LEADERSHIP CHANGE IN VIETNAM CENTER

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Abstract.

Political leadership in Vietnam is transforming itself, however slowly. It is marked by ambiguity, if not uncertainty. The unanswered question raised by this process are these: 1) is this change being directed from the top (i.e., the Politburo); 2) what are the outside and inside influences at work on the leadership; 3) is it possible for those inside the leadership system who seek change to maintain their integrity, or must they work outside their system toward some Western construct that can be adapted; 4) what is the role of the Party intellectual in all of this; 5) in broader terms can we expect communism in Vietnam to bend or will it break, and finally, 6) is it realistic ever to expect a Vietnamese civil society largely independent of government? Until we have a firm understanding, some genuine consensus about these questions, we must avoid precipitous moves.

Vietnam Leadership Culture.

For leaders in Hanoi since the end of the Vietnam War life has been a sense of wasted sacrifice and dashed expectations. Vietnam did not become, as Ho Chi Minh promised repeatedly through the long years of war, "ten thousand times more beautiful." Instead it descended into a grim time of troubles marked by new warfare, economic decline and enormous individual suffering. A bitter debate broke out among these leaders over the reasons for this postwar failure and what to do about it. To a certain extent the debate continues to the present as suggestions are tried tentatively (and often found wanting) and experimentation is exacerbated often by economic problems. The most useful action by the leadership has been gradually to take its hands off social and economic problems, and as it is put, "to allow the logic of the situation," to work its way. After years of no progress at all, by the mid-1990s a condition of what could be called the bare minimum level of progress had been accomplished. The system now can provide adequate food, sufficient if modest housing, basic education and rudimentary health care, as well as the consumer necessities of life and a small number of its luxuries. This economic improvement is impressive, even remarkable.

The name given to this experiment is *doi moi* (roughly, renovation). One would think that given its initial success it would have enhanced its prospects and encouraged the leadership to press on with the idea. But not so. It seemed the better the economy improved and the more the social scene settled, the greater became the leadership's anxiety. It stalled or backtracked in returning the nation closerto a market economy. It meddled in an officious way with Buddhist affairs in Hue. It intruded into the Highlands, siding with the coffee growers against the Montagnards. It wrangled with Cambodia for offering sanctuary to religious dissidents. All these matters could have been adjudicated, at least settled in a manner that would not have brought world criticism down on the heads of the leaders.

Most Vietnamese, even many in the South, saw Hanoi's 1975 victory as a vindication of the Party's line and strategy. Many, even ranking Party members, had strong doubts about the doctrine during the war but these were wiped out by victory. The party had proved its superiority. Actually, success was due to reasons other than doctrinal correctness but this was not apparent to the leadership, and in any event it is difficult to argue with a winner.

In a supreme irony, the Politburo in Hanoi, secure in the conviction that its doctrinal genius was proven, proceeded into the peacetime era with the dogmatic self-assurance that it knew the correct ideological road to follow. In its own insulated little world, it made decisions and issued orders. Soon Vietnam ran into the stone wall of reality -- in Cambodia, in China, in dealing with its own economic and social problems. Ho Chi Minh had promised that a victorious postwar Vietnam would live forever in a golden age. He had been believed and a brave new world had been expected. When the promise turned to ashes for no clear reason, it triggered an ideological crisis of confidence first within the Party and then outside of it. The Party now faces the task of explaining events

in terms of its sacred dogma and, beyond that, of developing some new satisfactory doctrinal construct.

Origin of Leadership Difficulties

Much recent political trouble would have been minimized had it not been for the concomitant deterioration of the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and, in particular, the decline in performance of the Party cadre.

More than any other single factor, the Party cadre were responsible for Hanoi's wartime victory. The cadre served as goad, inspiration and role model; with them the Party could continually mobilize and motivate the general population to victory. In the early years and throughout the war, the cadre corps, almost to a man, regarded Politburo leaders as omnipotent and nearly infallible. There is now a marked erosion of that perception. If it continues it will have a profound effect on Vietnamese politics.

No one is more dangerous or unpredictable than the disenchanted true believer. Loss of faith in infallibility quickly gives way to fear of instability, which can precipitate individual actions that guarantee instability, even chaos. This mindset of the VCP cadre—particularly regard for the leadership as superhuman—is difficult for the outsider to fathom. The tenacity of Vietnamese communist leaders, their implacability in the face of adversity, their immunity to the winds of change all combined with their record of proven ability ultimately to prevail have caused Party cadres (indeed many outsiders) to conclude that Hanoi's leaders were outside the laws of political change that operate elsewhere. This perception was strengthened by an intellectual isolation that prevented an infusion of ideas from the larger world or even the notion of alternate doctrines. It was further enhanced by the operative system in Vietnam, which precluded development of leadership; the system did not permit young Party members to gain experience in decision making at lower levels that would hone them for eventual top leadership roles. They suffered from arrested political development, were politically naïve. But this was the system's strength, for it created a faith from which superhuman performance flowed, a performance that largely was the reason the leaders were able to prevail and meet every test.

The postwar psychological letdown and continuing hardships resulted in ever worsening corruption, nepotism and "mandarin like" cadre behavior, which tarnished the cadre's wartime record of superior performance and virtually ruined the Party's image of omnipotence. Remedial measures -- purges, agit-prop and self-criticism sessions, re-indoctrination programs, etc. -- resulted in only marginal improvement.

The never-ending tension between the VCP and the rest of the society continues to this day. The Party, constantly insisting on its primacy and superiority, harangues and prods the people of the country who either accede to demands or passively resist them. The Vietnamese privately reciprocate by treating the Party with contempt or at least holding it in low esteem. The Party, said one articulate immigrant who left Vietnam recently, can be described as "the arbitrary moving hand-in-hand with the absurd," This is due to a

sense of a fall from grace among leading cadre, many of whom are bewildered at the advent of Party incompetency. Privately, some of the French-trained cadre use a French expression to describe their plight. The Party, they say, is in a state of moral secession.

However, leadership decline at its most fundamental level is traceable to the fact that Marxism-Leninism as a philosophic doctrine was slowly dying. The final stake through the dogma's heart was the break-up of the regional "Red Brotherhood", that mystical wartime steel hoop that bound together the true believers from North and South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and China, and allied them with the proletarians of the world carried along on history's wave of the future.

The changes inside Vietnam were both caused by, and contributed to change in Vietnam's international position. Most destructive of these was the cold war between Vietnam and China that began in the late 1970s. Hanoi's alliance with the USSR ended abruptly in 1989 when Moscow was forced to cut off economic aid to Vietnam. The double helix of luck -- spiraling sharply upwards for the ASEAN states and downwards for the three Indochinese countries -- made Vietnam's worsening leadership position ever more starkly apparent. In its foreign policies – confronting China, invading Cambodia, alliance with a distant and undependable Moscow, isolating itself from the capitalist world --can be found the clearest evidence of Vietnam's postwar leadership failure.

The Purge.

Official leadership response to cadre disarray, since the very early years, has been the purge. It has not been bloody as in the USSR and other communist systems; rather it has been a weeding out of Party ranks "those not of exemplary character…those who fail to demonstrate superior performance," to quote a Central Committee Directive of November 1999. There has been continual "purification" (to use the Vietnamese term) of the VCP since its formation, and especially in the postwar years. Chiefly, it has been directed at PAVN Party members, security force members, and ethnic Chinese. Unsubstantiated refugee reports say the campaign over the years was urged by Soviet advisers in Vietnam.

Directives in the 1990s ordered at least a 15 percent cut in membership, which would amount to about 225,000 persons, possibly as many as 400,000. Hoang Tung, Party ideologue, told a foreign journalist that 50,000 party members had been purged in the 1990s. Foreign diplomats stationed in Hanoi reported that a persistent figure mentioned in their circles was 500,000.

The purge is accomplished by the simple device of not issuing new Party cards to those deemed unworthy. The effort was directed at the rank and file and at regular cadres (*can bo*) rather than at leading or key cadre (*can bo cot can*) or high-level officials.

Supposedly all Party members are to be evaluated by their peers. A purge process begins when Party chapters receive instructions to hold special chapter meetings, out of which will come two sets of forms or reports. First there is to be a general freewheeling

discussion of each Party member by all other members present, describing strengths and weaknesses; the secretary takes notes on everything said. Then, each member fills out, secretly and anonymously, a form evaluating each of his fellow members on four points. Is the member totally loyal to the Party? Does the member have a militant revolutionary spirit? Does the member demonstrate socialist morality? Is the member regarded as a figure for emulation by the general public? Recommendation is made, which can be renewal of membership, probation, temporary suspension (pending fuller investigation) or expulsion.

Then the secretary's notes (unedited) and the evaluation forms (unopened) go to the special unit of the Party Control Committee in Hanoi. There, a new Party membership list for each chapter is prepared and sent to the chapter. New Party cards are then presented at some appropriate time such as a national holiday.

Meanwhile, Party recruitment goes on unabated. In the first nine months of 2001 a total of 11,233 new members were admitted, representing an annual increase rate of 3.2 percent. Some 89 percent were transferred from the Ho Chi Minh Youth Union, most of them from PAVN ranks. All of the new members, said an official statement, "were tested for capacity to overcome challenge" not further explained. (VNA Radio, 20 September 2001)

Current Leadership Scene.

An analysis of the Vietnamese leadership's efforts over the past decade to effect some changes and hold the line against others leads to six observations.

First, the leadership has now begun to acknowledge its own mortality. It can hardly be called rejuvenation but it does address the problem of age (if not senility) in the upper ranks, and more importantly it faces up to the question of generational transfer of power in Vietnam. At work in this process is a determination by the present rulers to name their successors, each from his own entourage or faction, conditioned by pressures from the cadre structure below.

Second, in more finite terms, the changes are a concerted effort to ease out of office reluctant, aged officials no longer equal to the daily burdens placed upon them. Since several of the figures are legendary, it is necessary not to demean the legend.

Third, the changes are meant to address some of the more serious problems besetting the economy and the society and to rectify social malaise, or "social negativism" as it is officially labeled. As such, these changes are essentially technical, a search for managerial competence.

Fourth, the changes are designed to tighten the Party's hold over the direction of military affairs. They must firm up PAVN to ensure its loyalty. In addition to the final elimination of ethnic Chinese officers, an estimated 8 percent of the PAVN officer corps has been weeded out on grounds of incompetence or "lack of character." Gen. Vo

Nguyen Giap headed a task force to "overhaul and make more rational" the entire political officer system within PAVN.

Fifth, the changes represent a political power struggle, communist style. Factionalism, the curse of all Sinic societies, continues to rag at the Hanoi leadership and recently triggered a new round in the endless political game of *bung di* (root out the faction). The struggle is cloaked in doctrine and fought out over issues on which the factions overlap: ideologue versus pragmatist, military versus security forces, North versus South, "political" generals versus "technical" generals, agriculturalists versus industrialists, etc. This, in the specter haunting Vietnam, suggests two possibilities previously unimaginable to Vietnamese communists: first, that the VCP might be rent asunder by factionalism and disillusionment with unpredictable consequences; and second (very nearly the reverse in ideological terms), that the VCP loosens its doctrinal hold on Vietnam and the country slowly and inexorably turns to what in that part of the world is regarded as democracy and capitalism

Conclusion.

Forces are now at work that are as enigmatic as they are unmeasurable. In the past, the leadership experienced few strains because of its enormously effective social control system. Hanoi exerted more social control and managed it in a more sophisticated manner than any other ruling group. Discontent was skillfully absorbed or shunted off but with no substitute institution – no minister of bad news, no in-house ombudsman—to supply the leadership with the benefits of criticism. This was comfortable for the Politburo but detrimental for the system. In effect, it eliminated internal pressures and demands on the leadership. In the past, leaders were able to overcome discontent and resistance by consistently demonstrating competence in managing Party and State affairs. Its strength came from establishing government as administration rather than government as politics. It was not plagued by petitioning constituencies, parochial or vested interests, and grass-roots politics. Like colonial rulers, it could build a road where engineers said it should be built, not where legislative politics dictated. The test was competence and as long as that test was met, the Politburo and its system were secure.

It is clear that Vietnam, like most of the rest of Asia, is transforming itself. The pace of change varies from country to country, or more correctly, society to society. What is not clear, especially with respect to Vietnam, is whether this change is being directed from the top, or whether it will come from inside the system or outside. Can one retain the integrity of one's politics while part of the system is working from the inside or is it that the only way to create a civil society generally free of government interference is from the outside? In Confucian Asia, -- consensus-oriented and bound by a code of relationships -- is the notion of a system once a Western construct, or can it be adapted to work to work in Vietnam?