

Viet Nam: The Troubled Ideology

By Javier Delgado Rivera

VIET NAM IS A COUNTRY IN MOTION. This Southeast Asian emerging economy is engaged in a political, economic and social evolving mode. It all started on the mid-80s, when the single-ruling Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) indirectly acknowledged its incapacity to develop the country out of decades of war against foreign aggressors. Viet Nam's economic fall between 1978 and 1982 forced its leadership to adopt a number of principles distinctive from the opposite camp; the market-inspired reforms of Doi Moi were introduced. Besides improving considerably the living standards of ordinary Vietnamese, the policies of Doi Moi also distorted the ideological foundations of the VCP. The Party's original Marxist-Leninist doctrine faces today the greatest of the challenges (even more threatening than the American army in the 60s and 70s); justifying its relevance in the globalisation era.

The doctrinal contradictions defying the VCP are best evaluated by taking a close look at the Party factions' interplay. For the conservative bloc, the Doi Moi's redress has come with a high cost; the betrayal of Ho Chi Minh Thoughts favouring the reformers' realities of bread and butter.

This paper evaluates the shock endured by the VCP ideology since the Doi Moi and its repercussions on state institutions, the unity of the Party leadership, and the country political liberties.

The Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) is the supreme state's institution of Viet Nam; 'leads the State by its political statements, its strategy, and direction; by ideological activities and inspection of performance (1),' states the Party's Charter. After the victory in 1976 of North Viet Nam over Washington's sponsored capitalist South (the infamous Viet Nam War,) the reunified Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (SRV) committed itself to further develop the Marxist-Leninist theory in the newborn state.

Over its first decade of existence, the SRV faced giant economic hardships, forcing the Party to loosen its communist agenda in 1986 through the introduction of a number of market-based economic incentives. They were framed in the denominated policies of Doi Moi (renovation in Vietnamese language,) which closely resembled the policies implemented by China's Deng Xiaoping in 1978.

The Doi Moi reforms opened the economy to local and foreign private investments and abolished the state monopoly on trade in most commodities, leaving certain sectors of the economy beyond the Party's reach. It sparked concerns among the Party hardliners and ideologues seeing in the developments of Doi Moi a serious threat to the socialist ideals. Hardliners believe that the recent economic dependence with the West resulting from the Doi Moi reforms, will prove deadly for the VCP's ideological foundations. They consider that the privatisation of state-owned assets is essentially contradictory to socialism and so, will not only irreparably harm the Party's capacity to manage the state, but it will also damage its credibility and legitimacy towards fellow citizens. In fact, they may not lack of evidences, as in the last years, the emergent Vietnamese middle-class, lured by the rising of 'capitalism,' are distancing themselves from their revolutionary history.

The 9th Party Congress in 2001 encapsulated all the previous market adaptations into the label 'socialist-oriented market economy-' apparently conservative and reformist factions have just attained the magic formula. In fact, and according to David Koh, from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, the VCP's theoretical underpinnings have virtually being dissected into a two-sided doctrine: 'Nationalism based on Ho Chi Minh Thought socialism combined with Ho's standpoints on the Vietnamese revolution, and economic performance legitimacy (2).' In propagandistic terms, these two principles are



Nguyen Tan Dung, Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, addresses the general debate of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly, at UN Headquarters in New York. UN Photo/Marco Castro

translated into the slogan *dan giau, nuoc manh, xa hoi cong bang, van minh*: Wealthy people, strong country, equal and civilised society.

It is apparent that one of the two pillars of socialism (state ownership and management of the means of production and distribution of goods) is partly undermined in the search of the other (the construction of an egalitarian society.) It is assumed that the incorporation of the private sector will speed up the equality of income among Vietnamese. Hence, besides ideologically sanctioning its economic reforms, the Party shores up its identity and, therefore, its legitimacy to preserve the profitable single-party status quo. As a study of the Australian Government puts it, 'the focus of the Party shifts from class struggle to economic development (3).' The downside of such ideological manoeuvring is the damage caused to the socialist precept of 'unity against imperialistic forces.' The opening of the Vietnamese market to foreign capitals is to a certain extent, still perceived by traditionalist factions in these archaic terms. On the other hand, the indigenous (not attached to the Marxist-Leninist set of principles) ideological element of national unity is left unharmed.

The Political Reports released before each Party Congress key documents widely utilised by political analysts to come up with the direction taken by the VCP's ideology and policies over the following five years. Therefore an evaluation of the two last Political Reports (2001 and 2006) would certainly expedite the uneasy task of figuring out how the internal mechanisms of Party reconcile the disagreements between conservatives and reformers. Elizabeth St. George and Mary Quilty, two Australian scholars, did so. In their

research they concluded that:

At the Political Report of the 9th Party Congress (2001), 'socialism is described as the successful path along which the VCP will lead the country, avoiding the pitfalls inherent in capitalism. Surprisingly The 2006 report is grounded on statistical evidence, which is used to justify the correctness of the current ideological position Doi Moi (4).'

Such a shift in the message is extraordinarily significant. The Party watered down its rhetorical discourse to focus on the fact that Viet Nam is today being developed as a result of the Party's economic adjustments; and since it is indisputably beneficial for the Vietnamese people, it follows the path of socialism.

Reformers Ahead but Far From Prevailing

In Viet Nam, a political figure like Gorbachev or Deng Xiaoping over which the reformist programme is successfully accomplished does not exist. In stead, the VCP acts by consensus. Intricate ideological and political debates are not just conducted every five years at the party congresses and its corresponding Political Reports, but also far more regularly at the Central Committee (the legislative body of the Party) and its plenums, the Party committees, and the Politburo (the standing bureau of the Central Committee and the Party's supreme leading body.)

The interplay among them could not be fully understood without referring to a crucial episode in the recent history of the Party- In just four years (1986-1990), the four most influential figures of the

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Politburo (among them Le Duan, Party secretary general from 1960 to 1986) passed away. They embodied the old guard, the remaining leaders of the Vietnamese anti-colonial movement. These deceases speeded up the restructuring of the Party elites, making some room for the incorporation of younger generations of politicians that were quickly subjected to institutional checks and balances aimed at dissuading them to introduce changes too rapidly. These legal monitoring mechanisms were soon after integrated in the 1992 Constitution. In short, the incorporation of younger personalities to the elites obliged the Party to make its decision-making procedures rather transparent.

More than any previous, the current leadership of the Party should be broken down if we were to comprehend the tensions and common grounds in which Viet Nam's politics operate today. The very first lesson to be learnt is that the old days of untouchable leaders are long gone. After Le Duan's sixteen years as Party secretary, just the excessively determined Le Kha Phieu (in office from 1997 to 2001) threatened the current requisite of leadership consensus.

Both, the demise of the old guard and the accountability to which the Party secretary general is increasingly exposed, speak volumes of the newcomers' capacity to influence the VCP. An illustrative example is found in the decision taken at the last Party Congress (the 10th in 2006) when the VCP permitted businessmen to become members of it. Most observers interpreted this move as a central success for pragmatists, since entrepreneurs tend to be younger and open-minded individuals favouring the reformist agenda. Whether the partial rejuvenation of the Party direction will eventually imbalance the hammered out equilibrium between traditionalists and pragmatists, remains to be seen.

The Thin Line among Party, State and Ideology

'The Party as leader, the people as master, the State as administrator.' Slogan of the VCP propaganda

Viet Nam's leadership is personified by the troika, namely the top

three positions: Party secretary general, Government's president and prime minister. Today's Party secretary is Duc Manh. He was elected because he lacks clear factional attachments, though in fact that he does not belong to the original revolutionary fighters does not characterise him as a hardliner. Unquestionably, Mr Manh is today paramount in balancing the Party as a whole.

Although according to Zachary Abuza, professor for Political Science at the U.S. Simmons College, the general secretary is 'primus inter pares (5)' key decisions are taken in consensus by the three, with the input of a gradually more autonomous National Assembly (NA).

The NA has been playing an increasingly chief role in the governing of Viet Nam. The milestone was stamped as the Constitution of 1992 institutionalised the NA as the highest organ of the State-according to a translation make by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the AN was given 'exclusive powers to enact laws, approve the state budget and exercise control of the executive and judiciary system (6).' In other words, the NA was being sanctioned to oversee the Party's compliance with the law.

It should be noticed that both the president and the primer minister are, obviously, members of the Party (elected every 5 years at the congresses) and roughly 90 per cent of the NA deputies are VCP affiliates as well. Therefore and in spite of the increasing division of competences among the four (troika plus NA), Party and State remain parts of the same notion and hence, ideology a primary guideline for the country as a whole.

Justifying the Old Iron Fist

The opening of the Vietnamese economy led to demands of loosening similarly the political scene. Though reluctantly, the Party reacted by relaxing the leash in the voices questioning the till-then unquestionable: The country's single-party system. It would be a short-lived debate- the timid echoes of change within the VCP died down or were dramatically silenced following China's Tiananmen crackdown in 1989 and the disintegration of the USSR and the Easter

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Europe regimes. The Party learned the lesson and its ideologues rolled up their sleeves to adjust the doctrinal bases to the new world's configuration. Soon later, and as Trong Nghia (Vice president of the Vietnamese Foreign Trade and Investment Development Centre) exposes, the 7th Party Congress (1991) stated that 'the core of the political reform in Viet Nam is the development of a socialist democracy... and political pluralism is not a reflection of democracy (7).' Consequently, civil servants, journalists, judges, scholars and almost any one with certain influence in the country is strictly 'advised' to observe this principle when running matters deemed sensitive by the Party's apparatus.

But the Party was about to harden even further its stand- just at the following Party Congress (the 8th in 1996), and as reformers and conservatives agree on the overall lines of the Party's policies, they came up with the notion of 'political stability.' Putting it plainly, the suppression of initiatives on political pluralism officially became party policy.

Twelve years later, the taboo of democratization has been slightly relaxed, though mostly limited to discuss the modernisation of the Party's structures, never multiparty politics.

If ideology (struggle against imperialism, national unity, equal society through socialism etc) was the key element in the VCP's successful guiding towards independence, today's rising standards of living among the vast majority of Vietnamese is indisputably the Party major ally. It allows the apparatus to weather (relatively unharmed in legitimacy terms) the yet weak calls for multiparty politics. Outside Viet nam and free from the potential coercion faced within the country, some sectors of the Viet Kieu (the Vietnamese Diaspora), have shown much more aggressive on its demands of an opening of the political stage, though with little success so far.

Along with the Party's denial to discuss politics publicly, the VCP has been widely accused by dissidents and foreign analysts of ignoring Vietnamese's civil freedoms. The fact that the VCP has been able to deliver higher rates of wealth (the growth of Viet Nam's last year Gross Domestic Product was 8.6 per cent) cannot legitimize it to disregard the fundamental issue of human rights. As an example, docents of journalist are now imprisoned after being accused of

'inaccurate reporting.' As any single-party state does, the VCP regularly mutes voices calling for the expansion of the political, civil and religious rights. The Asian Historian Lawrence E. Grinteri, in a recently published paper, reflects a conversation held in 2005 between senior Vietnamese and U.S. diplomats in which a Vietnamese official pinpointed: 'We are moving toward a more universal interpretation of human rights, but each nation has its own norms and values. In Viet Nam this cannot happen overnight. We cannot risk disturbances. Our top priority remains political and social stability (8).'

As mentioned before, since its inception, the Party has consistently been playing the card of the national unity. It should not be overlooked that the VCP commanded the throwing out of foreign occupants (including a brief war with China in 1979), conciliated the country's north and south, brought back the lost pride of the nation under a united flag and last but not least, is successfully developing an overpopulated country of 86 million. The VCP has only too well shown that is truly committed to do whatever is in its hands to assure the best of the fates to ordinary Vietnamese, so we are not talking about a dictatorial state merely concerned with prolonging its grip of power at all cost. The VCP cares about the wealth-fare of its people up to the point of having sacrificed part of its ideology to adjust the country's economic foundations to the requirements of globalisation. It is not to say that the VCP is doing and will do its very best to maintain its absolute control over most facets of the State. As sustained by Martin Gainsborough, a specialist on South East Asia's politics at the University of Bristol, the opening of the Vietnamese 'political space is likely to come from changes within state institutions, rather than from the rise of an assertive civil society as imagined in the West (9).'

Foreseeing the Future

'The nature of the political system... that President Ho Chi Minh initiated does not change. Yes, the economy will improve, the structures will improve. The principles will remain (10).'

Le Kha Phieu in an interview gave at the Asian Affairs Journal in 2000.

Over this article, the reader may have been lured to assume that it is a matter of time for the reformist programme to prevail. It is not

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and will not be the case in years to come. First of all, most party members, traditionalists and pragmatists alike, enjoy a wide range of privileges and immunities unacceptable in a multiparty state of law. In the end, ideology provides a progressively hollow shield to perpetuate such a profitable system. As most shields, this one is well-guarded by the armed forces, which in spite of overtly benefiting of privately-owned enterprises by its senior officers, plays in the camp of hardliners. Reformers do not count with the support the Party's theoreticians either, as the Central Theoretical Council keeps featuring the (at this stage, adulterated) Marxist-Leninist ideology at the very top of the Party commitments.

As Viet Nam is expected to maintain high rates of economic growth, the traditionalist factions will need to hummer out a whole set of new arguments to justify how the success of the market economy in Viet Nam can be squared with their claim that the country is still rightfully in the course of achieving the socialist ideal.

As argued in this article, since the partial liberalisation of the Vietnamese economy, the Vietnam Communist Party faces the colossal challenge of justifying the 'Communist' (here interchangeable with the analogous term of Socialism) adjective embedded between Viet Nam and Party. The VCP is a survivor, a relic of the Cold World. Right after the Doi Moi policies, the regimen identity has being debated, questioned and redefined in each Party Congress. In order to pull through, the Party needs to show a genuine commitment with the residues of its Leninist-Marxist ideology. For that reason it will only allow further changes that, beyond being in line with the expansion of its quasi-market system, could be reasoned around new readings of the old doctrine. If it fails to do so, it will run out of arguments in its defence against those accusing the VCP of running a plain dictatorship. ■

Javier Delgado Rivera

Journalist with a focus on Asian politics

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