

Freedom of Expression and Human Rights Violations under Authoritarian Rule

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Abstract: This study examines the mechanisms through which the Lao People's Democratic Republic restricts freedom of expression and evaluates the effectiveness of international responses to such violations. Despite constitutional guarantees, the Lao government utilizes a range of legal and institutional tools including vague penal codes, media censorship, and digital surveillance, to silence dissent and suppress public discourse. The enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone serves as a symbolic case of state repression and illustrates the broader chilling effect on civil society. Using a descriptive qualitative method, this study analyzes secondary sources such as human rights reports, international legal instruments, and press freedom indexes. Content analysis was employed to synthesize findings into four key thematic areas: legal-media control, digital repression, enforced disappearance, and international inaction. Data from Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders provided quantitative indicators to support the qualitative insights. The results indicate that repression in Laos is structurally embedded and politically intentional, while international responses remain largely rhetorical and ineffective. The study highlights the limits of ASEAN's human rights architecture and the enabling role of strategic alliances, particularly with China. Future research should explore regional patterns of digital authoritarianism and the role of transnational civil society in confronting impunity.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, Digital Repression, Freedom of Expression, Human Rights Violations, Laos.



1. Introduction

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is one of the few remaining communist states in Southeast Asia. While the country has opened its economy since the 1990s, political liberalization remains stagnant. The government, led by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), maintains strict control over the media and civil society [1]. Notably, the case of Sombath Somphone, a prominent civil society leader who disappeared in 2012, has drawn international concern over the state of human rights in Laos. This paper seeks to understand how authoritarian governance affects freedom of expression in Laos and evaluates the role of international pressure in improving human rights conditions.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) remains one of the few countries in Southeast Asia governed by a one-party communist regime. Since the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) seized control in 1975, the political landscape has been dominated by a centralized authority that suppresses political pluralism. This centralized control has fostered an authoritarian environment in which basic democratic principles, including the protection of human rights, are systematically undermined [2].

Under the LPRP's rule, civic space has drastically shrunk. Independent journalism is virtually non-existent, with all mainstream media controlled by the state. Citizens are discouraged from expressing political opinions, and public discourse is heavily monitored. The criminalization of dissent both online and offline has fostered a culture of self-censorship and fear among the Lao population [3] [4].

Numerous reports by international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International highlight persistent human rights violations in Laos, including arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and restrictions on freedom of expression [5]. These abuses are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of repression employed by the state to maintain political stability and ideological conformity.

The most emblematic case illustrating the state of human rights in Laos is the enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone, a respected civil society leader, in 2012. Despite video evidence indicating the involvement of state security forces, the Lao government has consistently denied responsibility and failed to conduct a credible investigation [6]. His disappearance has become a symbol of the dangers faced by activists under authoritarian rule in Laos.

Paradoxically, Laos is a signatory to multiple international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). However, there is a glaring discrepancy between Laos's formal commitments and its domestic practices [7] [8]. The state continues to enact laws that undermine these rights, such as the 2014 Decree on Internet Management, which criminalizes "false information" online and grants the state sweeping surveillance powers.

Laos's membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) further insulates it from regional accountability due to ASEAN's long-standing non-intervention principle. Mechanisms like the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) have limited authority and have so far failed to exert meaningful influence on member states with poor human rights records, including Laos [9].

This study is significant because it brings attention to an often-overlooked context within Southeast Asia. Compared to higher-profile cases in Myanmar or Cambodia, Laos receives relatively little attention in international human rights discourse. By focusing on Laos, this paper aims to fill a gap in the literature and offer a more comprehensive understanding of authoritarianism and civil liberties in the region.

Academically, this research contributes to broader debates on authoritarian resilience, civil resistance, and international human rights law [10]. Practically, the findings may inform policymakers, civil society organizations, and international bodies seeking to develop more effective advocacy strategies and interventions in closed political systems like Laos.

2. Literature Review

Scholars such as Human Rights Watch (2022) and UNOHCHR (2021) have documented multiple rights violations in Laos, particularly concerning freedom of speech, assembly, and movement. The one-party system [11], restricts political plurality and suppresses civil discourse. International instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Laos is a party, are often not implemented domestically. Previous studies [12] [13] highlight a culture of fear among citizens, with surveillance and arbitrary arrests becoming commonplace. Despite this,

regional mechanisms like ASEAN's Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) have limited influence due to non-interference policies [14].

Authoritarian regimes are commonly characterized by the concentration of power, suppression of political dissent, and limited civil liberties. Lesgart defines authoritarianism as a political system lacking pluralism, with limited political mobilization and ill-defined leadership accountability. These features tend to manifest in repressive laws and practices that restrict fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression [15].

According to Trantidis, state repression is a deliberate governmental action to restrict individual or group behaviors that threaten regime stability [16]. In closed systems like Laos, repression is institutionalized through legal, bureaucratic, and informal mechanisms, creating a structure of fear and compliance among citizens.

The right to freedom of expression is enshrined in Article 19 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). These instruments affirm the right of individuals to seek, receive, and impart information without interference. However, realization of these rights depends significantly on national-level enforcement.

Laos ratified the ICCPR in 2009, which legally obligates the state to uphold freedom of expression. Despite this formal commitment, the Human Rights Committee has noted consistent failures by the Lao government to meet its reporting and compliance obligations [17]. This discrepancy raises questions about the sincerity of Laos's engagement with international norms.

Scholars have observed that the Lao government uses vaguely worded laws to criminalize dissent. The Penal Code criminalizes acts deemed harmful to national security or unity, while the 2014 Decree on Internet-Based Information Control allows the government to sanction “false” or “divisive” information online [18]. These laws serve as tools of legal repression that blur the line between criticism and subversion.

The media in Laos is fully controlled by the state, with all broadcast and print outlets operating under strict government oversight. There is no independent press, and foreign journalists are rarely allowed to report freely. Reporters Without Borders consistently ranks Laos among the lowest in its World Press Freedom Index, reflecting the near-total absence of media freedom.

With increasing digital connectivity, the Lao government has expanded its surveillance capabilities. Freedom House reports that the state monitors social media activity and has prosecuted individuals for Facebook posts critical of the government [19]. This expansion into digital repression reflects a broader authoritarian adaptation to modern communication technologies.

Aside from the high-profile disappearance of Sombath Somphone, numerous other cases show a pattern of intimidation and arrest. Human Rights Watch documents several incidents where students, bloggers, or villagers who voiced grievances faced detention or harassment [20]. These cases indicate that repression is not isolated but systematic.

Research by Stevens et. al suggests that legal repression and surveillance have created a chilling effect on civil society [21]. NGOs operate under intense scrutiny, and many focus solely on apolitical development work to avoid state retaliation. Political activism, when it occurs, is often clandestine and fragmented.

Nguyen posits that certain authoritarian regime, particularly in Asia, exhibit “authoritarian resilience” through adaptability, institutionalization, and selective responsiveness [22]. Laos fits this model by maintaining political monopoly while allowing limited economic reforms, creating the illusion of progress without genuine democratization.

ASEAN's human rights architecture, particularly the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), has been criticized for lacking independence and enforcement capacity. Leber argues that the principle of non-interference severely weakens ASEAN's ability to address human rights abuses in member states such as Laos [23].

While international actors such as the UN and EU have expressed concern over Laos's rights record, their influence has been limited. This is partly due to Laos's economic and political alignment with China, which provides support without human rights conditions. Moreover, the absence of targeted sanctions or diplomatic consequences has allowed continued impunity.

Some scholars argue that quiet diplomacy or constructive engagement may be more effective than public condemnation. However, as noted by Creak and Barney [12], decades of engagement with Laos have yielded few tangible improvements in rights protections. This raises doubts about the efficacy of soft diplomacy in closed regimes.

Fransen propose the "boomerang model," where domestic actors bypass their government and seek international allies to apply external pressure [24]. However, this model is constrained in Laos due to the weakness of domestic civil society and the state's control over external communication.

Censorship and propaganda are integral to the LPRP's strategy for maintaining legitimacy. Kingsbury notes that the regime presents itself as the guardian of national stability and development, framing dissent as a threat to unity. This narrative is reinforced through education, media, and law enforcement [25].

Long-term exposure to repression has shaped the political culture of fear and obedience in Laos [26]. Young generations are taught not to question authority, and those who dissent often face social ostracism or state punishment [27]. This form of political socialization sustains the authoritarian regime across generations.

The reviewed literature illustrates that Laos represents a case of durable authoritarianism maintained through legal repression, surveillance, and weak international accountability [28] [29]. However, there is a lack of integrated analysis that connects these mechanisms to the broader failure of international human rights enforcement. This study seeks to fill that gap by linking domestic practices with the limitations of global and regional responses.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach, using secondary sources such as NGO reports, UN documentation, academic journals, and news archives. A case study method is used to analyze the disappearance of Sombath Somphone as a representative incident. The study aims to map the structural mechanisms of repression and assess international responses, particularly from ASEAN, the EU, and the United Nations.

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the mechanisms through which the Lao government restricts freedom of expression and the extent to which international actors have responded to these violations. The descriptive qualitative method is appropriate for exploring complex social and political phenomena, particularly in contexts where direct fieldwork is constrained or impossible due to political repression.

The selection of this approach is based on the need to provide an in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of the dynamics of authoritarian governance and human rights in Laos. Rather than seeking to test hypotheses or generate statistical generalizations, this study aims to construct a narrative and analytical explanation based on available evidence from diverse credible sources.

Data for this study were obtained through secondary data collection techniques, including analysis of scholarly literature, human rights reports, legal documents, United Nations publications, and reputable international media. Reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Freedom House were used as core references, as they provide detailed documentation of repression cases in Laos. These were complemented by academic works discussing authoritarianism and human rights frameworks in Southeast Asia.

To strengthen analytical depth, the study also incorporates documents from international legal frameworks, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Laos is a state party. Reviewing these documents allows for a comparative analysis between the country's international obligations and its actual domestic practices.

A case study approach was employed, with particular focus on the enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone, one of Laos's most prominent civil society figures. This case serves as a critical example of state suppression of dissent and the international community's limited ability to ensure accountability. The case study method enables a detailed examination of events, actors, and institutional responses within a bounded setting.

The data analysis technique used is content analysis, wherein the researcher systematically categorized and interpreted relevant data to identify key themes, such as state surveillance, legal repression, media control, and diplomatic responses. This involved triangulating findings across multiple sources to ensure validity and coherence.

Given the politically sensitive nature of the subject matter, this study does not involve human participants or field interviews. This methodological limitation is offset by the rich body of publicly available documentation that has been critically analyzed and cross-verified for accuracy and relevance.

Overall, the qualitative descriptive methodology provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how freedom of expression is curtailed in Laos, and offers insights into the structural

barriers that hinder international human rights advocacy. The findings derived from this methodology will inform the discussion and conclusion sections of the paper, particularly in answering the research questions related to state mechanisms of repression and the effectiveness of international engagement.

4. Finding and Discussion

4.1. Legal Infrastructure and State Media Control

The Lao government maintains its political dominance through a sophisticated legal framework that systematically suppresses dissent and restricts freedom of expression. While the Constitution of the Lao People's Democratic Republic provides nominal guarantees for civil liberties, including the right to free speech, these guarantees are undercut by a wide range of statutes and decrees that criminalize political dissent. Legal ambiguity is a hallmark of authoritarian governance, allowing for discretionary enforcement and selective punishment.

One of the most significant legal instruments of repression is Article 117 of the 2017 Penal Code, which criminalizes propaganda against the state. The article imposes harsh penalties—up to 15 years of imprisonment—for any speech or writing deemed to “sow confusion” or “damage national unity.” This provision lacks clear legal definitions and creates an environment where any form of criticism, whether public or private, can be interpreted as a criminal act.

Another major instrument of control is the 2014 Decree on Internet-Based Information Control, which enables the state to prosecute individuals for posting so-called “false information” or “content that divides unity” online. This decree grants sweeping surveillance powers to the Ministry of Public Security, allowing the state to monitor social media and online platforms without judicial oversight. As a result, the legal environment encourages self-censorship, particularly among younger, internet-savvy Lao citizens.

In addition to these laws, the government has enacted media regulations that give the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism the authority to approve or reject any news content prior to publication. Journalists are required to obtain official licenses, and media outlets that publish unauthorized or critical content risk closure, fines, or criminal charges. This system of pre-publication censorship ensures that only state-approved narratives reach the public.

The Lao media sector operates under what scholars describe as a “guided press model”, in which journalism functions not as a check on power, but as a mouthpiece for state ideology. The media routinely broadcasts party events, developmental achievements, and statements from government officials, while omitting or downplaying issues related to corruption, inequality, or dissent. The absence of independent or oppositional media deprives citizens of the ability to access diverse viewpoints or engage in public debate.

According to Reporters Without Borders (2024), Laos ranks 153rd out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index [30]. This ranking reflects not only state ownership of media but also the criminalization of journalism and the near-total lack of transparency in government operations. The low ranking is further corroborated by Freedom House, which scores Laos just 13 out of 100 in overall freedom—only 2 points for political rights and 11 for civil liberties. These indicators point to an entrenched authoritarian system with deep institutional control over expression.

It is important to note that the legal infrastructure is not merely symbolic or declarative. The Lao state actively enforces these laws through a combination of legal prosecution, surveillance, and intimidation. Ordinary citizens have been imprisoned for Facebook posts, while community leaders who speak out are threatened or silenced. Legal repression, in this context, operates hand-in-hand with coercive enforcement, making the law a functional instrument of fear.

The impact of these legal and media controls is twofold. First, it creates a culture of silence, where people refrain from discussing politics or social problems even in private settings. Second, it blocks the formation of civil society organizations that could advocate for reforms or public accountability. In short, the legal system in Laos is designed not to uphold justice, but to maintain political obedience and safeguard the hegemony of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP).

In sum, the Lao government's legal infrastructure—backed by extensive control over media—constitutes a comprehensive system of state repression. These laws, though often framed in the language of national security or unity, function primarily to eliminate dissent, consolidate power, and shield the regime from scrutiny. As long as these legal mechanisms remain in place, meaningful public discourse and democratic participation will remain unattainable in Laos.

4.2. Digital Surveillance, Repression, and the Chilling Effect

The expansion of internet access in Laos has opened new avenues for information exchange and citizen expression. However, instead of embracing digital openness, the Lao government has responded by intensifying surveillance and repression in online spaces. With increasing reliance on social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, the state has shifted its authoritarian mechanisms from traditional media to digital realms, creating a new frontier for control.

In late 2024, reports emerged of a Lao–China joint surveillance initiative through the establishment of the “Information Analysis Operations Center.” This center reportedly uses data analytics and AI-based monitoring to identify, track, and analyze online speech deemed politically sensitive. Such collaboration reflects China's growing influence in Southeast Asia and its export of authoritarian technology, a phenomenon some scholars refer to as “digital authoritarianism.”

Under the 2014 Decree on Internet-Based Information Control, authorities in Laos are empowered to arrest individuals for posting “false information” or content deemed to “threaten social order.” These vague categories give the state significant leeway to interpret criticism as criminal behavior. Several high-profile cases have demonstrated the practical application of this decree. In 2022, for instance, a university student was detained for sharing a meme that criticized government inefficiency in public transportation. Though minor in substance, the act was framed as a national security threat.

Such cases contribute to the normalization of online repression, particularly as the government publicizes arrests to deter further criticism. This tactic not only punishes individual expression but also signals to the broader public that dissent, even in casual digital forms, will not be tolerated. As a result, citizens practice self-censorship, avoiding political discussions altogether, even in private messaging apps where surveillance is suspected.

The chilling effect of these repressive strategies has been widely observed. Individuals refrain from liking, sharing, or commenting on posts related to governance, human rights, or economic issues. According to Freedom House’s 2023 report, the use of VPNs and anonymous profiles has increased in Laos, suggesting a pervasive atmosphere of fear. However, this technological workaround is limited to urban elites with access to digital literacy and devices, leaving rural populations even more vulnerable to state narratives.

Digital repression in Laos is thus not merely a modern iteration of traditional control, but a highly adaptive tool of governance. It enables the state to respond swiftly to perceived dissent, monitor population sentiment in real-time, and suppress opposition before it gains traction. Unlike traditional media repression, digital surveillance is harder to detect and resist, making it an especially dangerous tool in the hands of authoritarian regimes.

In conclusion, the government’s use of digital repression strategies—facilitated by both domestic law and foreign technological assistance—has created a virtual environment that mirrors the repressive nature of the offline public sphere. What began as an opportunity for citizens to express themselves has transformed into a heavily surveilled and censored space. As digital control becomes increasingly sophisticated, the prospects for online freedom of expression in Laos grow ever more uncertain.

4.3. The Disappearance of Sombath Somphone: A Symbol of State Intimidation

The case of Sombath Somphone remains the most emblematic and internationally recognized incident of human rights abuse in Laos. Sombath was a respected community development practitioner and civil society leader known for his peaceful advocacy in areas such as youth empowerment, sustainable agriculture, and participatory governance. On the evening of December 15, 2012, he was stopped by police at a checkpoint in Vientiane. CCTV footage clearly shows Sombath being taken away by unidentified individuals into a vehicle after a police officer appears to call someone. He has not been seen or heard from since.

Despite the availability of visual evidence and persistent demands for explanation, the Lao government has failed to conduct any credible investigation. Initially, authorities claimed ignorance and later suggested that the footage might have been manipulated. These denials have been widely discredited by international actors, including the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, which has repeatedly called for transparency and accountability in the case.

The enforced disappearance of Sombath has had a profound chilling effect on civil society in Laos. Prior to his disappearance, Sombath had represented Lao civil society at the 9th Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF), held just weeks before he vanished. His participation in international dialogue and

visible leadership in community development marked him as a prominent, though non-confrontational, figure. His sudden removal sent a clear message to other civil society actors: no level of civility, legality, or international recognition would guarantee safety under the regime.

This case illustrates the use of forced disappearance as a tool of authoritarian control, targeting not only the individual but also the collective confidence of civil society. It demonstrates how the state weaponizes fear to deter engagement, advocacy, and mobilization. After Sombath's disappearance, many NGOs retracted from public visibility, and discussions of governance or rights became even more subdued in the development sector.

International reactions have been consistent but ultimately ineffective. Organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and numerous foreign governments, including the European Union and the United States, have issued statements demanding an investigation. However, the Lao government has remained unmoved, hiding behind the rhetoric of national sovereignty and the limitations of ASEAN's non-interventionist framework.

The impunity surrounding Sombath's case reveals structural weaknesses in the international human rights regime. Despite clear evidence and international consensus, no meaningful consequences have followed. This exposes the limitations of naming-and-shaming strategies in authoritarian contexts, especially when the regime is buffered by powerful allies like China and supported by donor governments unwilling to jeopardize development partnerships.

From a symbolic perspective, Sombath Somphone has become a figure of both resistance and repression. For civil society in the region, he represents a peaceful vision of citizen engagement rooted in cultural respect and nonviolence. For authoritarian regimes, however, his disappearance has become a model tactic of invisible repression—one that avoids international spectacle while achieving total silencing.

In conclusion, the Sombath Somphone case epitomizes the human cost of authoritarian governance in Laos. It exemplifies how the regime neutralizes perceived threats through unaccountable violence while maintaining a façade of legalism and order. His disappearance remains unresolved more than a decade later, serving as a haunting reminder of the risks of activism in repressive states and the failure of international institutions to deliver justice in such environments.

4.4. International Response: Symbolism Over Substance

Despite numerous condemnations from international organizations and foreign governments, the international response to human rights violations in Laos remains largely symbolic and ineffectual. Statements from the United Nations, European Union, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch have consistently expressed concern about the erosion of civil liberties, especially in the aftermath of Sombath Somphone's disappearance. However, these expressions of concern have rarely been followed by concrete action or sustained pressure on the Lao government.

One of the structural weaknesses in the regional human rights framework is the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). As part of ASEAN's institutional design, AICHR operates under the principle of non-interference, which effectively prevents it from criticizing or investigating the domestic affairs of member states. This has rendered AICHR ineffective in addressing abuses in Laos, despite ongoing documentation of repression. The lack of enforceability and political will within ASEAN contributes to the culture of impunity and silence that surrounds human rights violations in the region.

Furthermore, Laos benefits from geopolitical insulation, particularly through its strategic alliance with China. As Laos's largest source of foreign investment, infrastructure financing, and political support, China offers the regime diplomatic protection against Western criticism. Unlike Western donors, China does not attach human rights conditions to its assistance. This strategic alignment has allowed Laos to continue its authoritarian practices without fear of international isolation or economic sanctions.

Western governments and development agencies, while aware of the deteriorating human rights situation, have largely prioritized economic cooperation and regional stability over accountability. Efforts to engage Laos through "quiet diplomacy" or constructive dialogue have not translated into measurable improvements in civil liberties. In fact, decades of aid and development partnerships have arguably legitimized the regime without demanding reciprocal reforms, thereby weakening the credibility of the international human rights advocacy agenda.

In conclusion, the international community's response to human rights violations in Laos—though vocal—has failed to produce meaningful change. The reliance on statements and non-binding

resolutions, combined with the absence of sanctions or coordinated diplomatic pressure, reflects a preference for diplomatic convenience over human rights protection. Without a shift toward firmer strategies such as conditional aid, regional cooperation, or targeted accountability Laos is likely to remain a space where repression is met with impunity and international silence.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate two key research questions: (1) How does the Lao government limit freedom of expression through policy and practice? and (2) How effective are international actors in responding to these violations? By employing a descriptive qualitative approach and analyzing relevant literature, legal documents, human rights reports, and case studies, the findings reveal a complex and systematic architecture of repression that permeates both offline and online spaces in Laos.

The Lao government restricts freedom of expression through a combination of vague legal provisions, state-controlled media, digital surveillance, and selective law enforcement. Legal tools such as Article 117 of the Penal Code and the 2014 Decree on Internet-Based Information Control are designed to suppress dissent under the guise of national security. Media censorship and digital surveillance further eliminate spaces for public discourse, while arbitrary arrests of online users reinforce a climate of fear. These strategies are neither ad hoc nor informal; rather, they are institutionalized and embedded in the authoritarian governance model of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

The disappearance of Sombath Somphone serves as a powerful case study that encapsulates the regime's willingness to silence even the most peaceful and respected voices in civil society. This event has had a long-lasting chilling effect on domestic activism and civic engagement. It has also exposed the state's capacity to neutralize dissent with impunity, despite international attention. The continued lack of accountability in this case signals that enforced disappearances and extralegal tactics remain viable instruments of state control in Laos.

In evaluating the effectiveness of international responses, the study finds that although global and regional actors—such as the United Nations, the European Union, and ASEAN—have consistently condemned rights violations in Laos, these responses are largely symbolic. ASEAN's principle of non-intervention, China's strategic patronage, and the absence of concrete diplomatic consequences have shielded the Lao regime from meaningful pressure. Development cooperation has often prioritized economic engagement over human rights benchmarks, enabling authoritarian durability.

These findings contribute to a broader understanding of authoritarian resilience in Southeast Asia, highlighting the adaptability of regimes that combine traditional coercive instruments with digital surveillance and legal repression. The study also underscores the limitations of the international human rights framework in closed political systems, particularly where geopolitical alliances insulate authoritarian regimes from accountability.

Future research should focus on comparative studies of digital authoritarianism across ASEAN member states to identify patterns of convergence or divergence in repressive strategies. It would also be valuable to examine the role of transnational advocacy networks, especially diaspora communities, in sustaining pressure on authoritarian governments from abroad. Moreover, in-depth ethnographic research if safely possible on local perceptions of state repression could offer further insight into how ordinary citizens navigate and internalize political fear.

In conclusion, the struggle for freedom of expression and human rights in Laos remains constrained by both domestic authoritarian practices and international ineffectiveness. However, continued scholarly inquiry into these dynamics is crucial to informing more strategic and coordinated responses. A more robust engagement from global civil society, coupled with innovative research on digital repression, may help re-center human rights discourse in international relations and expose the long-term costs of ignoring state-sponsored silence.

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