

VIETNAMESE CAPITALISM AND THE
FINAL NATIONALISATION OF HO CHI MINH

Vietnam is one of the world's five remaining communist states, but at the same time the country has come quite far in recreating capitalism. This paradox, which Vietnam shares with China, is the basis for the following interview with research professor Stein Tønnesson (ST) at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) in Copenhagen, who was in Vietnam during August-September 1992.

NONESA: There seems to be some uncertainty as to how one should interpret the new Vietnamese constitution of April 1992. On the one side it confirms the trend towards a market economy and a diversified foreign policy, but on the other hand it emphasizes the leading role of the Communist Party and prescribes "Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thinking" as the basis of the Vietnamese state. The general elections of July 1992 disappointed many of those who had hoped that the constitution would pave the way for genuine democracy, with real choice between different candidates. Why was it that the electorate once again were allowed only to choose between a restricted number of party candidates -- and a mere two "independents" who were not even elected?

ST: During a conversation I had in August with Vietnam's new minister of justice, Nguyen Dinh Loc, he said the original intention had been that about one fourth of the new National Assembly members should be independents, but old thinking still permeated many public institutions, and had prevented the

independent candidates from getting through the very complicated screening process prescribed in the constitution.

My impression was that the elections had met with complete indifference, at least among the educated classes of Hanoi, but they had not led to pessimism. I heard the Vietnamese reform process being compared to an aqua-culture where the fish are swimming forwards while the crabs drag sideways and the shrimps pull backwards. The July elections were the elections of the shrimps, but many fishes had been elected to the assembly anyway, and they would make sure that the reform process continued, at least in the economic domain.

The new president who was elected in September, general Le Duc Anh, may well be one of those dragging sideways, but the new National Assembly consists of people who are much more educated and younger than before, and the Assembly will have longer sessions than in the past. Since it met last September, it has passed a government organization law and a law on people's courts. The hardest nut to crack may well be the new land law which is under preparation. It is going to prescribe how the "long term users right" to land which was defined in the constitution is going to be practised. Although the Vietnamese state will formally continue to own all land, the users right is likely to be interpreted in a way that will make it very equal to ownership. Formally users rights cannot be sold, but there seems to be agreement to allow that they are "transferred" against "compensation".

NONESA: Have the reforms introduced since 1987 had much effect so far?

I think it makes sense to compare the role of the Vietnamese Communist Party today to the role of European monarchs one hundred years ago. Democratisation may mean to gradually transfer power from the king or party to elected institutions while keeping the king/party as a symbol. Absolutist and communist ideology must then fade out and be supplanted with an all-encompassing dedication to the national heritage, and in the Vietnamese case the main symbol of that heritage will continue to be Ho Chi Minh.

Vietnam will have a great opportunity to move in that direction during the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the August Revolution in 1995. On that occasion, the party could silently drop its leninism, and fulfil Ho Chi Minh's last wish. His remains could be taken out of Hanoi's Stalinist mausoleum, be ceremoniously incinerated, and his ashes be divided into three parts, be put in three ceramic boxes: one for the North, one for the Centre, and one for the South

In each part of the country, the box of ashes could be buried on a hill, and a simply-designed spacious, solidly-built, and cool house be constructed, where visitors could rest. That was what Ho Chi Minh said he wanted in his testament, and that would be a nice way of inaugurating a new democratic Vietnam, with continued respect for its national heritage, but disdain for party orthodoxy.