

# Laos 2024 Human Rights Report

## Executive Summary

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Laos during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings; disappearances; cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by government officials; arbitrary arrest or detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; witting cooperation with another country to carry out acts of transnational repression; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including censorship; trafficking in persons; and prohibiting independent trade unions.

The government did not take credible steps to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses.

Reports of human rights abuses, primarily involving forced or compulsory labor, by foreign investors (notably Chinese state-owned and private firms) were common. These entities often operated in autonomous Special Economic Zones; some had links to transnational organized criminal actors. Authorities generally did not investigate or prosecute such abuses.

## Section 1. Life

### a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year. In a report released in November and prepared for the United Nations' Universal Periodic Review of Laos, scheduled for 2025 (*Echoes of Injustice: Civil and Political Freedom Under Siege in Laos*), the human and women's rights-focused nongovernmental organization (NGO) Manushya reported on the deaths of known activists under circumstances suggestive of government involvement.

A woman named Bounleut, a member of the Alliance for Democracy in Laos, a Lao diaspora network of human rights and democracy advocates, was found dead after a reported motorcycle accident on June 23. Her death followed government harassment after she attended the 11th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development in Bangkok in February.

### b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

## **Section 2. Liberty**

### **a. Freedom of the Press**

The law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the government severely restricted this right through violence, intimidation, indirect censorship, control of the media, criminal defamation laws, and national security laws invoked to deter or punish criticism of the government.

The law forbade slandering the state, distorting party or state policies, inciting disorder, or propagating information or opinions that weakened the state; taken together, these severely restricted the ability of citizens to discuss matters of public interest.

In March, a man named Bee was arrested in Boun Tai District, Phongsaly Province, for posting a video on Facebook criticizing police officers for demanding bribes at a checkpoint near the Chinese border. Bee was forced to retract his statements and express regret for his actions in an apology video posted on the Phongsaly provincial police's website.

### **Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure**

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of violence, harassment, or intimidation against journalists by authorities or those acting on behalf of authorities.

## **Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups**

The state owned and controlled most domestic print and electronic media and closely controlled domestic television and radio broadcasts. Officials reviewed all articles in privately owned newspapers and periodicals after publication and by law could penalize those whose articles did not meet government approval. Publishers and journalists were generally aware of what content the government would approve for publication and practiced self-censorship.

### **b. Worker Rights**

#### **Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining**

The law permitted workers to form and join unions, but only within the framework of government control. The government recognized only the Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU), an organ of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. There were no independent unions and no legal means to establish them. The law defined collective bargaining but did not set out conditions, and it required the approval of all collective bargaining agreements by the state Labor Administration Agency. The law did not provide for the right to strike and forbade striking during mediation of labor disputes. The law did not address the legality of a strike if mediation or other legal mechanisms were unsuccessful. The law did not permit police or

members of the armed forces to form or join unions. The law did not prohibit antiunion discrimination.

The law allowed workers in the informal economy and self-employed workers to join LFTU-affiliated unions. It also established rights and responsibilities for “laborer representatives,” which the law defined as “an individual or legal entity selected by the workers and laborers in labor units to be a representative to protect their legitimate rights and interest.”

A dual system of representation effectively ensured government control over union activity. The law required LFTU representation in all workplaces employing 10 or more workers. Laborers who served as representatives of the LFTU were known as “grassroots representatives.” The LFTU also employed district and provincial representatives, on government payroll, to train and organize the workplace (grassroots) representatives. Both government-employed LFTU representatives and workplace (grassroots) representatives bargained collectively with employers on relevant matters.

Given total government control of union activity, there were no reports of government enforcement of laws on their establishment or operation.

Labor-related NGOs did not attempt activities they believed would be restricted by the government. The latter did support international labor-related NGO public affairs campaigns regarding workers’ rights to safety, fair pay, and representation.

Penalties for violations of freedom of association and collective bargaining were less than those for other laws involving civil rights violations and were never applied against violators.

Common employer practices that limited or violated worker rights included requiring employees to meet with LFTU representatives only during nonwork hours and offering bribes to LFTU staff to avoid interruptions to the workday.

To obtain LFTU representation in a labor dispute, the grassroots representative in the enterprise had to first raise the issue with her or his supervisor and employer. If this failed to resolve the dispute, district and provincial level LFTU officials could come to the workers' aid. Labor disputes were reportedly infrequent, and workers' engagement with LFTU officials outside the workplace was rare. The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare generally did not enforce the dispute resolution section of the labor law, especially in dealings with joint ventures in the private sector.

## **Forced or Compulsory Labor**

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **Acceptable Work Conditions**

### **Wage and Hour Laws**

The law set a minimum wage for some employees in the private sector, but it was below the official estimate of the poverty income level, and increases to the minimum wage did not keep pace with inflation.

The law limited the workweek to 48 hours (36 hours for employment in dangerous activities). The law limited overtime to 45 hours per month, and each period of overtime to no more than three hours. Employers were allowed to apply to the government for an exception to the overtime rules, which the law stipulated workers or their representatives also had to approve. Overtime pay was rarely granted.

Alleged violations of wage and hour laws were common for some piecework employees, especially on construction sites, in small factories and microenterprises. These workers earned less than the minimum wage. Workers in some special economic zones (SEZs) were paid only 50 percent of the minimum wage.

### **Occupational Safety and Health**

Occupational safety and health (OSH) standards existed and were appropriate for the main industries. The law provided for higher compensation for dangerous work but did not protect the right of workers

to remove themselves from a hazardous situation.

The law mandated extensive employer responsibility for workers who became disabled at work. In case of injury or death on the job, employers were responsible for compensating the worker or the worker's family. The law also required employers to report to the government accidents that caused major injury or death or required an employee to take four or more days off work to recover.

### **Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement**

The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare was responsible for enforcing wage, hour, and OSH laws, but it did not effectively do so. The law did not stipulate penalties for specific violations, but it stated they could include warnings, fines, "re-education," or suspension of a business license. Penalties were less than those for similar crimes, such as fraud, and were never applied against violators.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare's Department of Labor Management was responsible for workplace inspections. The number of labor inspectors was insufficient to enforce compliance. Inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions. The government partnered with international labor-related and other NGOs on Know Your Rights print and press campaigns as well as some radio advertisements.



Both Lao workers and undocumented migrant workers from neighboring countries such as Vietnam, China, and Burma worked informally in the construction, logging, mining, online marketing, and agricultural sectors, where wage and OSH violations were common. The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare reported it was difficult for authorities to collect accurate data on workers inside some of the country's SEZs. Most SEZ by-laws permitted some relaxation of labor laws but not outright dismissal, although labor laws were rarely enforced either within or outside of SEZs.

In January, the International Labor Organization estimated more than 83 percent of workers were employed in the informal sector, mainly in agriculture, construction, wholesale and retail trade, and household domestic work. The government did not enforce labor laws in the informal sector.

## **c. Disappearance and Abduction**

### **Disappearance**

There were reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities. Chilikham, a member of the Alliance for Democracy in Laos, disappeared on February 2 after collecting his new passport for a planned trip to Bangkok to attend the 11th Asia-Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development later that month. His whereabouts were unknown.

## **Prolonged Detention without Charges**

The law provided protection for individuals against arbitrary arrest and detention, but some government officials did not respect these provisions, and arbitrary arrest and detention persisted. The law promised detainees the right to a prompt judicial determination of the legality of their detention, but this was not consistently observed.

The law allowed detainees to be held for up to two months during an investigation for a minor offense, or three months for a major offense, before investigators were required to refer the case to the prosecutor with formal charges; this period could be extended for up to six months or one year, for minor or major offenses, respectively.

Police exercised wide latitude in making arrests, relying on a provision of the law that permitted warrantless arrests in urgent cases. At times authorities detained prisoners who had completed their sentences, particularly if they were unable to pay court fines.

Pretrial detention was a problem due to limited judicial capacity to try cases in a timely fashion and official malfeasance. Observers reported officials in some cases took bribes to shorten or lengthen pretrial detentions.

## **d. Violations in Religious Freedom**

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom*

Report at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

## **e. Trafficking in Persons**

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **Section 3. Security of the Person**

### **a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment**

The constitution and law prohibited such practices, yet there were credible reports government officials employed them, including reports of mistreatment of prisoners and detainees.

Impunity reportedly remained a problem. The Ministry of Public Security's Inspection Department allowed the public to submit written complaints via its website or through complaint boxes maintained throughout most of the country. Observers noted the website was cumbersome to use; statistics on the utilization of the website and boxes were not available. There was no known official body that investigated abuses by security forces. There were no known cases against officials accused of abuses.

## **b. Protection of Children**

### **Child Labor**

The law prohibited all the worst forms of child labor. The law set the minimum age for employment at 14 and limited working hours to a maximum of eight per day, provided such work was not dangerous or difficult. The law, however, also allowed children ages 12 to 14 to perform light work that did not affect their health or school attendance. The law applied only to work undertaken in a formal labor relationship, not to self-employment or informal work.

The government did not effectively enforce the applicable laws, reportedly due to a lack of inspectors. Penalties of imprisonment and fines were less than those for analogous crimes and were rarely applied against violators.

Child labor in the informal economy was prevalent throughout the country, mostly associated with family subsistence farming.

There were reports of child prostitution and child pornography – among the worst forms of child labor. Some observers alleged child sex tourism was increasing, especially in the capital.

### **Child Marriage**

The legal minimum age for marriage was 18, but the law allowed marriage

as young as 15 with parental consent. Observers believed underage marriage was a problem, particularly among certain ethnic minority groups and in poor rural areas. According to the 2023 *Lao Social Indicator Survey III*, published in January 2024, 6 percent of women were younger than 15 and 30 percent were younger than 18 when were married; for men, 1 percent under 15 and 10 percent were under 18 when married.

### **c. Protection to Refugees**

The government generally cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. The country received few cases involving claims for international protection in the year. There was no framework for identifying international protection needs or refugee protection.

#### **Provision of First Asylum**

The law provided for granting asylum or refugee status, but the government had no system for providing protection to refugees. The Ministry of Public Security did not routinely grant asylum or refugee status, but dealt with individuals on a case-by-case basis.

#### **d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement**

There was no significant Jewish community in the country, and there were no known reports of antisemitic incidents.

#### **e. Instances of Transnational Repression**

The government engaged in acts of transnational repression and knowingly cooperated with other governments to facilitate their acts of transnational repression.

#### **Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, or Violence or Threats of Violence**

Unlike in previous years, the government did not allegedly kill or kidnap individuals in other countries in reprisal for their political activities.

#### **Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, or Coercion**

The government allegedly harassed individuals in other countries for political reasons. Bounleut was reportedly harassed by authorities while in Thailand after attending the Asia-Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development, and later died in Laos in unclear circumstances (see section 1.a.).

#### **Knowing Cooperation with Other Governments to Facilitate Their**

## **Acts of Transnational Repression**

On May 3, Lao police arrested and handed over 17 Burmese nationals to the military regime at a border checkpoint near the Golden Triangle SEZ, according to Radio Free Asia and other media reports. The Burma regime allegedly provided a list of names to Lao authorities, claiming they were activists who supported opposition People's Defense Forces, but observers said they were casino workers and cleaning staff who had lived in Laos for several years and were employed by Chinese-owned businesses in the SEZ. The arrestees were led onto a boat by Burma military officials after the handover. They were reportedly forced to wear black bags on their heads during the transfer and were taken to Kengtung in Shan State for interrogation upon their arrival in Burma.