had some positive results, but did not eradicate the deeply rooted networks.

In recent years, tens of thousands of Laotian citizens [left the country](#) because of the poor economic situation, joining hundreds of thousands who are already living abroad (Benar News, 30 October 2023). Despite progress in developing infrastructure, the majority of Laotians still work in the agricultural sector; the CIA Factbook estimated that in 2012 more than 73% of all workers were employed in this sector, the UNDP estimates a still high 62.4%. Although this rate may be decreasing, it still shows that it is no exaggeration to call Laos a rural society. Many Christians are living in the rural areas as well and therefore share the challenges of poverty and malnourishment.

Additionally, the country may find itself in a catch-22 situation in the foreseeable future: By cooperating with China, foreign investment is available without opening up the economy to market forces; but the price is a growing dependence on China. According to estimates, the country's '[sovereign debt](#)' to China makes up 29.4% of the total GDP. But there is also a further hidden debt exposure of 35.4% of the GDP, making it "a class of its own" (Malik, A., Parks, B., et. al. (2021). Banking on the Belt and Road: Insights from a new global dataset of 13,427 Chinese development projects, September 2021). Even though this huge amount of debt is not only due to Chinese investment, Laos seems to be on the brink of sovereign [bankruptcy](#), according to observers (The Diplomat, 28 June 2022). The Lao kip was seen as the [third weakest](#) currency worldwide in 2023, behind the Iranian rial and the Vietnamese dong (Forbes, 12 June 2023).

An ECOSOC upgrade has no effect on the question of human rights, minorities and freedom of religion. Questions will be increasingly asked about who exactly is benefitting from projects like building dams, especially as some 288 dams are planned. If all - or even just most - of the dams are completed, this may [jeopardize](#) the food and water security of more than 70 million people in several different countries (ASEAN Today, 13 August 2020). The railway between Laos and China, a part of the latter's Belt and Road Initiative, was completed in December 2020, despite the COVID-19 crisis, and was opened on 3 December 2021. It has the [potential](#) to be a gamechanger for Laos' economy, but only if it is accompanied by further efforts to improve hampering legislation and cut red tape, not as a stand-alone investment (ISEAS, 158/2021, 30 November 2021). In another sign of its growing dependency on China, Electricité du Laos, the country's largest power grid operator, granted a [25-year concession](#) to a Chinese company for managing its power grid (RFA, 16 March 2021). Villagers are often not properly compensated in [resettlement](#) measures and lack proper land and water resources (UCA News, 1 October 2021). With more and more projects announced, Laos' infrastructural integration into the Chinese power system is deepening; by exporting energy to the province or Yunnan and potentially importing it back, the country hopes to become "[ASEAN's battery](#)" (Panda Paw Dragon Claw, 22 April 2024).

If the ties with China are drawn tighter, Christians will be significantly affected since China is not so concerned about a country's human rights record as other nations are and even sponsors a different understanding of human rights. Laos is trying to diversify its foreign investment and has had some success; for example, South Korea is another large [foreign investor](#) (ASEAN Today, 7 December 2018). However, it often seems that these investments go hand in hand with corruption and cronyism and so the majority of the population does not see anything of the promised growth and wealth.

### Gender perspective

Women are, in general, more economically vulnerable than men. Looking at [UNDP's Gender Equality goal](#) (UNDP Strategic Support/Laos, accessed 5 August 2024), it is clear that gender inequalities persist in relation to access to the labor market. Additionally, sexual violence, exploitation, and the unequal burden of domestic work all hinder women from attaining positions in public office. Whilst Laos boasts a relatively high proportion of [women in parliament](#) (22%), female representation is currently the lowest it has been since 2002 ([World Bank Laos data](#), accessed 5 August 2024).

### Social and cultural landscape

According to the [CIA World Factbook Laos](#) (accessed 5 August 2024) and [UNDP Human Development Report Laos](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Lao 53.2%, Khmu 11%, Hmong 9.2%, Phouthay 3.4%, Tai 3.1%, Makong 2.5%, Katong 2.2%, Lue 2%, Akha 1.8%, other 11.6% (2015 est.)
- **Main languages:** Lao (official), French, English, various ethnic languages
- **Urbanization rate:** 38.2%
- **Literacy rate:** 87.1% (age 15 and above, 2021)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 5.9 years. Data from [UNESCO's](#) country profile (accessed 8 June 2023) highlights a small gender gap in relation to primary and secondary education in favor of boys. This gender gap is closing however, and Laos has made [significant progress](#) over the past decades such that most regions have achieved gender parity (WEF, July 2022, pp. 222-223).

- **Health and education indicators:** The pupil-teacher ratio in primary school is 22:1. Statistically, 3.7 physicians are available per 10,000 people and 15 hospital beds.

According to [World Bank Laos data](#) (accessed 5 August 2024):

- **Population age:** 31% of all people are below the age of 14; 4.5% are above the age of 65 (2022).
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 89% (2020).
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 3.8% (2023), the rate for vulnerable employment is 78.3% (2022)

Other sources report:

- **Refugees:** According to the [UNHCR](#) (accessed 5 August 2024): "Lao People's Democratic Republic receives only a small number of cases involving claims for international protection per year. The country is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention, and there is no framework for identifying international protection needs or refugee protection."
- **Migrants:** 1.3 million Laotians have migrated from their country. Laos serves much less as a transit and destination country. From Laos, the main migration destination is neighboring [Thailand](#), receiving 280,000 regular working migrants and many more irregular (IOM Flow Monitoring Report, December 2022).
- **IDPs:** As of 31 December 2023, there were officially zero IDPs in Laos ([IDMC, Laos country profile](#), accessed 5 August 2024).
- **Malnutrition:** Malnutrition still affects 33% of all children below five years of age, causing stunted growth. It causes 50% of all child deaths under 5 years of age, according to [UNICEF](#) (Laos country profile/Nutrition, accessed 25 April 2024).

[UNDP Human Development Report Laos](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.62, Laos ranks 139th of 193 countries in the world. The HDI is still improving, growth even accelerated in 2019.
- **Life expectancy:** 69 years
- **Median age:** 24.4 years
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.467, Laos ranks 116th of 166 countries in the Gender Inequality Index.
- **Unemployment:** 6.8% of youth (between 15 and 24) are neither in school nor employment. The child labor rate (between 5 and 17) is 28.2%

Traditional Lao culture is based on Buddhism and perceives it as natural that wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of the ruling elite by virtue of their 'karma'. This karma determines their birth and social status. The means to improve your own status is to build up a network based on obligation and loyalty, given in exchange for protection and assistance in times of need. Given these underlying social values, there is little possibility for improvement in undeveloped regions or even of an open protest; after all, what happens is determined by one's karma and has to be accepted.

Poverty is still a considerable factor in Laos and according to the World Bank report quoted above in the section *Economic landscape*, a growing number of households struggle to make ends meet and have to live on the same or a lower budget than the year before (due to the combined effects of

inflation and currency depreciation). One important area where poverty plays out is child labor. Apart from the high rate of child labor mentioned above, in the period between 2015 and 2019, 23.2% of children of primary and secondary education age were [out of school](#) (RFA, 2 June 2021). Most of these children come from rural communities and are working in the [agricultural sector](#), supporting their families who often do not appreciate the value of schooling (UCA News, 14 June 2021). Due to the dire economic situation and a lack of perspective for graduates, thousands of students are dropping out of school and even the best universities of Laos struggle with strongly [dropping enrolment numbers](#) (RFA, 9 June 2024). For example, the number of students at the National University of Laos, the country's most prestigious university, fell to 6,000 students in 2023 from 9,000 in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, it remains a challenge to translate infrastructure projects like dams or the recently inaugurated highspeed trainline built by China into benefits for the lives of ordinary people. Although the recent transfer of power in January 2021 bolstered forces standing against corruption, this remains an uphill battle and as there is no free press in the country, there is no public pressure pushing for accountability or decisive action against corruption. There has also been a major reminder that Laos is part of the "Golden triangle" of drug production and trade in Southeast Asia: In the [biggest ever drug-busting operation in Asia](#), Lao authorities seized 55 million tablets of methamphetamine and 1.5 tons of crystal methamphetamine on 27 October 2021 (Reuters, 28 October 2021). 2022 saw a continuation of this trend, with more than 58 million tablets methamphetamine and more than a ton of crystal meth seized in locations in northern Laos close to the border with Myanmar ([UNODC](#), "Synthetic drugs in East and Southeast Asia - Latest developments and challenges", 2022). In the first six months of 2024, two major [drug busts](#) resulted in the seizure of 22 million methamphetamine pills in Bokeo province alone (Laotian Times, 13 June 2024).

### Gender perspective

Despite a [legal framework](#) that protects individuals from domestic violence and a relatively [low rate](#) of intimate partner violence (compared to the region), there is widespread social acceptance of gender-based violence, especially in the context of [indigenous women](#) where it is said to be underreported (UN Women, 2022; IWGIA, 1 April 2022). According to [Georgetown's 2019/2020 Women, Peace and Security Index](#), nearly three in five women agree that violence is justified against women who do not adhere to cultural expectations, and 80% of female victims choose not to report instances of abuse (GIWPS, 2019, p.45). The COVID-19 pandemic also had a detrimental impact on the physical and social wellbeing of women and girls. In September 2020 a representative of UNICEF, Dr Pia Rebello Britto, reported: "The loss of employment, lack of access to information, healthcare and social services have heightened the risks for them to become victims of violence, exploitation, neglect, abuse and trafficking" ([UNICEF, 11 September 2020](#)). As highlighted in a report published by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), Christian women who belong to ethnic minority groups and those residing in rural areas are most likely to experience neglect, discrimination and marginalization ([UNPO, April 2021](#)). This is perpetuated by both the communities in which they live, as well as by state forces.

Some of the biggest threats to the safety of both Christian men and women in Laos, albeit impersonal, are residues of [unexploded explosive ordinances](#) (UXOs) still scattered across Laos – an estimated 30% of more than 270 million cluster bombs dropped on Laos during the Second Indochina War (1954-

1975, a.k.a. the Vietnam War) failed to detonate and only about 1% has been removed so far, with approximately 1,600km<sup>2</sup> of land still unsafe (Insider, April 2022). About 31 UXO accidents were [recorded](#) in 2021 which resulted in 11 fatalities and 44 injuries, partly exacerbated by the suspension of field operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic (News.cn, 9 December 2021). Open Doors research suggests that some of the highly [contaminated zones](#) (CBS News, 5 September 2016) coincide with the regions where Christians also face high levels of persecution (see above: *Map of country*). Current estimates suggest it would take another 100 years for these areas to be made completely UXO-free ([The Guardian, 27 April 2023](#)).

## Technological landscape

According to [Datareportal Digital 2024: Laos](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 66.2% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 48.8% of the total population
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 88.5% of the total population

As per a December 2023 law, the government has required everyone to [register](#) their mobile number with the authorities (RFA, 28 November 2023). The reason behind the new law was announced as being an attempt to balance security measures and privacy concerns.

All data supplied above should be treated with caution, as Laos is still a somewhat secretive country and all Internet and mobile phone usage has to be seen against the background of a closing (but still existing) urban-rural gap (consequently, UNDP's HDI Internet usage figure - 25.5% - is far below that of Datareportal. Although the capital of Laos, Vientiane, is relatively small compared to other Asian cities, people from the rural areas are flocking to the city in search of employment and a better life. This has increased since Laos became a stop-over point for the international highspeed trainline. Infrastructure in the capital is more advanced; rural areas sometimes have no Internet or mobile phone coverage, despite the access rate to electricity being more than 97% even in rural areas.

In July 2019, Laos announced a new law against what it perceives as "fake news", according to which all private online news websites, an important information source for an increasing number of Laotians, have to be [registered](#) (RFA, 19 July 2019). Due to such tough restrictions, many Laotians rely on [news](#) from neighboring Thailand and social media, despite the risks and limitations (RFA, 13 August 2020). The government of Laos ordered the registration or re-registration of all [SIM cards](#) for cell phones in July 2020, a policy it extended due to COVID-19 until January 2022 (Laotian Times, 30 September 2021). Unregistered SIM cards started to be [disconnected](#) as of December 2020 (Laotian Times, 3 December 2020).

Laos is not listed in Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report, due to a lack of data. However, the President's appeal to [report](#) police abuse by all means except via Facebook (RFA, 12 April 2021), shows how much the Communist Party wants social media to be avoided.

### Gender perspective

According to the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security ([GIWPS Laos](#), accessed 5 August 2024), women's cell phone use in Laos rose from 60.4% in 2017 to 81% in 2023. This development indicates that - like men - women are likely to have good access to digital Christian resources and online

Christian communities. However, ease of access may vary between rural and urban regions, based on the degree of freedom within individual households (e.g., for Christian converts living under the strict supervision of family members).

## Security situation

Since the struggle for Hmong independence ended in 2007, when the leader of an ethnic insurgency group was arrested, Laos has not faced any particular security challenges, although occasional skirmishes take place. However, the country watches carefully Vietnam's policy of [cracking down](#) on the Hmong - many of whom are Christian (UNPO, 18 April 2019). It remains to be seen if the June 2023 attack in Vietnamese Dak Lak province and the following crackdown on alleged "terrorists" (see: [WWL 2024 Full Country Dossier Vietnam](#)) will have any repercussions for the government's policy. The Hmong minority in Laos is over 9% of the country's population. Christians often face [harassment](#) and restrictions, but this is not due to any specific security issues (RFA, 7 May 2020).

## Christian origins

Roman Catholic missionaries (Jesuits from Vietnam) made several attempts to enter Laotian territory from 1630 onwards. However, not until the Paris Foreign Mission Society entered the country in 1878, could a [mission station](#) be established at Ban Dorn Don on an island in the Mekong River (UCA News, Apostolic Vicariate of Pakse, accessed 9 December 2020).

[Presbyterian Christians](#) established churches in Thailand (Siam) in the 1860s and Swedish and Swiss missionaries moved eastwards into Laos in 1890 and 1902 respectively. However, Protestantism did not spread until the Christian and Missionary Alliance entered Laos in 1948. The Khmer minority, dominated by the Lao majority, then began to respond positively as did other minority groups (LEC History, accessed 9 December 2020).

As outlined in an article by the [Christian Forum in Asia](#) (18 January 2022): "The formation of the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) was actually an outcome of the missionary work of Swedish Protestant (1890), Swiss Brethren (1902), and Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries (1928). The early days of the Swiss Mission training in southern Laos involved evangelism. The Brethren missionaries from Switzerland gave their first annual "cours biblique" (Bible course) for Christians in Song Khone, Savannakhet Province in 1911. The missionaries who worked in three different parts of the country came together and adopted a constitution to establish the Lao Evangelical Church in 1956. The newly formed church was granted corporate status by the Royal Lao Government in 1960."

In the mid-1970s, the Communist regime started a campaign to eradicate the Christian minority - but failed.

## Church spectrum today

Laos: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	48,900	21.8
Protestant	173,000	77.2
Independent	1,800	0.8
Unaffiliated	120	0.1
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>223,820</b>	<b>99.9</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	162,000	72.3
Pentecostal-Charismatic	20,200	9.0

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Major denominations are the Roman Catholic Church, Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) and the Seventh Day Adventists. Many other churches are active, for instance, Evangelical, Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, Lutheran and Assemblies of God.

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Laos>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

## External Links

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