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[Journals](#) [This Journal](#) [Contents](#)

Vietnam's Tentative Transformation

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Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Vietnam has been one of only five countries to retain a communist regime. ¹ Founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1930 in Hong Kong, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) suffered through a lengthy period of French colonialism, maneuvered its way to power in the chaos that followed the Second World War, dislodged the French from half the country, survived the U.S. intervention, and finally conquered noncommunist South Vietnam in 1975. Today the VCP is the sole political party in Vietnam. It has clung to the Leninist principle of "democratic centralism," has firmly resisted the establishment of the social conditions that would make possible the emergence of multipartism, and until the early 1980s remained wedded to Marxist economic dogma. Yet the VCP has begun to recognize that profound changes in Vietnam's economic system are imperative if the country is to survive in the post-Cold War world, and it has grudgingly acknowledged that political change might not be far behind.

While the need for change is undisputed, the appropriate scope and pace of that change have become subjects of sharp debate within the VCP. Conservative elements have refused to countenance anything that might compromise the party's authority. Even those who would like to move faster do not dispute the need for "stability." Vietnam's leaders are attempting to ski down a very steep slope without losing control. As communist leaders in other nations have learned, the reformist road is fraught with danger. Yet the VCP realizes that it has no choice. It understands that the ideological cement binding the party to the people [**End Page 73**] has eroded since 1975, and that this erosion is at the heart of many of Vietnam's current problems.

Analyzing the Transition

The proceedings of the Eighth Congress of the VCP, held in late June 1996, convey the difficulty of the ruling party's position as it embarks on the delicate task of implementing economic reforms while holding on to the reins of political power. From its inception 66 years ago until its victory over South Vietnam in 1975, the VCP held congresses at irregular intervals owing to the exigencies of war and, for part of that period, its underground status. Beginning in 1976, party congresses have been held at five-year intervals to review the regime's accomplishments and announce the party's objectives to the 97 percent of the Vietnamese people who are not VCP

members. At these congresses and the semiannual plenums of the VCP Central Committee, economic policy and the political line that guides all aspects of party activity are discussed, and troublesome issues are supposed to be resolved. While the Eighth Congress stands out for what it did *not* accomplish, its temporizing and indecision (as well as the contentious internal debates that preceded it) provide clues to the country's future course. Is Vietnam moving, however slowly and painfully, toward something that those in the West might call democracy? Or is this simply wishful thinking on the part of outside observers?

By now it is axiomatic that political systems in Asia--democratic or otherwise--develop according to each individual country's historical experience, cultural heritage, and practical needs. The experiences of South Korea and Taiwan as well as the political evolution of countries as diverse as Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia demonstrate how varied--and bumpy--those roads can be. The Vietnamese experience has been particularly tortured, featuring a century of colonial servitude followed by revolution, war, and extended domestic turmoil. That painful past goes a long way toward explaining the current regime's mistrust of outsiders--a suspicion that borders on paranoia--and its refusal to countenance any form of political competition.

During the protracted struggle between communist and anticommunist forces that followed the achievement of independence from France in 1954, North Vietnam continued to be known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), the name of the communist republic proclaimed by Ho Chi Minh on 2 September 1945. This name retained the flavor of the anticolonial struggle and was indicative of North Vietnam's allegiance in the Cold War. After their victory over South Vietnam and formal reunification, the North Vietnamese renamed the country the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) in 1976. The new name not only marked the birth of a new political entity but emphasized its socialist, **[End Page 74]** as opposed to democratic, character. There was no mistaking the political intention of the regime in Hanoi: to build a society emphasizing the collective over the individual.

Observers of Vietnam would do well to strive for objectivity in understanding the factors that have influenced the country's unique course of political development. This is not to say, however, that unbridled relativism is in order. There are indeed standards by which to judge political conduct and "progress"--however one defines that term--toward a less authoritarian regime and a more open society. Scholars are in general agreement that democratic systems feature 1) *accountability* of elected officials to the electorate; 2) *transparency* of government actions and procedures; and 3) *participation* of the citizenry in the political process.

Participation and genuine political competition are indeed critical. To be meaningful, participation requires the existence of certain basic freedoms, including freedom of expression, assembly, movement, and belief. Although it is clear that Vietnam still has a long way to go before it can be considered a democracy, it has taken some tentative steps toward allowing broader participation in the shaping--or at least the debating--of the issues that concern the people's fundamental well-being.

The Loss of Ideological Cement

The northern part of present-day Vietnam (Tonkin), home of the "Viet" tribe that emigrated millennia ago from southern China, languished under Chinese imperial control from the first century B.C. until A.D. 967. By that time, the Vietnamese had become a coherent ethnic group,

and they embarked on what would be a nine-hundred-year period of independence, punctuated by Chinese and Mongol invasions, which they repulsed. Under their feudal monarchs, the Vietnamese expanded southward to the center of contemporary Vietnam (Annam) and, by the seventeenth century, to the Mekong Delta (Cochin-China). A target of persistent European intrusions, Vietnam was ultimately absorbed into the French colonial empire in 1887. During the Second World War, Japan occupied the country and used the colonial apparatus of the Vichy government as its surrogate. The Chinese and French colonial experiences, and the millennium of independence in between, left the Vietnamese with a strong sense of patriotism and an intense desire for freedom. These sentiments have shaped Vietnamese politics ever since.

In the turbulence following Japan's surrender, Ho Chi Minh's cadres, under the umbrella of the Vietnamese Independence League (Vietminh), competed fiercely with noncommunist nationalist groups for the political allegiance of the Vietnamese people.² The DRV, with Ho Chi Minh as **[End Page 75]** president, maintained an uneasy control over much of Vietnam. Not hesitating to use violence whenever expedient, Ho Chi Minh consolidated his position as the symbol of resistance to French colonialism. By the time France embarked on an effort to resume control by military force in December 1946, Ho Chi Minh had managed to preempt the noncommunist nationalists, eliminating many of their cadres and forcing their leaders into exile. Thanks to Ho Chi Minh's exceptional organizational ability, his charisma, and dedicated associates such as Vo Nguyen Giap, Vietnamese communism succeeded in combining the spirit of Vietnamese patriotism with the discipline and sharp focus of Marxism-Leninism. In retrospect, this fusion was clearly the essential ingredient in the Communist victory over the French, the Americans, and the U.S.-backed Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the south. In addition, North Vietnam benefited immensely from the material and political support provided under the banner of international communism by the Soviet Union, the East European bloc, and China. Without this assistance, North Vietnam could not have persevered in its struggle against South Vietnam and the United States.

The unique legitimacy that the struggle against France had given the VCP persisted after the conclusion of the 1954 Geneva Agreements that divided Vietnam in half. Among the two million, mainly Roman Catholic, Vietnamese who chose to move from North Vietnam to the south were a large number of nationalists who had fought against the Vietminh on the side of the French, who represented for them the lesser of two evils. The government of South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem (1955-63), and in particular the officers of the South Vietnamese military, were drawn from this group. Although these nationalists were no less patriotic than their Communist counterparts, the leaders of southern governments from Ngo Dinh Diem to Nguyen Van Thieu (1965-75) were never able to command the indigenous political respect that Ho Chi Minh's movement had developed over the years of struggle. The South Vietnamese rulers, "trapped in the jaws of history," were grievously handicapped (especially after 1963) by the massive U.S. presence, which permitted the Communist insurgents in the south (the Vietcong) and the DRV to pin on them the label "American puppets."³ Despite widespread hostility among southerners toward the Communist north, this was a psychologically powerful charge, however unfair, that the leaders of the RVN were never able to escape.

When North Vietnam finally conquered the south in April 1975, many Vietnamese hoped that "liberation" (i.e., peace) would eventually bring a true unification of the country's disparate regions, political elements, and interest groups. Reconciliation, however, did not take place. Although Vietnam did not suffer a bloodbath comparable to what Cambodia experienced after

1975, many on the losing side were subjected to a painful process of political retribution. The Hanoi [End Page 76] Politburo now admits that the Marxist-Leninist system that engineered victory in war between 1954 and 1975 failed to improve the lives of the Vietnamese people in peace, owing largely to the mistakes of the VCP's leaders. Between 1975 and 1979, Hanoi attempted to impose on the south the highly centralized command economy, modeled on the Soviet system, that it had implemented in the north since 1954. The government stressed heavy industry at the expense of agriculture, pushed collective farming despite glaring evidence of its inefficiency, and attempted to obliterate private enterprise in the conquered south. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978 not only isolated Vietnam from the rest of Southeast Asia for a decade, thus inhibiting economic development, but also delayed normalization of relations with the United States until 1995.

The "war economy" system installed by the DRV in 1954 was bolstered by Stalinist-Maoist ideology. Massive and sustained external assistance from the Soviet Union and China papered over the inefficiencies of the system for decades. Not until 1979, in the run-up to the 1981 Fifth VCP Congress, did the party's leaders begin to question the existing economic order. It was another five years before the Sixth VCP Congress in 1986 put significant economic correctives on the books, and it was not until after 1989 that these measures began to take effect. By the late 1980s, the prestige of the VCP had begun to deteriorate, just as the aspirations and expectations of the masses were beginning to rise.⁴

Ironically, some of the measures adopted by the VCP to reverse its flagging fortunes--indeed, to prevent the very collapse of Vietnam as a country--generated as many problems for the regime as they solved. The Sixth VCP Congress inaugurated *doi moi*, or "renovation"--supposedly the magic key to open the door to sound economic development that had previously eluded Marxist Vietnam. A concept ostensibly limited to the transition from a command to a market economy, *doi moi* increasingly came to be applied to broader aspects of Vietnamese society.

The VCP intended *doi moi* as a parallel to Gorbachev's *perestroika*. It was not meant to encompass *glasnost*, even though the VCP Central Committee had adopted a multifaceted reform agenda with the aim of "broadening democracy in all fields of social life." The two years immediately following the introduction of *doi moi* were marked by an unprecedented flowering of liberalism. Dozens of newspapers and magazines sprang up in the south. Veterans of the Vietcong expressed bitter resentment at northern dominance, in effect challenging the [End Page 77] authority of the VCP. Artists and writers engaged in remarkably open flights of fancy away from communist dogma.

This "Saigon Spring" shocked the VCP and resulted in a clampdown on freedom of expression and a rollback of *doi moi*. At the Seventh VCP Congress in July 1991 and in the 1992 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the disciplinary principle of "democratic centralism" and the leading role of the VCP were strongly reaffirmed. The party explicitly rejected the concept of political pluralism. Despite stirrings of discontent among both its own ranks and the populace at large, political change originating from outside the party was denounced as a mortal threat. "Stability" became the watchword, and the number-one enemy against which the party faithful should struggle was identified as "peaceful evolution." Interestingly, this term, which came into use as the VCP became aware of the need for change, has yet to be precisely defined by the party. As with pornography, the Vietnamese people are supposed to know it when they see it. An outsider might define it as any significant social change

that takes place without the express permission of the VCP. From the mid-1980s onward, advocacy of pluralism or peaceful evolution has been enough to attract stern warnings from the security services. If this advocacy is especially public, loud, or frequent, the advocate can be jailed for "exploiting freedoms of expression to harm the national interest."

The Eighth VCP Congress

This is where matters stood at the start of the 1990s, a decade that has brought a number of important changes: spectacular economic growth (GNP grew 9 percent annually between 1993 and 1995), normalization of relations with the United States, and Vietnam's triumphant entry into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in July 1995.

It had been widely anticipated that the Eighth VCP Congress would see the retirement of Vietnam's ruling troika: President Le Duc Anh, 75; VCP General Secretary Do Muoi, 79; and Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, 73. One scenario had Vo Van Kiet moving up to the presidency; this would have been a victory for the so-called reformist wing of the party. There had been hints about grooming a fresh generation of Communist leaders and of consolidating the economic gains made since 1986. The Congress had been billed as a battleground where younger members who advocated a "full steam ahead" approach to economic, legal, and administrative reform would be pitted against a conservative old guard that wanted to slow, if not halt, the transition.

But the Eighth VCP Congress confounded the predictions. Instead of passing gracefully into retirement, each of the three senior leaders was reappointed for another five-year term. The party looked at the **[End Page 78]** possibility of change--and then recoiled in the name of unity. Far from conveying the desired picture of stability and togetherness, however, the Eighth Congress resembled "a game of musical chairs, with the country's strongest institutions battling for places in the Politburo." ⁵ The Politburo was expanded from 16 to 19 members (one new member, Nguyen Dinh Tu, died and was not immediately replaced), a reflection of the jockeying for power among military officers, economic reformers, and political conservatives. The Secretariat of the Central Committee, which had accrued considerable powers over the years, was abolished. The Congress ratified the formation of a new five-member Standing Board with reportedly wide powers to conduct day-to-day Politburo business. Its members are the three top leaders--Do Muoi, Le Duc Anh, and Vo Van Kiet--along with General Le Kha Phieu, head of the army's political department, and Nguyen Tan Dung, vice-minister of the interior, known as a hard-liner on issues of internal security. There was some uncertainty about precisely what powers the Standing Board would have, and one Central Committee delegate had the temerity, as the motion was being put to a vote, to suggest that the sacred principle of democratic centralism was being violated. In the voting, his comment was ignored by other Central Committee members, but the view that the powers invested in the Standing Board were indeed excessive appears to have been widely shared.

The Eighth Congress was essentially a holding operation that reflected underlying tensions over the proper course of economic renovation and the dilemma of reconciling VCP ideology with an economy that is increasingly governed by free-market principles. Pluralism was emphatically rejected, and "peaceful evolution" was again pinpointed as the specter haunting the party. Finally, the importance of "Ho Chi Minh Thought," however that may be defined, was reinforced. The VCP is using that concept in the same way that Confucianism is now being used in China: as a means of legitimation and as a regulatory mechanism for current policies with which the people may be less than satisfied.

The Eighth Congress's temporizing, however, did not turn the clock back or eliminate the need to plan for the future. Since 1986, the party's prime instrument for restoring its efficacy has been *doi moi*, or economic liberalization. So far, the results have been fairly positive. Approved foreign direct investment has risen above \$20 billion. The agricultural sector, now consisting largely of family-owned farms, has become far more productive than it was under collectivization. Vietnam has been exporting a million tons of rice or more annually for the past several years, and the value of coffee exports now surpasses that of rice. Vietnam's new status as the seventh member of ASEAN has afforded it not only economic advantages but a measure of strategic protection from its age-old enemy, China. Altogether the 1990s have been a decade [End Page 79] of good economic performance. The question for the VCP now is how to continue the economic reforms without losing political control.

The Perils of Change

To understand Vietnam's difficulty in making the transition to a more participatory system of governance, we must recognize the many and varied problems that the country currently faces. One set of problems is related to Vietnam's geography and climate. The only areas suitable for the large-scale cultivation of rice are the Red River and Mekong deltas; both are susceptible to flooding and salt-water intrusion. Most family plots in the two prime deltas have been divided and subdivided into irreducible minimums, as have those on the plains and minideltas of the Central Highlands. The country is rich in beautiful scenery but not in natural resources. Oil and natural-gas reserves have yet to be fully charted, but most analysts believe they are modest and will be exhausted a few decades into the next century. There is some coal, lots of optical-grade sand, and a dwindling supply of hardwood.

Growing at 2.1 percent per year, Vietnam's population now stands at 74 million, with 1 million people entering the labor force annually; finding a way to keep them all employed is one of the regime's most pressing tasks. War left much of Vietnam's physical infrastructure--roads, railroads, bridges, harbors, utilities--destroyed; much of what remains dates from the nineteenth century and is in need of renovation. Building a modern infrastructure will require decades, not to mention billions of dollars. All of these immutable facts of life, which influence the strategic calculations of the Vietnamese government and the VCP leadership as they consider the country's economic future, shape the debate over political change as well.

Other problems are sociopolitical in nature. These are in the power of the VCP to address, if not to solve quickly. The country's leaders have grave reservations about any transition to a more inclusive political system. In Vietnam, politics is still a zero-sum game. The country's history since 1945 has left a bitter political legacy. Although the people no doubt feel profoundly "Vietnamese" and identify passionately with their culture and nation, whatever its political system, the pre-1975 wounds suffered by both north and south have not entirely healed. That the "conquered" south is, in material terms, progressing more rapidly than the victorious north has created an undercurrent of resentment in Vietnamese society. Per-capita GDP is about \$220 nationally; in the Ho Chi Minh City-Bien Hoa-Vung Tau "growth triangle" around the former Saigon, it is estimated to be well above \$500. Moreover, expatriate Vietnamese pour in hundreds of millions of dollars annually, mainly to the south, where their relatives reside.

Doi moi has been successful in many respects, but it has also [End Page 80] generated unfulfilled expectations and potential hazards. Cleavages between the cities and the rural areas, where 80

percent of Vietnamese still live, have widened. Income inequality between the entrepreneurial "haves" and the "have-nots" has grown dramatically in recent years. Corruption has become pervasive. The causes are manifold, but in part it is a byproduct of the transition to a market economy. The cadres of the VCP are part of the problem, and their unfair advantages are a constant source of frustration for the general public. Finally, half of Vietnam's population was born after 1968, and a generation gap exists between those who fought in the war and today's youth, who never experienced its trauma.

As noted above, public advocacy of "peaceful evolution" or dissent from VCP or state policies can result in imprisonment. Prominent members of the VCP who have spoken out in favor of drastic changes in the VCP's attitudes have been drummed out of the party or jailed. In March 1990, Tran Xuan Bach, director of the VCP's foreign-affairs department and an expert on Soviet and East European political reform, made some comments that seemed equivocal about political change. He was quickly ousted from the Politburo, reportedly because of his advocacy of pluralism.⁶

Repression continues in a variety of forms. The egregious postwar "reeducation camps" ceased operations only recently, and the regime's human rights record remains poor. The Constitution proclaims that all citizens "shall enjoy freedom of belief and of religion" but cannot "misuse beliefs and religions to contravene the law and State policies." The majority of Vietnamese are nominally Buddhist, with animism and ancestor veneration strong components of their faith. Especially sensitive politically is the regime's repression of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and the imprisonment (or "pagoda arrest") of monks who have resisted the Vietnamese Buddhist Church, a state-sponsored organization created specifically to give the government control of Buddhist activities. Venerable Thich Quang Do, secretary-general of the UBCV, has spent most of the last 16 years under house arrest or in jail. The regime's suspicion of the Roman Catholic Church is even stronger. The government restricts the movement of Catholic priests, limits the number of young Vietnamese allowed to enter the priesthood, and obstructs the Church's efforts to obtain religious teaching materials. It is hard to judge whether resentment against the government for this religious repression, which affects a sizeable portion of the population, is strong enough to give rise to significant political discontent.

Where does all this leave the VCP today? The Eighth Congress has erased all doubt about the party's intention to reassert its authority over all aspects of Vietnamese life. Yet if the will is there, the ability is not. The party's power to exert totalitarian control over society is growing progressively weaker. Fissures in the party are unmistakable; they reflect **[End Page 81]** both a growing diversity of opinion in Vietnamese society at large and mounting pressure for broadened participation in the state's affairs. These pressures are sometimes overt, but more often they are hidden from the view of foreign observers. For example, the 1979 Constitution stated that the VCP "is the *only* force leading the State and society" (italics added). In the 1992 version, the wording had been changed to "the VCP is the force leading the State and society." The omission of the word "only" came after intense debate during 1991 and early 1992 that indicated dissent not only within the party but among intellectuals beyond its confines. Similar differences persisted throughout preparations for the Eighth Congress.

A second important sign of change in the direction of greater political participation has been the enhanced powers given to the National Assembly under the 1992 Constitution. The Assembly is supposed to be the "highest organ of State power" and the representative of the people's

"collective mastery." Although 93 percent of its members belong to the VCP, and all candidates for election to it must be approved by the party's "mass organizations," the Assembly's actions since 1992 indicate movement toward a more representative system. In recent elections, there has been more than one candidate for many of the Assembly positions (in 1992, 602 candidates competed for 395 seats). Assemblymen, who are elected for five-year terms, come from a range of professional backgrounds and represent a variety of intellectual and economic interest groups. On average they are younger and better educated than their predecessors. The Assembly is no longer totally compliant; its committees grill government officials, and debates within the Assembly are often vigorous and substantive. The Assembly meets twice a year, and its sessions have grown progressively longer. It has the power to modify legislation submitted by the government and occasionally has exercised that authority. Its activities are reported in the media. The Assembly is by no stretch of the imagination an independent branch of government; still, it is becoming an increasingly important player in the political life of the country. Its transformation into something more than a rubber stamp has also forced changes in the VCP, which has had to develop an "interagency" system to respond to elected officials' requirements, to compile reports in a responsive manner, and to field sometimes probing questions concerning its policies and decisions.

Third, a growing number of Vietnamese citizens have access to information from many sources, including computer networks. Of course, the availability of information is still confined primarily to the intellectual elite; probably few among the rural population seek out information, let alone have access to computers. The news media are controlled by the state, and journalists are required to "act in accordance with guidelines established by the Ministry of Culture," which state that their official mission is to propagate the party line. The media may not **[End Page 82]** challenge the primacy of the party, question directly the wisdom of government policies, or challenge "Ho Chi Minh Thought." Yet they are permitted to report on and criticize corruption and inefficiency involving government figures. Recent years have seen a profusion of business journals, and the movement toward a market economy seems likely to give the print media a broader and perhaps eventually a more independent role in society.

The long-term impact of economic reform on the political system itself is perhaps the major incalculable factor. Clearly, the VCP's highest priority is to limit the interaction between the two, and both the rhetoric and the actions of the Eighth Congress demonstrate the turmoil this dilemma has created. Some scholars of Vietnamese affairs believe that there is "no stable half way house between the system it has known to date and the free market system that inspires some of its reforms. . . . The evidence that partial reform can succeed is inconclusive, and there is some likelihood that it carries a momentum which may fundamentally alter the political structure of the regime."⁷ The collapse of Vietnam's closest ally, the Soviet Union, has forced the country to shift its position in the world; that global shift must inevitably be accompanied by a domestic adjustment. "Peaceful evolution" may be condemned by the VCP as something cooked up by foreigners, an anti-Vietnamese plot--but it happens to be supported by the Vietnamese themselves, particularly members of the younger generation.

It is not surprising that Vietnam's leaders feel threatened by "outside forces." One recent event that provoked anxiety was U.S. president Bill Clinton's July 1995 announcement of normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations, which included both good news and bad news for the party. Normalization and increased contact between Americans and Vietnamese, the president said, "will advance the cause of freedom in Vietnam, just as it did in Eastern Europe and the former

Soviet Union. I strongly believe that engaging the Vietnamese on the broad economic front of economic reform and the broad front of democratic reform will help honor the sacrifice of those who fought for freedom's sake in Vietnam." This blunt statement stunned the VCP and strengthened the hand of conservatives who had warned that the United States would use normalization as a means of undermining the VCP's political control. ⁸

"Democracy" Vietnamese-Style?

Vietnam has been "in transition" for years now, and rarely have foreign observers accurately predicted the VCP's next moves. How political decisions are really made, how personal and party allegiances line up, and the subtleties of local and regional relationships remain extremely difficult for outsiders to fathom. Nonetheless, certain basic questions must be asked, even if they cannot be answered satisfactorily: **[End Page 83]**

Can Vietnam achieve economic improvements in the absence of greater political openness? In the short term, the answer is probably yes. How long these improvements will last is another matter. No social upheaval along the lines of what happened in the former Soviet Union is likely to occur in Vietnam. Any political change will indeed be evolutionary (despite the VCP's proscription) rather than revolutionary, if only because the party has obstructed development of the conditions for the generation of serious political alternatives. This approach, of course, could breed precisely the sort of unrest that the regime is trying to prevent through its focus on stability. With pluralism forbidden, the party will bear the full brunt of dissatisfaction with the rate of improvement in the lot of the Vietnamese people, and with the corruption and inefficiency that have attended *doi moi*.

Can economic reform and consequent improvement in the Vietnamese people's standard of living rejuvenate the VCP? Again, in the short term, probably yes. The economic benefits as well as the psychological lift of "opening up" have indeed helped create the economic stability the regime in Hanoi needs to maintain political control. From the beginning, that was the rationale behind *doi moi*. The evidence since the 1986 Sixth VCP Congress suggests that as long as economic reforms bring benefits, as they have so far, the Vietnamese people may be willing to accept political limitations. This does not mean, however, that the VCP has been totally reborn in the eyes of the people. As in any modernizing society, the party and the government will always face the question, What have you done for us lately? Reforms to date are far from complete. And the momentum already created leaves the Vietnamese leadership in a difficult position, fearful of going forward yet knowing that it has gone too far along the path of reform to turn back.

Should we expect to see in Vietnam either a Soviet-style meltdown or another Tiananmen Square? Neither sort of cataclysm is anywhere on the horizon. In the nineteenth century, long before the Communists were on the scene, students played a key role in advancing the Vietnamese independence movement. ⁹ The VCP has always paid special heed to intellectuals and youth groups generally, but particularly students. Recognizing their incipient political power, it has treated them with care. ¹⁰

How and when will change come? Although foreign actors may have some influence on the domestic political environment, institutional political change in Vietnam will most likely originate from within the VCP, and probably will be initiated by the younger cadres, who are frustrated with the slow pace of change in so many aspects of Vietnamese life. Only the most radical external critics of the Vietnamese regime are demanding a precipitate dismantlement of

the VCP, and there is no evidence that such extreme action is being advocated from within.

Will economic change continue? Yes, but its pace may slow and its [End Page 84] scope may diminish. The country's leaders will continue to court foreign investment, and banking, tariff, and administrative reforms will proceed. But reform in certain sensitive areas, including the disposition of state enterprises and land ownership, seems certain to lag until the political will exists--that is, until the older leaders pass from the scene.

Clearly, there are a number of positive factors at play in Vietnam today. Most significant are the following:

- 1) The slow but steady expansion of the role of the National Assembly in the country's political life, as described above;
- 2) The VCP's genuine effort to separate the party bureaucracy from the operation of the government itself--an effort that springs not from a "liberal" mindset but from a pragmatic recognition of the inefficiency of the current system;
- 3)The VCP's effort to create a government guided more by law than by party fiat, in recognition that the former is more appropriate for a country that is no longer at war;
- 4)The continued decentralization of political administration, a process that creates "bottom-up" pressure on the government and party leaders;
- 5)The reorientation of Vietnamese higher education away from Marxist orthodoxy and toward Western standards, a process that would have been unthinkable just ten years ago;
- 6)The VCP's commitment to private enterprise in many areas of economic life, despite its reluctance to give up control of state enterprises; and
- 7)The gradual emergence of a more mature and competent media.

The VCP recognizes that it can no longer count on the reverence it enjoyed during the war, when ideology was bound up with nationalism. It has done considerable soul-searching and is still grappling with the impossible contradictions that the war and Marxism-Leninism have generated for Vietnamese society. It is conceivable that over the coming decades the party will divide even more clearly into factions, with some of them dropping the orthodoxy that now encumbers the VCP. The party is currently split on how to manage the next stage of economic reform, as well as on how to manage political change. Some of the strongest proponents of pluralism have actually come from within the party. While "democratic centralism" is still the rule, the need for discipline in the face of crisis that marked the 1946-75 period is absent today, and the pressure to maintain a common front has diminished.

Vietnamese society has been affected by many factors: *doi moi*, normalization of relations with the United States, Vietnam's entry into [End Page 85] ASEAN, the infusion of capital from international financial institutions, economic assistance from Japan and other donors, and the corollary influences that come with contact with foreigners. Over the longer term, as Vietnam's society modernizes and establishes multiple links with the outside world, economic change may

well beget greater political openness. Many within the VCP recognize that Marxist-Leninist ideology is succumbing to the forces of science, education, cultural exchange, and the marketplace. These facts of modern life would appear to make "peaceful evolution" in Vietnam inevitable, leading initially to a softer authoritarianism and perhaps later to a more sophisticated participatory system of governance.

Whether the Vietnamese will be able to design a political system that is open enough to accommodate divergent points of view, and whether the transition can be effected peacefully before pressures reach a critical mass of discontent, are open questions. What is required is an extraordinary national effort to find a new social consensus. Given the country's tortured history, that effort will necessarily be a complex and drawn-out process, one that will depend for its success on the VCP's willingness to allow greater participation of the Vietnamese people in the political process. One U.S. scholar describes the current Vietnamese system as "mobilizational authoritarianism," reflecting the Leninist idea of intensive, preferably voluntary, citizen participation through formal institutions dominated by a single party with a constitutional monopoly of power. ¹¹ For the coming decade the best that can be hoped for is "authoritarian pluralism," as seen in several other Southeast Asian countries.

"Gorbachev-phobia" is now the standard sentiment among Vietnam's Communist leadership. It is an article of faith in Hanoi these days that communism collapsed in the Soviet Union because of inept management, not because of a failure of ideology. As long as this mindset persists, change will come slowly. Moreover, it seems unlikely that political change in Vietnam will come faster than in the People's Republic of China. Both regimes have a vested interest in "stability" through the dominance of a single party. In Vietnam today, life for the man or woman in the street or rice paddy is generally less constrained by politics than before *doi moi*. The Vietnamese are preoccupied with the daily problems of earning a living; "democracy" in the Western sense is not an issue. But if the VCP drags its feet so much that progress toward a higher standard of living is forestalled, the pressure for broader change will grow. In the end, giving the Vietnamese people greater [End Page 86] opportunities for participation in their own governance and for individual initiative will be essential if the regime is to build popular support.

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Notes

1. The other four are China, North Korea, Laos, and Cuba.
2. See David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), for an exhaustive account of how Ho Chi Minh consolidated Communist power after the Second World War.
3. See Bui Diem, *In the Jaws of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), for a powerful statement of the noncommunists' plight after 1954.

[4.](#) Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 552.

[5.](#) Adam Schwartz, "Safety First," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 July 1996. For an extended analysis of the VCP's organization, see Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), and Lewis M. Stern, *Setting Socialism's Agenda: The Vietnamese Communist Party Central Committee from 1991 to 1996* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland Publishers, forthcoming).

[6.](#) Porter, *Vietnam*, 100.

[7.](#) David Elliott, "Dilemmas of Reform in Vietnam," in William S. Turley and Mark Selden, eds., *Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism: Doi Moi in Comparative Perspective* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1993).

[8.](#) See Mark Sidel, *The United States and Vietnam: The Road Ahead* (New York: Asia Society, 1996).

[9.](#) See David Marr, *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), ch. 10.

[10.](#) See Porter, *Vietnam*, ch. 6. Porter cites protests against living conditions and curricula by Saigon students in 1989 as an example of an "emerging form of unauthorized political participation." He notes that "the contrast between a southern population that is relatively unafraid to assert its political interests and northern and central Vietnamese populations that remain politically more timid is striking testimony to the divergence of social structures in the south from the longer-settled north and center" (p. 163).

[11.](#) William S. Turley, "Party, State, and People: Political Structure and Economic Prospects," in Turley and Selden, eds., *Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism*, 269.

[Journals](#) [This Journal](#) [Contents](#) [Top](#)

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