Laos is the only Marxist state in the world without a written constitution. Information about its political institutions (whose power focuses on the Supreme People's Assembly, hereafter the SPA) and its party institutions (whose power focuses on the Secretariat of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, hereafter the LPRP) has up till now come only through press releases and interviews. The fifteen year delay in producing a constitution contrasts sharply with the experience of other Marxist states, for whom a written constitution has proved a useful tool both internally for its legitimising function and externally as a platform for expounding the socialist programme best suited to the state's stage of development. A drafting committee has been at work in Laos since May 1984. In April 1990 the fruit of their labours was made public by "the campaign to organise discussion on the draft constitution among cadres and people". This campaign, like the extensive public meeting held in Burma during the early 1970s, has the primary purpose of promulgating the contents of the draft constitution. But, unlike the Burmese example, there is a secondary aim of providing a forum for the expression of grumbles and discontent. "The campaign . . . is aimed at enriching public life and extensively promoting democracy . . . People must be allowed to express their views, criticise each other; and criticise cadres, soldiers, policemen, and party and state organisation . . . "1 An English translation of the draft constitution was published in the Vientiane magazine Pasason on 4th June, 1990. It has since been reprinted in a form slightly more accessible to the rest of the world 2. 

The draft constitution's ten chapters follow exactly the model of the

1. LPRP Central Committee Secretariat Instruction No 21, 30 April 1990, quoted in Summary of World Broadcasts 20 June 1990, p. FE/0795 B/2.
1981 Constitution of the People's Republic of Cambodia. A short preamble summarising the history of the last six hundred years is followed by chapters on the political system, the sociopolitical system, and the rights and duties of citizens. The next four chapters deal with political institutions, starting with the SPA and moving down through the State President, the Council of Ministers and the Regional and Municipal councils. Chapter 8 describes the judiciary, chapter 9 defines the national alphabet, language, flag and anthem, and chapter 10 declares that only a two-thirds majority of the SPA has the power to amend the constitution. There are 73 articles, compared to the 93 articles of the 1981 Cambodian constitution. A clear source of many of the articles found in both the Laotian and Cambodian documents is the 1980 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. France's three ex-colonies in South East Asia continue to form a constitutional family, just as they did in the days when France ran the Indo-Chinese Federation from its administrative centre in Hanoi.

I shall describe the proposed institutions of government briefly: Sovereign power will continue to lie with the SPA, which is to be elected by secret ballot every five years. The SPA will meet twice a year to ratify proposed legislation, and to appoint the organs responsible for day-to-day decision making, which are the Standing Committee of the Assembly, the State President and the Council of Ministers. Following Lenin's principle of Democratic Centralism, the SPA also controls and supervises the organs of local government, which are Local People's Councils elected every five years at provincial and town level, and every two and a half years at District level. The draft constitution describes this as "the popular democratic system" but it is silent as to the role of the most important element of the system - the Communist Party itself. Marxist constitutions, with the unhappy exception of Romania under Ceausceau, give details of the state machinery, but ignore the party which wields it. In the draft constitution Article 1 makes the solitary reference to the party: "The LPDR is a popular democratic state under the leadership of the LPRP". It does not tell us that the party's organisation has the same structure as that of the state, with the party's Central Committee, Political Bureau and Secretariat analogous to the state's assembly, Standing Committee and council of Ministers. Nor does it mention that the five leading officials of the present state are simultaneously leading officials of the party.

All of this is standard-issue Marxist constitutionalism. We must look