

that the Alliance should investigate thoroughly and assess the political implications of ecumenism as a means of improving relations between nationalities, (*Večernij List*, Zagreb, 12.10.88). (AKSA, 14.10.88, 21.10.88)

New Orthodox Cathedral

Throughout the year progress reports have appeared in the Serbian press on the building of the new Serbian Orthodox Cathedral of St Sava in Belgrade. The building of the new church has undoubtedly boosted Serbian Orthodox morale. The weekly *Danas* (Zagreb, 12.4.88) declared in an article, excerpts from which were reprinted in *Slobodna Dalmacija* (Split, 13.4.88), that due to the building of the new cathedral, the Serbian Orthodox Church was rousing itself after many years of inactivity. The Cathedral is already being visited by thousands of pilgrims from

all over Yugoslavia. (AKSA, 15.4.88, 29.4.88)

Medjugorje

Most reports on Medjugorje have concentrated on the commercial benefits of tourism. The fact that foreign tour operators have been exploiting the Medjugorje phenomenon to the full was regretted in *NIN* (Belgrade, 14.8.88) and *Nedjeljna Borba* (Belgrade, 20-21.8.88) (AKSA 19.8.88 and 26.8.88)

There was considerable press coverage of the claims by Goran Marjanović, a greengrocer from Split, that the Virgin Mary appeared to him on 1 March 1988 and promised to reappear again until 19 March, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, (Split, 7.3.88). (AKSA, 11.3.88, 18.3.88, and 25.3.88)

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Religion in Laos

The communist Pathet Lao victory of 1975 after 30 years of bitter civil war brought a new and alien system of government to this traditionally Buddhist country. Fears of religious and political persecution after the communist takeover led many people to seek refuge in neighbouring Thailand. This was especially true of the tribal peoples of the north of the country, many of whom, such as the Hmong, had sided more or less openly with the anti-communist forces. Some Buddhists, however, had been prominent in the Pathet Lao forces, and monks had taken part in

the guerrilla war as doctors and propagandists.

The new government's attitude to religion had superficial similarities to that of its Indochinese neighbours, Vietnam and Kampuchea.* The country was officially atheist, and the government took immediate steps to control religious groups. But in practice, life for religious believers in Laos has differed markedly from

*See 'The Catholic Church in Vietnam', RCL Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 80-83, and 'Religion in Kampuchea', RCL Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 169-70.

that of their neighbours. The Lao people, who make up about 60 per cent of the population of the country, have traditionally been tolerant of other religions, and their Buddhism is still impregnated with vestiges of their animist past. The majority of the tribal peoples are animist, and Christianity is confined to a very small minority. Islam too is only an insignificant force. This pluralist tradition was reflected in the Pathet Lao's communism, which is more tolerant and less ruthless than that of its Vietnamese or Khmer counterparts.

The new government avoided the physical annihilation of believers and places of worship adopted by the fanatical Khmer Rouge, or the tight control and restrictions employed by the Vietnamese. However, some of the same repressive measures were applied initially. Buddhism lost its place as the state religion. Buddhist religious instruction was forbidden in schools after 1975. Attempts were made to close down pagodas, and the number of monks declined. The 85-year-old Patriarch, Venerable Phra Thamyano, was put under house arrest, and his post was officially abolished in 1976. The deposed Patriarch fled to Thailand in 1979. The monks' hierarchy, the Sangha, was abolished, and replaced with a party-approved body, the Lao United Buddhist Association, a policy similar to the setting up of the Vietnamese United Buddhist Church. Other Buddhists were among the 15,000 people believed to have been taken into custody for 're-education'.

Christian churches in various parts of the country were closed. Two Catholic churches in the new capital, Vientiane, had to shut down, leaving only the cathedral, and in the former capital, Luang Prabang, the only church was closed, forcing Catholics to meet in private homes. All the

Catholic schools and the country's only Catholic seminary were closed and taken over by the state. The one Italian bishop, Alessandro Staccioli (the other three were local) was expelled from the country, as were all foreign missionaries. By Easter 1976 there were no more priests or nuns from abroad left in the country. Of the 45,000 Catholics in Laos in 1975, about a third of them are believed to have fled to Thailand.

The much smaller Protestant churches, founded as a result of activity by Westerners from the Christian and Missionary Alliance and others, suffered similar restrictions. Several pastors were arrested and church buildings were confiscated. Some pastors and believers fled over the border to Thailand.

These restrictions made religious worship almost impossible, except when believers met in secret or in the capital Vientiane, where a few pagodas and churches remained.

Since 1979, however, the situation for religious believers has eased slightly. A decree was reportedly issued in 1978 permitting and giving equal status to all religions except animism. The government never succeeded in isolating the people from religious influences, and the population remained devout in spite of the pressures on religious belief. Pagodas which were beginning to suffer from years of neglect gradually started to reopen and the number of monks began to rise again, with even young men becoming monks. Attendances at pagodas increased, especially on major festivals in the Buddhist calendar. A visitor to Vientiane in November 1981 during the most important festival of the year, Tak Bat, reported that most of the population of the city as well as people from further afield joined more than 1,000 monks in the That Luang temple. Anti-Buddhist measures were relaxed, and Buddhist holidays, which

the government had initially attempted to ban, are now universally observed, even by party members, although they are not official holidays. Government ministers attend leading Buddhist festivals, something which would be unimaginable in Vietnam or Kampuchea, and in November 1988 the President of Laos and the head of the armed forces were seen by western journalists worshipping at the That Luang temple.

The return of Buddhism to everyday Laotian life has not been matched by similar concessions to Christian groups. The Catholic Church has kept a low profile, and tried to avoid conflict with the communist government, but the church is still restricted in some areas of the country, especially in Luang Prabang province in the north. As far as is known, most of the 15 or so Catholic priests were detained in re-education camps after the communist takeover, but were at liberty by the late 1970s. In 1980, however, one of the three Vicars Apostolic, Bishop Thomas Khamphan of Pakse, was imprisoned, as was another priest, Fr Jacques Bounliep. In 1984 two priests and a catechist were arrested. However, they have all since been released. The bishop and Fr Bounliep were freed most recently, in August 1988, and have been able to resume their pastoral work. In spite of these problems, attributed to hard-line local cadres rather than to a systematic government policy, and restrictions on worship in some provinces effectively preventing the holding of Christian religious services, the Catholic Church in Laos has been able to maintain links with the Vatican. The Vatican's Pro-Nuncio in Bangkok has visited Vientiane several times, and the involvement of Catholic charities in development work, although not work of a religious nature, in Laos has kept

open lines of communication. The Laotian bishops have not been allowed to visit the Vatican, nor were they allowed to travel to Thailand to meet the Pope during his visit. In 1982 the then Apostolic Vicar of Vientiane, Thomas Nantha, obtained permission to attend the Asian Episcopal Conference in Bangkok, but this was revoked by the state at the last minute. A 1985 government suggestion that the Catholic Church should sever links with the Vatican (as was achieved in China and attempted in Vietnam) was not pursued.

Protestants too, who now number about 15,000, suffer restrictions on holding services. In May 1988 an American missionary from the Christian and Missionary Alliance, who are still able to operate in Laos, reported that more than 30 churches in Luang Prabang province have been instructed not to hold religious services. The secretary of the local party is reported to have issued the instruction, which applies also to Catholics, but not to Buddhists. The same month state security officials alleged that foreign missionaries working among tribal people in the north were engaged not only in missionary work but also in intelligence gathering for foreign countries. Missionaries had also visited churches without state approval. A pastor in Luang Prabang is said to have encountered difficulty because of his too-public celebration of Christmas. He was detained in 1984 and 1985 because of this, but it is not known if he has encountered problems since then. Protestants, unlike the Catholics, have accepted the government's scheme for setting up special committees to run each denomination. American Quakers and Mennonites are involved in development work within the country, although it is again work not of a religious nature.

Laos presents a paradox of an avowedly Marxist-Leninist country with an atheist ideology, where even government ministers are not afraid to be seen worshipping in public. Measures against religious groups similar to those adopted in Vietnam and Kampuchea were not followed through with the same ruthlessness and determination, and direct confrontation between religious groups and the new communist system was avoided. Laos' religious policy was liberalised long before that of its two communist neighbours. Buddhism plays a far more important public role in Laos than in Vietnam

and Kampuchea, and restrictions on public Christian activity in some areas have not prevented continuation of low-profile private activity. Hard-line ideological cadres are more to be found on a local level rather than in the upper echelons of the party. The foreign contacts which the country has maintained afford the Christian churches some degree of protection unknown to their counterparts in Vietnam and Kampuchea, who have had to rely more on their own resources.

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