

### ***Forsaken Causes: Liberal Democracy and Anticommunism in Cold War Laos* by Ryan Wolfson-Ford (University of Wisconsin Press, 2024)**

Reviewed by

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Ryan Wolfson-Ford's *Forsaken Causes: Liberal Democracy and Anticommunism in Cold War Laos*, published in 2024 by The University of Wisconsin Press, is an ambitious work that seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between liberal democracy and anticommunism in Cold War Laos. The book challenges dominant historiographical narratives by highlighting Laos's role as an active and influential agent in Cold War geopolitics, driven by its own internal dynamics and ideologies rather than merely serving as a passive stage for superpower rivalries. *Forsaken Causes* endeavors to challenge Cold War narratives often dominated by victors, whether communist or anti-communist. Wolfson-Ford contends that the political history of Southeast Asia is marked by unevenness, with anti-communist narratives dominating some contexts, while in socialist states like Laos and Vietnam, communist narratives have been legitimized and maintained by the state.

One of the book's most significant contributions is its autonomous history of the Kingdom of Laos during 1953–1975. The author achieves this by employing a diverse array of seldom-used primary sources in Lao, French, and English, including newspapers, memoirs of Lao intellectuals and politicians, school textbooks, and what can be categorized as “grey literature”. Wolfson-Ford contends that, despite being surrounded by authoritarian regimes, Laos maintained a form of liberal democracy intertwined with anticommunism. He contrasts the political trajectory of Laos with that of its neighbors, stating, “Liberal democracy was cast off in Thailand by 1947, Cambodia by 1955, Indonesia by 1957, and Myanmar in 1958–1962; failed to arrive in South Vietnam in 1955; and was suspended by emergency rule in the Philippines by 1972” (p. 3). Against this backdrop, the Royal Lao Government (RLG) embarked on a different path, characterized by the participation of nearly one million people (almost one third of the total population at the time) in the 1972 elections. This event marked a pivotal moment in Laos's political history as a notable experiment in liberal democracy under conditions of universal suffrage.

A central challenge in Wolfson-Ford's narrative is his conceptualization of “liberal democracy.” While one might not expect a lengthy theoretical discussion of this key term in a historical book as opposed to a political science one, a conceptual framework discussing terms like “liberal democracy” in contrast to illiberal, authoritarian, socialist, and electoral democracies would have been appreciated. Such a discussion would have been especially valuable given the contemporary prevalence of “liberal democracy” as a rallying cry among liberal movements confronting so-called “populist” opponents. Nonetheless, Wolfson-Ford asserts that, throughout the period under investigation, “Lao citizens had political and civil liberties fundamental to any liberal democracy, including free speech, free press, free assembly, and the rule of law.” This arguably idealistic

portrayal of the RLG's political system is tempered by restricted electorates and exclusionary practices, pointing towards a more oligarchic system. The author admits: "These rights were curbed from time to time due to war, and democratic rhetoric did not match reality (like any liberal democracy)" (p. 16).

In discussing the postcolonial political landscape of Laos, Wolfson-Ford emphasizes the influence of the elite, educated under French colonial rule, who held liberal ideals of progress and universal human rights. He argues that these ideas were deeply intertwined with the country's history and significantly influenced its political ethos. Notably, the author states, "The ideas of elite Lao society that arose under French colonialism via French schooling cherished a belief in liberal progress and universal human rights" (p. 5).

Wolfson-Ford delves into the complexities of nationalism and racial tensions in Laos, arguing that Western notions of race significantly impacted Lao nationalism. He identifies historical fears of racial extinction during the colonial period, noting that Lao anxieties were primarily directed against Vietnamese domination. This dynamic is intricately linked to anticommunist sentiment, as the author notes, "Lao fears that the nation would be lost harkened back to colonial-era fears of racial extinction at the hands of the Vietnamese" (p. 12).

The book offers a critical examination of the RLG's homogenizing policies, such as the use of terms like "Lao Thoeng" and "Lao Sung", which functioned not merely as markers of identity but as instruments of assimilation. Wolfson-Ford presents a compelling argument here. Comparative insights regarding similar policies in neighboring Southeast Asian countries might enhance the readers' understanding of regional ethnic dynamics. For example, in Cambodia during Sihanouk's Sangkum Reastr Niyum regime, non-Khmer ethnic minorities were labeled Khmer Loei (the hill people in the northeast) or Khmer Islam (Cham and Malay), and in Thailand, the Malay Muslims in the deep South are still called Thai Islam. The Lao elite focused intensely on reinventing their history, aiming to create a modern, scientific narrative about the "birth of the Lao race" (p. 100). This raises the question of whether, and to what extent, this historical narrative encompassed the Lao-dominated northeastern region of Thailand (Isan), a territory that had historically constituted a significant part of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang.

In tracing the trajectory of Lao anticommunism, Wolfson-Ford provides a detailed account of critical events. He highlights the pro-communist Pathet Lao movement's recruitment of ethnic minorities and the establishment of a resistance zone in 1953, following the invasion of North Vietnamese forces. This narrative depicts the complex and often contradictory political landscape, as the Pathet Lao engaged in the democratic process at times while advocating for significant socio-political reforms.

Wolfson-Ford also examines influential political decision-makers such as Katay Don Sasorith, whom he characterizes as an early advocate of anticommunism, critical of communism's ideological atheism. Katay believed that propagating Buddhism and aligning with the United States were essential strategies for combating communist ideologies. Such ideological battles are vividly recounted, including the challenges faced in building the Royal Lao Army, which by the early 1950s had fielded fewer troops than the North Vietnamese forces operating within Lao territory.

One of the book's notable strengths is the exploration of the post-1965 political trajectory in Laos, which Wolfson-Ford characterizes as a period of democratic revival. He discusses the complex dynamics between anticommunism, neutralism, and regional alliances, highlighting the role of Prince Souvanna Phouma and other leaders in shaping the country's political strategies. Nevertheless, despite claims of a democratic revival, the 1965 elections reveal a more nuanced reality, with a restrictive electorate that challenges the notion of a fully realized liberal democracy. As Wolfson-Ford acknowledges,

democracy in pre-1975 Laos was significantly constrained, reflecting an elite-dominated or oligarchic system rather than a genuine liberal democracy.

Throughout the 1960s, anticommunism became deeply entrenched in Lao society finding vivid expression in popular culture. Media outlets reported on communist atrocities, often drawing from defectors' accounts of harrowing experiences in the so-called liberated zones. As geopolitical tensions escalated, anti-Vietnamese sentiment grew increasingly intense. The author discusses a comic book published by the RLG, which portrayed the conflict as a racial war of extermination against the Lao by Vietnamese invaders and occupiers (see Grabowsky/Tappe, "Important Kings of Laos", in: *Journal of Lao Studies*, 1(2), 1–44).

Wolfson-Ford further explores Souvanna Phouma's crucial involvement in promoting the United States bombing campaign against Pathet Lao-held areas. He points out that Souvanna's unwavering support is evident from his lack of hesitation, with his only condition being that the bombings remain confidential. As a principal architect of what became known as the "secret war" in Laos, Souvanna was primarily concerned with securing the RLG's survival. Both he and other RLG officials were consistently preoccupied with potential reactions from China and the Soviet Union should the conflict intensify (p. 157).

Chapter 8 examines the "Return of Democracy" after 1965, with Wolfson-Ford portraying the subsequent seven years as a "revival of liberal democracy" (p. 170). During this time, the emergence and reorganization of political parties signaled renewed vitality in Lao democracy, reinforced by the persistence of a free press, legal rights, and a developing civil society. The author describes the 1965 elections as limited, prompting questions about the implications of this description. In a somewhat defensive tone, Wolfson-Ford indicates that while maintaining liberal democracy during wartime was a challenging undertaking, it had become deeply rooted in the political culture of both the RLG elite and the general populace, leading to efforts to revive it at a time when other democracies in the region were unravelling (p. 171).

It is a bold claim to assert that the elections of July 18, 1965, represented "both the nadir and rebirth of liberal democracy in Cold War Laos," especially given that only about 20,000 individuals—comprising military officers, government workers, and teachers—were eligible to vote (p. 172). This situation is more indicative of a "liberal oligarchy" than a true liberal democracy. Regarding the 1967 elections, the author contends that these marked the full revival of liberal democracy, suggesting that even some areas in Phongsaly and Sam Neua participated. Nonetheless, Lao citizens residing in areas under complete Pathet Lao control were still excluded from the election process.

Wolfson-Ford contends, "The most profound failure of the RLG to create a free, open society with respect to civil and political rights was excluding the Pathet Lao from the political system. Pathet Lao deputies were prevented from taking their seats when the National Assembly was closed in 1959" (p. 189). The concept of liberal democracy was further disseminated across the broader society as it became part of the RLG school curriculum. The author cites Souvanna's estimate that only 3 percent of the population were casualties of the war (p. 200), although this figure appears to be a significant underestimate.

*Forsaken Causes* offers a pivotal reexamination of Laos's political history during one of its most turbulent periods. Despite certain shortcomings in conceptual clarity, the book succeeds in offering fresh perspectives on the agency of Laos in Cold War geopolitics. It foregrounds the nuances of local political maneuvers, distinguishing the Lao experience from its Southeast Asian neighbors through the dual lenses of liberal democracy and anticommunism.

For historians and students of Southeast Asia, Wolfson-Ford's study constitutes a valuable addition to the existing literature, illuminating the complex and multi-layered history of Laos. The book challenges readers to reconsider established narratives and to appreciate the nuanced political landscape of Cold War-era Laos. *Forsaken Causes* thus offers a significant contribution to our understanding of both the history of Laos and the broader dynamics of the Cold War in Southeast Asia.