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Somsavat Lengsavad [Laos, Deputy Prime Minister]

Somsavat Lengsavad

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Interviewee: **SOMSAVAT LENGSAVAD**

Interviewer: Minh Pham

Date: 13 May 2015

Location: Vientiane, Laos

00:00:22

[Minh Pham](#)

Mr Deputy Prime Minister, a real honour to be here. We would like to thank you from the bottom of our heart for this interview. We very much appreciate you taking the time during a very busy week to speak to us, thank you very much. Next month, Mr Deputy Prime Minister, you celebrate your seventieth anniversary, your seventieth birthday in fact. Your career has spanned a long six, almost six decades, fifty-four years to be exact. You joined the revolutionary movement at the very young age of sixteen. Could you tell us what motivated you, and how did you join the movement?

00:01:14

[Somsavat Lengsavad](#)

Thank you very much indeed for the interview with me today. I believe that you as the former UN (United Nations) resident coordinator, and the former UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) resident representative have a very good understanding of Laos. So, this interview is an honour for me indeed, as it shows your strong affection towards Laos. I also appreciate you following my CV (curriculum vitae) so closely and acknowledging that I will celebrate my seventieth birthday next month. As you may be aware, I joined the national struggle when I was sixteen years old. What motivated me to join the revolutionary movement at a very young age was the situation in my country. The revolutionary forces were struggling for independence for Laos. At that time, the revolutionary party concluded an agreement with the royal government of Vientiane for national unity. Therefore, the leaders of the revolutionary party joined the coalition government 1957. There were two battalions, the first one was located in the Xieng Gneun district of Luang Prabang province, and the second located in the Plain of Jars.

While the first battalion was in Xieng Gneun, they met with people from all strata of society, including students. I myself also had the opportunity to meet with them and learn the policies of the Lao Patriotic Front and that the Lao nation had been intruded by foreign forces. The Lao Patriotic Front was fighting against them in the struggle for independence. But when the Pathet Lao Front joined the coalition, the royal government of Vientiane backed by the US, arrested some leaders of the Lao Patriotic Front, one of whom was Prince Souphanouvong. At the time, many people were curious as to why Prince Souphanouvong, who came from the royal family, joined the revolution for national independence and sacrificed everything to mobilise and struggle for national concord. He was arrested by the royal government of Vientiane, which was backed by the US. So that became a topic of debate among the people and among the students as well.

00:04:44

[Minh Pham](#)

Deputy Prime Minister, following that you saw combat in the north of Laos, your struggle led you to fight with your colleagues from Pathet Lao in the caves in the north of Laos. Could you tell us about this experience, Deputy Prime Minister?

00:05:12

[Somsavat Lengsavad](#)

Given the situation in the country during that time, I, together with eight other colleagues, decided to leave our families and school to join the revolutionary movement, which started in the north of Laos. During my time in the north, I was very fortunate to become the secretary to the Northern Army commander, who was General Sisavath Keobounphanh. In my capacity as the secretary to the Northern Army commander, I assisted him to lay out the fighting plan to protect the political stronghold, which involved mobilising the people to have a sense of patriotism, and set up militias among the villages, among districts, and so on. As a result, the people's resilience gradually increased. Although the royal government of Vientiane brought much aggression to our territory, we were able to protect the political stronghold in the north.

I myself was involved in combat to defend the Sing district in Luang Namtha province at the end of 1963. At the end of 1963, I was involved in the attack of the royal government of Vientiane, and we were able to defend Sing district in Luang Namtha province. It was the first time in my life that I was exposed in the battlefield. I never had any military education nor training. They just handed me a rifle and gave me some advice on how to use it.

00:07:10

[Minh Pham](#)

Deputy Prime Minister, you mentioned about the resilience of the people and of course, the sacrifice of the people in that struggle. As an emerging leader, how did you mobilise the sentiment, how do you encourage people to make the type of sacrifice that they did during that struggle as an emerging leader back then in the 60's?

00:07:40

[Somsavat Lengsavad](#)

Once we arrived at the liberated area, the people of the Lao Patriotic Front began to sensitise us politically by retelling the story of our struggle for independence and liberation. Thus, I told the people the reason why Laos has such a long history. Laos has abundant natural resources, but why do people remain poor despite of that? For example, in the history of Laos, King Fa Gnum unified the Lao small states into a single kingdom called Lan Xang, then King Saya Setthathirat

continued to develop the country until the period of King Souriyavongsa and King Anouvong. That was how I reminded the people of our history. The former kings had established our country, but what impeded our national development was the many foreign invasions. So for the people to come out of poverty and to gain independence, we had no other choice than to be united, to rise up and fight together.

00:09:05

[Minh Pham](#)

Deputy Prime Minister, you and your family also suffered personally and made big sacrifice also during that struggle. Looking back, Deputy Prime Minister, what are the lessons you have drawn from that conflict, from your nation's struggle, and from your own personal struggle for your country's independence?

00:09:31

[Somsavat Lengsavad](#)

I trusted that in order to gain national independence and achieve the well-being and prosperity of our nation, we must remain firm, overcome difficulties and sacrifice everything for our nation and the people. During the struggle, it never crossed my mind that I would die, because I strongly believed that it was for a just cause. It was a mission for the nation and the people, hence I was resolute and was not afraid of dying. Because since an early age, I had been educated by monks in the temple, where I cultivated a sense of morality. A belief that good will defeat evil has also given me the courage to move on. Also, the party trained us to be optimistic revolutionaries.

00:10:42

[Minh Pham](#)

We have learnt that you were very close to President Kaysone Phomvihane. You just mentioned some of the qualities, some of the traits of a strong visionary leader, firmness, undying belief in a just cause, a sense of optimism, a sense of moral value in your cause as well. Tell us a bit about the lessons, or what you have learnt from Mr Kaysone's leadership, and how those qualities have informed your own leadership, then and now?

00:11:28

[Somsavat Lengsavad](#)

I was very fortunate and proud to be assigned as the secretary of President Kaysone since 1964. I was only nineteen years old at that time. President Kaysone asked me how many languages I could speak, when he first met me, he asked how many languages I knew. I told him I had graduated from a Chinese primary school, I could communicate in Chinese but not very well. I then graduated from a Lao school, where I also took some French classes. He further asked whether I speak Vietnamese. "No, I don't." I replied. He told me, "You should pay great attention to learning Vietnamese. Continue to improve the

languages you already know, but Vietnamese was a must," he added. He explained, "We fought alongside and worked with the Vietnamese regularly. therefore, it is necessary to know their language."

I came to realise that a good leader must be very educated, must love to study. That's why they have a great wisdom to guide. That was my first impression of him when he advised me to learn, even when we were in the cave, and there was airstrike outside, he was still reading theories. I saw him reading books on Marxism-Leninism, Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong, books and lessons from other countries around the world. I saw him putting so much effort into studying. I had learnt from him that a leader must be knowledgeable, and love to study. This habit was passed on to me. I tirelessly studied Vietnamese, but I did not go to school in Vietnam. Within three years, I was able to do translation.

I also learnt from the Vietnamese experts in the field. Sometimes, President Kaysone spoke to me in Vietnamese to see if I was able to answer correctly or not. That's why I spared no effort to learn that language. That was my impression of him, a leader who always loved to study and learn new things, because of which, he was able to come up with new ideas all the time. All the strategies and tactics he mapped out were the result of his study.

In the beginning, he told me that he had been a student at a law school in Hanoi. After that, he joined the revolutionary movement. He realised that to be a good leader you need to be close to the people. You need to stay side by side and live with them. Hence, during my time as his secretary, he often sent me to different villages and districts. In a year, I spent around six months living with the people. I had to go back and forth to report to him regularly. By doing that, he was able to check whether I knew the people's concerns and needs, and how I would address those concerns and needs. That was how he trained me using these practical situations. I will always remember my first field visit alone. I listened to them and took notes, then I returned and reported back to him.

00:15:37

[Minh Pham](#)

Deputy Prime Minister, if I could summarise some of the key values, or key qualities of leadership that you and also President Kaysone have displayed - a moral sense, a sense of moral value, one; courage, two; open-mindedness and intellectual curiosity; firmness; the belief in your just cause; a strong sense of optimism, and a sense of service to the people, and being close to the people; and a sense of loyalty to the people and to your cause. If you look at all those qualities today, and if you project the development of Laos in the future, what are the qualities you think Laos would need in a future leader?

00:16:47

[Somsavat Lengsavad](#)

To be a good and courageous leader, first and foremost you must be authentically patriotic. Authentic patriotism must be shown through being a role

model, a good role model in every aspect to your colleagues and to the people. For instance, to develop the country, you must address negative phenomenon such as corruption and bureaucracy, you must set a good example by eliminating these negative phenomena.

For national development, you as a leader, must set a good example by exercising thriftiness. A leader of the government must be a good role model, who respects and obeys the law. A leader of the party must respect and strictly adhere to the party's rules. Apart from that, a good leader must be very academic, have far-sighted vision and remain alert. As for President Kaysone, his strength was the ability to grasp the situation the country was in, as well as world developments. He told me that if you don't know your country's history, you won't be able to formulate policy that will serve your country well. I was really impressed by his courage. He dared to think, he dared to take action, and to take responsibility.

For example, once the nation was liberated, he made some adjustments to our path to socialism. He turned rural areas into cooperatives and converted industry sectors into state enterprises. After three years of agricultural cooperatives, we realised, after visiting the provinces, that they weren't very effective. We concluded that those practices might not suit our geography. That's what I meant by knowing your country's history and circumstances. President Kaysone had the courage to admit that the policy was a mistake and adjusted the cooperatives by giving each family a production deal.

00:19:58

[Minh Pham](#)

Deputy Prime Minister, you have met and you have worked with many leaders. Could you give us your sense of which one you have a lot of respect for?

00:20:11

[Somsavat Lengsavad](#)

I respect all leaders, but each of the leaders has his or her own unique traits. I extremely respected President Kaysone, I worshipped him as if he was a god. I have been working very hard until today. My colleagues always tease me that I have the same work attitude as President Kaysone. All of President Kaysone's successors were also loyal to his code. They have been carrying on President Kaysone's code for national development up to where we are today.

What I admired the most about President Kaysone was his dedication to learning, which no other leader can compare. I was very close to him, even in the final stage of his life. I still recall a doctor was looking after him by his bed. Though he was severely ill, he picked up a book and read. This is why I had so much respect for him.

00:21:29

[Minh Pham](#)

So, he was a father figure to you, Deputy Prime Minister?

00:21:33

[Somsavat Lengsavad](#)

That is correct, you may say so.

00:21:35

[Minh Pham](#)

Deputy Prime Minister, you mentioned this very strong sense of optimism in your struggle. If we look at the context of the struggle back in the 60's and early 70's, the country was against a formidable opponent. What's your source of optimism, Deputy Prime Minister?

00:21:58

[Somsavat Lengsavad](#)

I have a firm belief in our party's ideology, which is to fight for victory, and to lead our nation to prosperity. I also trusted that the people of Laos shared the same aspiration, so this mission must be conquered.

00:22:23

[Minh Pham](#)

Deputy Prime Minister, one cannot talk about leadership and one cannot talk about Laos without talking about the issue of unexploded ordinance. Two-point-seven million tonnes were dropped in the country in the so-called Secret War by the United States. As a leader, what would be your message to your people, but also what would be your message to your former opponent?

00:22:56

[Somsavat Lengsavad](#)

As a leader, I nourish moral virtues and have much respect for the friendship of the global community. Thus, I am very happy to see the people of America show their affection towards the Lao people. As we could see during wartime, there were the United States anti-war movements to support us. As you said earlier, the US had carried out the Secret War in Laos, Two-point-seven million tonnes of explosives were dropped. This was mainly due to the wrong policy conducted by the US government. I do think the American people would also be against the Secret War as Americans were also victims. There were American pilots who lost their lives. This was all because of the wrong policy conducted by the US government.

00:23:57

[Minh Pham](#)

So, you would separate Deputy Prime Minister, the policy of the government, versus the people representing that country, as from perspective of a leader.

00:24:09

[Somsavat Lengsavad](#)

That is correct, I do not believe that Americans had any hatred towards Laotians and vice versa. Just like you and me, we respect and care for each other. We are not opponents.

00:24:22

[Minh Pham](#)

Before we conclude this interview, Deputy Prime Minister, is there any point that we missed, or is there any point that you would like to emphasise to us in terms of from what you see as societal leadership quality.

00:24:41

[Somsavat Lengsavad](#)

As I mentioned earlier, to be a leader you must be a good role model for the people. You must not be selfish, you must always care for the well-being of the people. Given that people are still poor, we must find ways to free them from poverty. If the people are illiterate, we must find ways to educate them. One of the traits of a good leader is that you must respect your team members. You must respect and care for your subordinates. So, to conclude from my point of view, a leader must be a good role model in every aspect.

00:25:34

[Minh Pham](#)

I thank you very much Deputy Prime Minister, and we have learnt a lot from you through this interview. Your leadership over the last forty years since the change of regimes in Laos, the country has progressed significantly. LDC (Least Developed Country) graduation, WTO (World Trade Organization) accession, your leadership in the economic agenda of the country. We would like to pay you tribute to the success and to your leadership and thank you very much. I will personally miss you and miss your country very much and look forward to stay in touch with you and with our colleagues here.

00:26:19

[Somsavat Lengsavad](#)

Thank you, Mr Minh Pham. The success that Laos has gained over the last forty years of establishing the Lao PDR was the result of collaboration from friendly countries and international organisations including UNDP, where you were their resident representative. I would like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude to UNDP and to you, Mr Minh Pham, for your kind cooperation and for supporting our country all these years.

00:27:15
Minh Pham

Thank you very much.