

VIETNAM: TOWARD THE OPEN SOCIETY

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The Vietnamese have a great consciousness of history—are burdened by it in fact—and delight in ruminating with visitors they feel they can trust about the recent past. They interpret their history, revise it, seek to extract its meaning and explore the might-have-beens, the roads not taken. In this the old are defensive and the young are critical. General Vo Nguyen Giap acknowledges to visitors no mistake ever made in pursuit of the war, refuses to confirm the estimated two million casualty figure. Young Hanoi military strategists tell visitors, guardedly, that while the North's cause, unification of the Fatherland, was a correct and holy one, too high a price was paid to attain it, that it could have been achieved sooner, more easily and at less cost in lives and treasure. Economists say that Vietnam has the densest bureaucracy in the world and that is the chief problem. Party theoreticians tell you that socialism still represents the best of all the worlds if only it is managed correctly. Southerners, again guardedly, tell of their contempt for "the Viet Cong, those masters of destruction who can tear down but not build up," as one respected writer put it, and who added ominously, "we went through Hell down here after the war. But never again."

How Vietnam is run. Governance in Vietnam involves two major institutions, the State (or government) and the Communist Party. Picture the two as a broad pyramid, which is the State inside of which is a narrow pyramid, running from apex to a base. Then picture this structure sliced horizontally to form a series of descending committee levels. At the top is the Politburo and its Party Central Committee; and on the State side, the Cabinet and the National Assembly (with its mass organization called the Fatherland Front). Descending the pyramid are a series of lower level committees, interzonal level (province and district) and at the bottom a rice roots party committee called "people's government." At each level Party members are part of the governing committee, insuring that political control comes from the inside out, and the committees are not puppets on a string.

If and when political change comes in Vietnam it usually is timed for the Party Congress which is held every five years. A Party Congress is not a policy making event. Chiefly it involves political mobilization and spiritual (ideological) motivation. Before it is convened the Politburo decides policy—what is to change, what is to stay; and top personnel assignments: who gets promoted, fired, shifted. Then, draft policy papers and name-lists go down to local party congresses—at provincial and municipal level. Here the Politburo's decisions are explained by Party cadres from the center—whose job really is to sell the contents to the faithful. The rice roots congress is not a rubber stamp. There is discussion, sometimes heated, and many suggestions are made. Cadres note these and take them back to the center where the drafts are rewritten—hopefully to make them more palatable. The idea here is that Party members are told this is how things are going to be, but we want your support, we want you to come to the National Congress in a spirit of harmony, prepared to be enthusiastic about what we have ordained.

The Politburo's system of decision making never has been delineated by anyone to the satisfaction of North Vietnam's experts and other Hanoi watchers. Generally, it is accepted that the Politburo operates under an operational code of collective leadership

with the rule that no decision is taken which is not tolerable to all members. A decision may be strongly opposed and disliked by a single Politburo member, but it may not be a total anathema to him. The validity of this collective leadership thesis rests not on consideration for personality or individual ego but as a manifestation of the internal politics within each of the constituencies of each members. The Politburo is *seen, not* as a small group of leaders debating their opinion, but as an arena where the chief agents of the country's major institutions battle out and ultimately determine important policies for the society. Each Politburo member has a constituency which he may run, but one that also constrains him, often determining the policy positions he takes on any particular issue before the Politburo.

The essential policy debate at the Hanoi leadership level is this: all members of the Politburo—and most of the Central Committee and ministerial level officials—want rapid economic development. They have different rationales for this—the military support it in order to strengthen their defense structure, for instance—but no one challenges the desirability of the economic development. Further, all acknowledge that the present ruling political arrangement—the Leninist system, in which the Party monopolizes political power—is going to have to change.

Leadership. The Hanoi leadership system since its inception in 1955 (and extending as an institution back to the beginning of World War II) demonstrated a constancy of purpose and consistency in behavior matched by few other world ruling groups. Its steadfastness, however, by its very nature ultimately proved to be a weakness—a leadership inflexible and unequal to meeting the needs and the interests of a changed Vietnam. The performance record of the Politburo since 1975 is clear, failure in running a semi-modern peacetime economy. Its wartime virtues—tenacity, determination, doggedly staying the course—became vices in peacetime. Its basic principle of wartime operations—sustained, prolonged, application of total force—could not be adapted to postwar policy making skills, where a softer, subtler and more flexible style of leadership is required.

After the Vietnam War the Politburo grew older, ever more self-contained, unwilling to listen to advice even from its own Central Committee. One by one death or disability reduced the original membership. But never was there the conscious decision to replace itself in a generational transfer of political power. Finally the Seventh and Eighth Congresses swept the Politburo more or less clean.

All of the original old guard have stepped down except Do Muoi (perhaps Vo Van Kiet is in this category). Sixty percent of the Politburo were new faces and 30 percent of the Central Committee first timers. By the 1990's the Politburo had become somewhat younger than its predecessor (average age being about 65 [vs. 72 for outgoing]. Five members were in their 50s, the youngest being 52). More are what are termed technocrats (i.e. functionaries) as opposed to the former “jungle fighters.” The present Politburo therefore is somewhat more “professional,” less influenced by class consciousness, more familiar with science and technology. There are more southerners, at least five, plus several others with long service in the South who can be depended on to understand the South and more sympathetic toward its problems and its potential.

It could be argued that there was also a shift in the Politburo balance of power, from neo-conservative to reformer. More correctly, however, it would seem that there are fewer of either type who are clearly discernible. New members tend to be apolitical, or at least not clearly identified with any of the major political factions or with a strong policy/ideology positions. Indeed, persons who attended the last Congress report privately that those individuals considered to be “non-political” got the most votes.

Some observers see the political scene in Hanoi as emerging into a contest of strength and struggle for power between the military and the security police. Mai Chi Tho's departure as Minister of Interior was seen as a victory for the former, a defeat for the latter. Some even go so far to suggest that the PAVN generals may at some point move to "protect" the Party much as the Polish Army generals did in response to the rise of the threat represented by the Polish Solidarity movement. It would not be a coup d'etat; rather, PAVN generals would rule in the name of the Party. The scenario as projected: discontent over the inability of the regime to make economic progress leads to a revolt by the masses that splits the Party. In desperation, since it is the only force that can prevent destabilization, PAVN generals more in sorrow than in anger, announce they are returning Vietnam to the true revolutionary path, one that is radical but also scientifically rational and technologically orientated (probably also mythic and millenarian). Undoubtedly this would engender a bitter, probably bloody, struggle within PAVN, resulting in a shakeout of the top military leadership.

This scenario is only hypothetical. What does seem to be certain is that the era of monolithism in Hanoi is passing. Divisive forces within the society, so successfully held at bay through 25 postwar years, are now loose. Vietnam is soon to be whipped by the winds of change. The focus of this storm when it comes will be a generational transfer of power. Around it will revolve the other forces for social change: party cadres disenchanted by a failed economy and the Party's explanations; the restive young longing for a freer, richer life; veterans considering themselves inadvertent postwar victims; and, most of all PAVN, rent by forces of change it does not understand yet seeking to stand against them.

The Party Plans. Communism is dying in Vietnam, slowly and one even might say, gracefully. The outward trappings are still there, the symbols, the annual enthusiasm in observing the Party's birth, and obeisance to the icons, Ho Chi Minh, Marx, Lenin and even Stalin. At the same time image distances itself from reality. Lip service continues, but that is all. Communism is no longer regarded as an infallible guide to interpreting the past and fixing the course to the future. Northerners, especially the true believers, agonize over this demise, not in their minds but in their hearts. Few can face the stark realization that a lifetime of dedication to the cause has come to naught. One of them, a highly placed Politburo figure, said to the author, "We cannot abandon our system because we paid such a high price for it." This confirms the belief among southerners that the South was right all along, and deserved to win, and had the South won it would have been better for all, including the Northerners. Yet Southerners, too, share the same sadness of lost years and wasted sacrifice. This is not simply another manifestation of the North-South geographic regionalism. There are those in the North who say the Revolution went wrong when it incautiously embraced the imported concepts of Marxism-Leninism rather than to find an indigenous path to socialism which would have been acceptable in the South. And in the South there remain a scattering of unreconstructed revolutionaries still firmly dedicated to class struggle and collectivism. The point of this, and its significance for the future, is that Vietnamese attitudes toward life and change were never polarized, North and South, by geography or even secularism. Always, and this is seldom grasped by foreigners, there has been a sense of transcendental humanism. That is why in the aftermath of war the Vietnamese did not react or remember as did the Americans, or the French before them, or the Chinese before and later.

Party intellectuals at the Ho Chi Minh Institute in Hanoi, the Party's foremost think tank, do not acknowledge that communism is dead. But they tacitly admit that the Party is in deep trouble and they candidly tick off for a visitor the evidence of decline: a

golden wartime image, now badly tarnished; the Party reputation for near infallibility discredited, its membership disillusioned, its cadre morale sagging; everywhere evidence of the twin sins of revisionism and deviationism. Still, they say, the system must not change, the Party must continue to monopolize political power. It is willing to accept suggestions and even criticism but cannot share political power for to do so would destroy the Party and leave only anarchy, absence of government. Thus Vietnam must maintain the “political character of the State and the class nature of the legal system.” This barricade is to be held for as long as possible, say these intellectuals, while in the meantime they concentrate on saving the Party. The Party’s condition is not irredeemable as with communist parties elsewhere. There is a loss of belief in the Party but not loss of trust. It can be saved and the intellectuals at the Ho Chi Minh Institute have a contingency plan to do so.

The plan begins by house cleaning, already underway. Party incompetents and second raters are being eased out of key positions as gently as possible, into retirement or harmless sinecures. This represents a traumatic but necessary change of personnel policy. In the past, rewards and promotions were based on Party loyalty alone, and were guaranteed and automatic for the fully loyal. It is a policy the Party can no longer afford, say officials. The heart of the plan is to co-opt the youth of the nation as future Party leaders. Said one theoretician, “The Party is scouring the countryside to recruit the best and brightest of the young and put them on the career ladder which leads to the top.”

It is clear planning for Vietnam’s political future is based on political developments in Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore, i.e. carefully moving the system from hard authoritarian to soft authoritarian to political pluralism.

The goal is renovation and recruitment so as to position the Party for the day when the Party’s monopoly of political power can no longer be sustained. It is highly significant that these top level ideologues are now committed—resigned is perhaps a better term—to an eventual multi-party system in Vietnam. But they seem confident that if the Party can vet its dead wood and field a corps of politically skilled cadres adept in the time tested devices of fragmenting political opposition by playing one faction off another, then the Party can meet and defeat any combination of political challenge. It can win control of Vietnam at the polls, openly and honestly. This is a bold, risky plan, one not fully accepted by all Politburo leaders, which is not to say it won’t eventuate. In actuality what is under way in Vietnamese politics is the one immutable law of history: the law of change.

Democracy. Western academics, political scientists and others in addressing the prospects for democracy in Vietnam immediately encounter a major ontological problem (to remind: ontology: that branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being, of reality). So, what is the nature, the reality, of democracy in Vietnamese culture?

When Vietnamese call for democracy in Vietnam most do not mean Western style democracy. Rather, they mean Vietnamese style democracy. There is in their concept, however, some elements of Western democracy: a written constitution; government by rule of law, rather than government by communist party fiat; naming those who are to govern through fair, free means (but not necessarily through the franchise, i.e. elections); and an independent judiciary ensuring equal justice for all (a sense of impartial justice and fairness in equity is the essence of Vietnamese democracy).

Vietnamese tend to equate Western style democracy with individualism which in turn they equate with personal selfishness. It is not an unfair characterization. Their democracy is defined more in terms of relationships, but not expressed in terms of the individual. Rather it seeks to accommodate social harmony, not to serve personal satisfaction.

Always there is in the West this delicate balance between the rights of the individual and the needs of society. In traditional Vietnam it was more a matter of the rights of the *Ho* (extended family) vs. the society, as represented by the emperor. The individual was not counted in the national census, only the household. The family was the smallest social unit—one lamp, one fire—says the ancient Vietnamese proverb. Any future Vietnamese democratic system must rest on this principle.

In the West the individual is the smallest social unit. The family counts for less. This is both a strength and a weakness for Western democracy. Strength comes because it equates the individual with personal freedom. And freedom in the West is the central value—not the only value, but the organizing value. It is what makes everything else worth having, worth doing, worth being. Many Americans are willing to fight and die for freedom but for nothing else.

However, personal freedom is also a weakness, for it works against social consensus. It need not be that way, but it is in the West. The price we pay for individual freedom is pluralism carried to the extreme, something to become an uncontrolled impulse. We trade liberty for ever diminishing social harmony.

Vietnam Legislature. In addition to altered leadership, Vietnam requires major institutional change, a fact which now seems generally accepted. Significant experimental change of government is under way in the National Assembly, and may pave a major road to an open society.

As originally conceived, the National Assembly in Hanoi was not a legislature comparable to other legislatures around the world. Rather, it was intended to be an instrument for mobilizing public opinion and motivating rank and file Vietnamese to support Party plans and programs. Its operational instruments were the mass organizations, primarily the Fatherland Front but also other organizations of workers, women, farmers, youth, intellectuals, etc. The National Assembly was an important mobilizing instrument, but was not a law making body as legislatures elsewhere. The law was fixed in Hanoi by the Party and sent down to the province committees and state enterprises in the form of Congress resolutions, Politburo directives, Central Committee instructions, and so on. The law was what the Party said it was that day; tomorrow it could be something different. These instructions were written in ideological language, hence subject to wide interpretation, varying often from one province to the next. This method of government—known as the “mechanism of (social) movement system.” (*phong trao*)—worked fairly well in North Vietnam during the war but after the war it became disastrous. So it was told, privately, by the international lending agencies.

In the mid-1980s the Party realized that its elitist cadres corps were simple unable to manage all, control all, solve all problems. Government once simple had become diversified and complex. The Party needed help. Hence, there began a concerted effort to pass some of the burden of rule to the National Assembly. The Assembly leadership reacted by arguing that if the Assembly was to assume new duties and responsibilities it also must have greater authority. Concessions were made. With increased responsibility came new political latitude for the Assembly. The favorite jargon word used in the press to mean converting Party line into action programs is *concretize*—as in “to concretize major lines and policies as set forth by the Party, turning them into legal documents to serve daily life in the spirit of renovation.” (Vo Van Kiet Rado Hanoi interview Aug. 16, 1991)

It is now mandated that Vietnam is a “constitutional state” (*nha nuoc phap luat*) and government by Party fiat has been replaced by government by law. The party still monopolizes policymaking. Policy is to be communicated to the National Assembly, still in ideological language, whose job is to translate it into legal language, and send it, as

laws and legislation, down the line for implementation. In effect the National Assembly become the country's chief executive officer reporting to the Politburo as a board of directors. The first task was to produce a body of basic legislation in support of this new governmental system. Dozens of new laws were promulgated and now are in various stages of implementation. It is too soon to judge how this experiment will work or whether it will become a major contributor to increased social consensus in Vietnam.

The proposed changes can be read two or more ways depending on interpretation of rhetoric. Many specific terms employed are highly ambiguous in meaning, probably deliberately so. Particular sanctions dealing with the ideological basis of the state are given to differing interpretations. On the one hand the Constitution seems to be a firm statement, now if anything made even firmer, that the fundamental concept of the Vietnam state will remain unchanged. The Party will continue to monopolize political power and while it is willing to entertain criticism and suggestions from the National Assembly and allow administrative authority and responsibility to State elements, it will not share political power. Nor is there to be any division of power within the State's jurisdiction, i.e. no compartmentalization of executive, legislative, and judicial functions. The operative political theory is that the sovereignty rests with the people but is exercised solely by the Party. Therefore all State (and National Assembly) actions "must reflect the people's will as determined by the Party."

The ideological section of the Constitution, particularly those portions related to economic dogma, tends to stress the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh as source of inspiration at the expense of Karl Marx. Ho always was a model for emulation but not for his intellectual concepts concerning history and economics, hence the purpose of this change of focus appears not so much to raise Ho's thought to a more central level, but to reduce those of Marx. More of Lenin survives here than Marx. The revisers are indeed correct, the Party must continue to monopolize political power because otherwise the Leninist system will not work. Their calculation is that it can be adjusted and amended and will prove to be workable and viable. But of course that was the initial thinking of Gorbachev, Ceausescu, Honicker, the Polish generals and others.

It appears that whatever the exact form adopted finally the National Assembly will come to act more in the manner of legislature elsewhere; with more authority. The increased latitude in interpreting basic policy handed down by the Party. This means it will be more deeply involved in addressing Vietnamese economic problems (and presumably more sympathetic to the idea of a market mechanism economy).

Future Rulers. Given the complexity of determining who the future rulers in Vietnam will be, to say nothing of our knowledge of likely candidates, judgements on the future of rulers in Vietnam must be highly tentative. However, based on a variety of indications—such as the behavior of youth; the context of Vietnamese education, and recruitment methods, certain characteristics of the next generation of leadership can be isolated. There are at least three such characteristics.

The first is the most obvious: the great formative social trauma will be the Vietnam war. Every generation everywhere has some great social experience or trauma which helps shape it. For example, among Americans, the social trauma of Lyndon Johnson's generation was the great depression; of the John Kennedy generation, World War II; of the present arriving generation, the great cultural revolution of the 1960s. In Vietnam clearly the major social trauma which is to shape the thinking of the next generation will be the war that achieved unification of the country under a Marxist banner. This will, in Vietnam, have added meaning, for the Vietnamese have a profound consciousness of history and in fact are burdened by it, unlike say the Americans.

Second, in terms of education and experience, the next generation will be less worldly and, perhaps as a consequence of this, more idealistic. It is a characteristic still strong, but changing. The older generation was well traveled and at home with foreign ways and ideas. Ho Chi Minh was out of Vietnam from 1913 to 1940. Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap were educated in French schools and fluent in French. The next generation will be more purely Vietnamese in heritage. Fewer of its members will have been abroad. It will be the first Vietnamese ruling group in more than a hundred years which largely speaks no foreign languages. Having been isolated from many ideas—both foreign and domestic—the next generation will be (or appear to be) more idealistic. In the summer of 1969 the author conducted extensive interviews (in chieu hoi and POW camps) among northern Vietnamese in the mid-30s age range. He was struck by their idealistic world view. Almost all manifested a belief in the perfectability of man and the possibility of attaining a social utopia. It was the naive attitude common among college freshmen everywhere but thereafter lost in maturity, but these people were in their 30's. Certainly it was uncommon among middle aged Vietnamese, who in the south are generally the most suspicious, distrusting and cynical of any peoples anywhere in the world. This idealistic socialization system limits inculcation of much external information and many ideas which amounts to a case of arrested political development. But it is changing.

The third characteristic, perhaps a reflection of the second, is that the next generation of Vietnamese leaders probably will be less internationally minded. This will mean, in practical terms, less commitment to the Marxist notion of worldwide proletarian solidarity. Travelers to Hanoi often report encountering isolationism among youths. Some go so far as to call it paranoia toward foreigners. This is a tendency of the young to equate foreign presence—such as USSR technicians—with intrusion into Vietnamese affairs and attempts to dominate Vietnam, even when there is no evidence that this is the case. Commonly young people express the need for Vietnamese “independence” from outsiders, asserting that Vietnam should go it alone in economic development (which is not the official policy) even if this means less is accomplished or progress is slower. Hostility for the Chinese is reported as particularly sharp among the younger generation. The Marxist social myth of proletarian brotherhood workers of the world, unite—appears to have little appeal for the next generation's leaders.

There are other characteristics of the young, and other forces at work, which also will shape the future leaders of Vietnam. But these, at the moment, are indeterminate. Certainly the next generation of Vietnamese leaders will be collectivist minded, dedicated to the idea of mass society. Probably the South will have a deleterious (or modifying) effect on this. Already the “southern experience” as it is called is cutting into the values of the spartan northern society.

The long running major doctrinal debate—over the role of ideology in life styles and decision making—will be carried over to the next generation. Increasingly, perhaps it will turn on the question of the place of the Party in society. Is the Party central to all, or is it—as it was once whispered in the USSR and East Europe—fast becoming “irrelevant?”

Finally there is the simple fact of generational change. When son takes over—in this instance it is more a case of grandson taking over—things can not be the same. Grandson may admire grandfather, may even genuinely want to emulate him. But soon he finds that the world has changed. Grandfather's ways, once so wise and proper, no longer seem appropriate. Once again there is demonstrated the single immutable law of history: this too shall pass away.

Conclusions. The present rulers in Hanoi are uncertain and afraid—but believe they do not need to abandon their Leninist governing system as did east Europe and the Soviet Union. They believe they can create a socio-political system acceptable to all Vietnamese which does not involve multiple political parties. Time will tell.

I believe Vietnam is moving, however haltingly, toward what we in the West call the open society. It will not remain a hard authoritarian society for much longer. The movers and shakers—including the all important coercive elements (the police and the military)—seem convinced that rigid authoritarianism cannot be sustained for long. They will hold the line for as long as they can but when the inevitable comes they will make whatever change is necessary. The Party will not die as it did in some European countries. It has a future or at least the opportunity to have a future. The eventual replacement of the present system will not be a western style democracy, that is one resting entirely on the franchise. Parts of the present Leninist institution may survive, particularly those mechanisms for mobilizing and motivating public opinion. There will be political involvement by the rank and file, built around a Confucian-style sense of justice and equity. Inevitably there will be political turmoil, in which the future will be characterized as in the past by a style best termed the politics of factionalism, the curse of all Sinic political systems.

The Vietnamese economy, it seems certain, will continue to move toward congruence with other market economies of the world. There is no discernable influence on the horizon that could prevent it. Nor is there any group, or any ideology, that can force a return to a command economy of classic Marxism.

Much of the future turns on the still emerging leadership. The ruling Politburo seems at once worried but confident. It is aware of the need to become more transparent, to throw off as much as is possible the debilitating politics of clandestinism, to make Vietnam more interdependent, its relationships more Confucian. Increasingly, since it must, it will work to develop the necessary economic infrastructure, technical education and foreign capital investment and technology transfer arrangements.

The closed society cannot endure anywhere in the long historical reach. Nor will it. The erosive forces of change continue relentlessly, inexorably. What we must do is hang on, out-endure, wait for renewal of confidence. There was enormous loss of faith in America during the Vietnam war, in part because of the war. That erosion has now stopped, quite unlike those societies still closed—like Vietnam. There loss of faith grows daily and the winds of change continue to build. As a Vietnamese proverb has it, when it is darkest you can see the stars. Or as the American proverb says the mills of fate grind slowly but they grind exceedingly fine.

Outsiders, particularly Americans, are best advised to understand that, even with great economic leverage, we cannot greatly influence internal Vietnamese events. If the Vietnamese succeed it will be because of the Vietnamese themselves. If they do not, the blame will be entirely theirs. Outsiders should also remember that the history of Vietnam in this century is filled with one event after another that no one predicted, expected, or could fully explain when it happened. Hanoi's victory in war, breakup of the Red Brotherhood, Vietnam invading Cambodia, China invading Vietnam, abandonment of Marxist economics in favor of a market economy—all were unexpected, most inexplicable. Among Hanoi watchers this is known as Vietnam's penchant for deviating into truth. It is what we can expect of Vietnam in the future.

Addendum: The design of this paper is four fold. Part One, contained here, deals with the leadership, politics and government. Part Two, economics; Part Three, foreign policy and geopolitics.