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Democracy in Vietnam?

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Introduction

The crisis of world communism in the second half of the 1980s had very different results in Asia than in Europe. All the European communist regimes fell or were transformed, and neither they nor their successor regimes were able to generate economic growth through market economical reforms. If these states are at all to succeed economically, it will only be after a long period of severe crisis. In contrast, the communist states in Asia, mainly China and Vietnam, succeeded astoundingly well with their economic reforms. They unleashed what one might call a popular capitalist movement with significant growth in agriculture, internal and external trade and substantial investments in industry. At the same time, the communist parties retained their political monopoly. The great paradox of the communist crisis is that the transition to capitalism was by far the most successful in the countries where the communist regimes survived.

As in China, the communist regime in Vietnam made its first concessions to market economic principles already in 1978-79 (Ljunggren 1992). At that stage, however, the Vietnamese leaders saw the reforms as just a momentary retreat on the road towards the communist goal. Only in 1986, when the 6th Party Congress proclaimed the *Doi Moi* policy (renovation), did the Hanoi leaders undertake a greater departure in principle from the kind of centralised socialist planned economy which had been instituted in North Vietnam from 1954 and the South from 1975. Until 1992, the transformation that Vietnam was undergoing did not arouse much interest in the West since changes elsewhere in the world were far more dramatic, but in the last two years it has become more generally known how radical the Vietnamese transformation actually is.

The present report:

*provides an overview of the most important political developments in Vietnam 1986-92,

*points out ten main characteristics in Vietnam's political developments, *discusses Vietnam's position as compared to the other communist states in Asia,

- * depicts three future scenarios and
- * concludes with an assessment of whether or not Vietnam is heading towards democracy.

Before proceeding, it should be emphasised that the present report uses the term *democracy* in a narrow sense. Democracy is an institutional system on the national level, with three main characteristics:

- 1) respect for the basic human rights and freedoms (freedom of association, opinion, etc.);
- 2) voting by secret ballot for a National Assembly (possibly also the head of state) with no insurmountable obstacles to those who seek to stand as candidates;
- 3) a general recognition of the principle that the government must resign if it is unable to win an election or obtain support from a majority in the National Assembly.

The third factor is considered crucial. The great advantage of a democratic system over any other political system is that it includes a mechanism for a peaceful transfer of power. Popular participation at the local level is an attribute of many democratic countries, but is not included in the definition of democracy used in this report.

The 6th Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in December 1986 agreed on a severe criticism of the "bureaucratically centralised management mechanism based on state subsidies...", an expression which since became the official term for the old socialist system that was applied from 1954 to 1986 in northern Vietnam and from 1975 to 1986 in the south (Elliott 1992: 132).¹ The 6th Party Congress introduced a new slogan: *Doi Moi*, excluded three powerful veterans from the politburo and elected the reformer Nguyen Van Linh as new general secretary. He led the party until the 7th Congress in 1991, which replaced him with the more colourless Do Muoi. The reformer in Vietnam's leadership since 1991 has been prime minister Vo Van Kiet, who comes from the south.

The main goal for the new party leadership constituted in 1986 was to achieve economic growth. This was to determine policies in almost every domain: ideology, social policy, foreign policy, etc. To obtain economic growth it was not enough to dismantle the unproductive agricultural collectives, reduce military expenditure and let the market loose. It was also seen as necessary to get foreign loans for investments in industry and infrastructure. This in turn required a new investment law, which was adopted in 1987—at a time when its contents were in clear conflict with the socialist constitution (Ngo Ba Thanh 1991-92; Vietnam, S.R. 1987)—and it demanded a foreign policy that could normalise relations with China, Japan and all countries in Southeast Asia, as well as get the United States to cease its embargo.

One concession after the other was made on the Cambodian issue. Vietnam withdrew its army of occupation in September 1989 and accepted a U.N. plan which made the vehemently anti-Vietnamese *Khmer Rouge* a legitimate member of Cambodia's new "Supreme National Council". Relations with China were normalised in November 1991—shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 1992, Japan and Australia resumed their aid programmes to Vietnam and, after the

¹ Laos instead uses the term "the centralised bureaucratic-management mechanism" (Ljunggren 1992: 23-4).

election of Bill Clinton as U.S. president in the autumn of 1992, Japan signed an agreement providing Vietnam with a loan of USD 369 million.² In July 1993 the United States reduced the severity of its embargo by allowing Vietnam to obtain IMF support and loans from the World Bank, but on 13 September 1993 President Clinton decided to retain the 29-year-old bilateral U.S. embargo, giving as a reason that Vietnam should cooperate more fully in the search for US servicemen missing in action (MIAs). The Vietnamese People's Daily called this reason "absurd" since Vietnam was already offering full cooperation (SWB Summary, FE/1797 B/5, 18 Sep 93).

By keeping up its embargo for so long, the United States has contributed to the reestablishment of an old pattern in Vietnamese trade: it is again mainly directed towards the Chinese merchant cities of Singapore and Hong Kong. Investments in the growing Vietnamese economy have come mainly from East and Southeast Asia, with Taiwan and South Korea in the lead. The U.S. embargo has in a sense protected Vietnam against a too powerful influx of foreign capital and thus allowed the development of a localised and rudimentary but very lively capitalism (under the cover name "multi-sector commodity economy").³

1988 was the year the new reforms were implemented. Vietnam was the first socialist country in the world to make its currency convertible and to the great surprise of economic experts the government succeeded in avoiding hyperinflation. The main reason for this was probably that many families put hidden capital into circulation. The subsequent growth in internal trade and the smuggling into the country of attractive goods primarily from Thailand, as well as a substantial increase in the production of rice after the dissolution of the collectives, created widespread satisfaction and optimism. This strengthened the communist regime, and it survived the revolutionary year of 1989

² For a good discussion of the relationship between Japan and Vietnam, see Furuta 1992: 171-5. Another Japanese specialist on Vietnam, Masaya Shiraishi, also published a book in 1993 on contemporary developments in Vietnam. For a Vietnamese view of Japan, see Dao Huy Ngoc 1991. Ngoc is a former ambassador to Tokyo and currently director of the Institute of International Relations in Hanoi.

³ For a western analysis of this rudimentary local capitalism based on a systematic survey, see Ronnås 1992.

without much difficulty. Indeed in March 1989 the state even started to dismantle the system of fixed prices (Gates & Truong: 14).

Vietnam applied a policy resembling that of Deng Xiao-ping in China: the dismantling in practice of socialism, retention of the party state and a somewhat revised and diluted communist rhetoric with nationalistic and Confucian overtones. Both in China and Vietnam the leaders reiterated again and again that economic development required political stability and that political pluralism would only lead to anarchy. Here they could build upon central principles within the Confucian tradition. The difference between the two countries was that in China there was a rapid upsurge of political opposition and demands for freedom leading to reaction and repression, whereas in Vietnam the growth of intellectual opposition was slower. Even in Vietnam the intellectuals have tried to test how much the authorities permit but so cautiously that it has not yet led to any open confrontation. The student revolt in China and the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 led Hanoi to put the brakes on its reforms in the political and cultural domain. In connection with a campaign against corruption, the Vietnamese Communist Party was thoroughly purged of "undesirable elements" in 1990, a year otherwise characterised by hectic diplomacy over Cambodia and the beginning of an improved relationship between Vietnam and China.

1991 was a decisive year for Vietnam. The withdrawal from Cambodia, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the end of economic aid from Russia, and the failure of an attempt to normalise relations with the U.S.A. must have been traumatic for the party leadership in Hanoi. On the other hand Vietnam did achieve normalisation of relations with China. Cross-border trade with the great neighbour rapidly increased, and Vietnam managed to keep up its economic relations with the successor states to the Soviet Union, including the Russian republic. Indeed a Russian-Vietnamese joint venture in oil production had fine results.⁴

⁴ "By 24th December [1992], the Vietnamese-Russian oil and gas joint enterprise Vietsovetro had pumped 5.23m tonnes of crude oil, 550,000 tonnes above the yearly plan." SWB Summary FE/WO263, 6 Jan 93.

The 7th Party Congress, held in June 1991, is difficult to interpret. Doctrinaire leaders as well as the most avid reformers lost power and the new politburo became a compromise-seeking body where a China-oriented, conservative "security faction", represented by general Le Duc Anh (president from September 1992) opposed a "reform faction" led by prime minister Vo Van Kiet. The security faction is influential in the army, police and the party bureaucracy while the reformers seem to dominate the new economic institutions, the civilian ministries and the majority of the National Assembly.

The two major events in 1992 were the adoption of a new constitution in April, "legalising" the anti-constitutional economic laws which had been adopted since 1987, and the election of the 9th National Assembly in July. In these elections there was still no room for any opposition candidates. In each constituency the voters had to choose from among a small number of official candidates, who had all been through an elaborate screening process (FEER 9.7.92). From a democratic viewpoint the election can hardly be said to have represented any progress, however the members of the new National Assembly were younger and better educated than those of the previous one. The new Assembly continued a process started by its predecessor towards more genuine debate and voting on government proposals. In 1993, the National Assembly convened for a full month and adopted a number of important laws. Apart from this, international media reports about Vietnam in 1993 were concerned with the visit of the French president François Mitterrand, a conflict between the state and Buddhist monks in south and central Vietnam, and President Clinton's decision to retain the U.S. embargo.

Main Developments

It is often said that Beijing and Hanoi have carried out radical economic reforms, but have *yet* to do so in the political field. This viewpoint rests on two questionable presumptions:

The first one is that only reforms in the direction of political democracy can be considered political reforms. As will be shown on the following pages, Vietnam has indeed carried out radical political reforms, but not in the way that protagonists of a democratic political system would have hoped for.⁵ Drastic reforms have been undertaken in the structure of the Vietnamese Communist Party, in the functioning of a wide range of public institutions and in the division of responsibilities between them, as well as in the relationship between party and state. Also, serious cuts have been made in the state bureaucracy. So far, however, the reforms have aimed at preserving a softened version of authoritarian rule rather than allowing any opposition to the leadership of the party.

The second presumption is that a free market is in some way logically connected to a respect for the basic freedoms and institutions of political democracy, so that the introduction of a market economy sooner or later will lead to political freedom. This presumption is not without a certain basis. Capitalism, as we know it from Western history, develops new social classes demanding influence over the affairs of the state. This makes it difficult to maintain authoritarian regimes for any sustained period of time. However, democracy is not an inevitable result of capitalism. Many developed countries, both in the West and the East, have in certain periods—particularly the 1920s and 30s—combined a market economy with different types of authoritarian regime. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a great many states adopted democratic institutions, but it should not be taken for granted that this trend will continue.

Since 1986, Vietnam has been through a radical transformation in its economic, social, cultural and political domain, but Vietnam has not become a democracy. Towards the end of this report we shall return to the question of democracy, but first we shall go through the main

⁵ William Turley in ch. 12 of Ljunggren 1993.

developments from 1986 to 1993.

Family Capitalism and Social Injustice

A highly significant aspect of the social transformation in Vietnam is the restitution of the household as the basic economic unit and of family connections as the basic network in productive and commercial activities. related aspect is a drastically increased social injustice. The difference in incomes between rich and poor families, not to speak of those who do not have a family, has grown tremendously these last years.

The new (and, of course, classic) attitude to the family is reflected in the Vietnamese constitution of 1992: "The family is the cell of society. The state protects marriage and the family" (Vietnam, S.R. 1992b: §64). When land was transferred from the collectives to the household, and small-scale private enterprises were allowed in 1987-89, Vietnamese families suddenly had vastly greater opportunities. And they grasped these opportunities with unprecedented enthusiasm. A popular capitalist movement was unleashed. The initial phase in 1988-89 was characterised by small-scale private enterprise. Millions of homes in the towns as well as along the main roads were transformed into shops, restaurants and workshops. In the next couple of years the commercial phase was followed by a construction phase: every self-respecting household started to renovate its house or build a new one. All of this generated a tremendously increased circulation of money, a general satisfaction among the majority of people who managed to increase their income, and a general feeling of greater leverage and independence in relation to the state. Life became very much easier for all those who had—or were able to obtain—some kind of property.

One might say, paradoxically, that the Vietnamese Communist Party regained much of its lost authority by introducing and promoting capitalism. In some places it became really popular, and in those circles where the party was unable to become popular, it was passively tolerated. However it was not the party that created the new dynamic and popular capitalism. The party merely opened the floodgates. The people itself, organised in families, created the movement. Hence as long as the economy continues to expand and the regime does not create too

many obstacles, the great bulk of the population, at least in northern Vietnam, is likely to tolerate the present regime.

It must be emphasised that the current enthusiasm for free enterprise is something new in Vietnamese—at least North Vietnamese—history. Within Confucianism as well as communism commerce has been considered unworthy of respect. Hence it was something women used to take care of in the villages and Indians or Chinese in the towns. Under French colonial-rule only a tiny class of ethnic Vietnamese engaged themselves in commerce and industry. This class grew significantly in South Vietnam between 1954 and 1975, and its experiences from the American interlude does much to explain why it was the south that took the lead in the new economic deal of 1986-87. The upgrading of commerce in Vietnam in the second half of the 1980s can be compared to what happened in Japan a hundred years earlier. In Vietnam the commercial revolution seems to have strengthened the general standing of women and also to have generated an economic upsurge among the approximately one million ethnic Chinese who still live in Vietnam. Half of the Chinese community fled during 1978-79; those who stayed behind now function as links between Vietnam and its investors and trading partners in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Some of those who fled then now want to come back.

The turn to family-based agriculture and a free market has destroyed much of the social justice policy applied since the communists took power. There is no doubt that the *average* standard of living has been significantly improved: economic liberalisation has increased the incomes not only of the rich, but of a clear majority of people. However the quality of public services like education and health care has been reduced, and the situation of the very poor, the landless and workless in the poorest regions, has most probably worsened even in absolute terms. However, there are no reliable statistics that such assessments can build upon. A report about living conditions in the countryside published in January 1993 resembled the analyses of the rural class society that the young communist cadres Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap wrote in the 1930s. In much the same way as then the 1993 report divided the peasants into three classes: 10-20% rich, 50-60% with an average income and 20-30% poor (5-10% very poor). One reason why the

poorest are often worse off than before is that there is no longer a collective to provide them with food and that many villages have distributed all available land to private households without setting any plots aside for the poor. Another reason was explained by the Vietnam News Agency in January 1993: "Regarding the policy on capital loans to peasants, generally speaking, the poor are usually in the last row of borrowers because they do not have anything to mortgage. If this situation is allowed to continue, the poor would remain poor and the polarisation of wealth would continue. Many localities have urged the bank to adopt a suitable organisation, mechanism and policy so that the poor can borrow to expand production" (SWB Summary FE/1579 B/7, 6 Jan 93).

In 1993, the party took up the challenge by launching a programme against poverty. In July the Ministry of Labour organised a conference in Hanoi to discuss the programme, and in September another conference was dedicated to socio-economic conditions in the mountain regions. The first conference set as a target to eliminate hunger and raise all households above the poverty line (5-10% are believed to be below that line) before the year 2000 (SWB Summary FE/1747 B/8 22 Jul 93). The second conference estimated that more than 50% of the population in the mountain (ethnic minority) regions were living in poverty and suffering from regular food shortages. Nomadic farming and destruction of the environment was increasing.

To conclude, the gap between rich and poor has widened dramatically in the new family-based Vietnamese society, and despite a considerable general improvement in living standards over the last years, the number of people living in absolute poverty remains high. The party and government have launched a programme to combat poverty, but its effects remain to be seen.

Intellectual Renaissance and Ideological Self-doubt

After the elections to the National Assembly in the summer of 1992, Vietnamese newspapers proclaimed that 222 (56.2%) of the new deputies had a university degree. Only 58 deputies represented agriculture and 19 industry. This mirrors the intellectual renaissance that has characterised the Doi Moi period. In contrast to the social upgrading

of businessmen, the worship of educated people is not new in Vietnam. People with a high education have got back the status that they enjoyed in the Confucian society and informally kept during the entire communist period. In public campaigns before the 7th Party Congress the hammer and sickle was replaced by a symbol with a book and a pen. Congress documents were presented to the public in a booklet with an introduction beginning as follows: "...Present were 1,176 delegates representing 2,155,021 Party members. Among the delegates were 134 women, 125 of ethnic minority origin and 743 university graduates or post-graduates including 108 with PhD and MSc degrees and 49 professors." (Vietnamese Communist Party 1991d: 3.) In the Congress report, the traditional "worker peasant alliance" was expanded into an alliance of peasants, workers and intellectuals (*Nhan Dan* 15.8.92). This trinity, within which there is little room for doubt about who plays the leading role, can also be found in the national constitution of 1992.⁶ The question is, however, if there exists an independent class of intellectuals in Vietnam who can use its respected status to assert itself and form public opinion (i.e., an intelligentsia). Or perhaps the state's formal recognition of the role of intellectuals is just an attempt to buy continued loyalty from those who have received a higher education. The heyday of Vietnamese intellectuals was during the 1920s and '30s, a period with intense discussions in the main Vietnamese towns about philosophical, moral and political issues (Marr 1981). During the Second World War the French Vichy regime suppressed basic freedoms thus preventing a continuation of intellectual life. However, it blossomed briefly again in the spring and summer of 1945, when the Japanese destroyed the French colonial regime, permitted the release of political prisoners and gave Vietnam nominal independence. During the August Revolution of the same year, the radical parts of the Vietnamese intelligentsia joined the Viet Minh, thus effectively tying themselves to the communist party and depriving themselves of any right to openly question the leadership's policies. Public opposition was seen as

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"The SRV state is of the people, by the people and for the people. All state power belongs to the people, based on the worker-peasant-intellectual alliance". Vietnam, S.R. 1992b: cp. 1, §2.

have probably been out of touch with popular concerns for too long to play any leading role in generating public opinion.

Thirdly, there is a group of "might-be" intellectuals to be found among the large numbers of people who have been educated since the 1960s in Vietnam, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. They are the technicians, mathematicians, engineers and other experts who used to keep the so-called "bureaucratically centralised management mechanism based on state subsidies" going—or limping. They are seldom heard of in public and no one knows for sure what they actually think. But they are the ones who might form the basis of a national, democratic "loyal opposition". In a Vietnamese context, such a "loyal opposition" would work within the confines of the constitution, it would not try to revive the defunct South Vietnamese regime nor sow dissension between the northern and southern halves of the country. Two such experts who might become spokesmen for this kind of opposition are the physicist Nguyen Thanh Giang and the mathematician Phan Dinh Dieu. As a result of a negative evaluation at his workplace, Nguyen Thanh Giang was not allowed to stand as an independent candidate in the elections for the National Assembly in 1992. Phan Dinh Dieu, a vice-president of the Vietnamese Academy of Sciences, did not even try. He had circulated petitions to the party before the 7th Congress in 1991 but did not get them published. Later on he criticised Marxism-Leninism for being an outdated ideology and expressed clear democratic principles in interviews with international news agencies. In August 1992 he proposed in a letter to the general secretary of the communist party to abandon Marxism-Leninism as an official ideology and redefine communism with emphasis on authentically Vietnamese national and cultural values. Do Muoi invited him to a discussion, but did not heed his advice. In 1993, Dieu was ousted as vice-chairman of the National Centre for Scientific Research, a position that had given him a status of deputy minister.⁹

⁹ For Nguyen Thanh Giang: Murray Hiebert, "Election strategy. No threat to communist party rule in July polls", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 9.7.92: 21. For Phan Dinh Dieu: *Asia Yearbook 1992*: 212; *Amnesty International 1992*: 3; Tønnesson 1993. For general secretary Do Muoi's meeting with Phan Dinh Dieu and three other critical intellectuals, see FEER 24.10.91: 16. For the letter from Dieu (called "Phieu") to Do Muoi, see *Indochina Chronology*, 3/92: 5-6. For his

20 detrimental to national unity and thus traitorous behaviour (Tønnesson 1991: 13, 352-3). An intellectual blowout in North Vietnam in 1956 (the Nhan Van-Giai Pham affair) was soon quelled by a party decision.

Then came the war against the South Vietnamese regime and its US backers, and again northern intellectuals had to close ranks. In the south, the term "third force" was used for those intellectuals who were neither communists nor supporters of the Saigon regime but in fact they were not a "force" at all, just a disparate group of people who were obliged to either opt for exile (in France) or take sides in the struggle.

After 1975 the North Vietnamese imposed their political and economic system on the south and in the following ten years there was as little room for intellectual activities as before. The great debates and artistic life of the interwar period only really resurfaced when the Doi Moi policy was launched in the mid-1980s. Today Vietnam has a number of avant-garde artists and authors some of whom have already had an international breakthrough. Among these authors can be mentioned Bao Ninh, Nguyen Huy Thiep, Duong Thu Huong and Nguyen Khac Truong (for titles of some of their works, see the list of sources).⁷

Who are the intellectuals in today's Vietnam—apart from this small group of avant-garde authors and artists? Firstly, there is a group consisting of the old generation of French-trained intellectuals who have followed the communist party through thick and thin; some of them played an important role in the reform movement towards the end of the 1980s but they are now old indeed and unable to wield much influence. Secondly, there are all the educated Vietnamese who live in exile. They already play an important role in the economic development of Vietnam by providing capital, know-how and international contacts for the many investment projects that have been launched in recent years.⁸ But they

⁷ In August 1992, Irene Nørlund convened a workshop at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen, to compare present day Vietnamese literature with that of before the Second World War. Many interesting comparisons were made between the situation before and after the long interruption of intellectual life in the years of repression and struggle (1945-85).

⁸ See Murray Hiebert, "Cautious about investment: Wooing them home", FEER

When meeting intellectuals in today's Vietnam, party members as well as independents, one soon discovers a mixture of ideological self-doubt and intellectual curiosity. The old Cold War certainties have broken down for the Vietnamese too, and they are uncertain as to what to put in their place. In addition they are not sure how far they can go in trying out new ideas without provoking a reaction from the party's conservatives. Vietnam is going through a period of transition. New thoughts, whether home-bred or imported, have a greater chance of being heard and reflected upon. But it remains to be seen who dares put them forward.

Limited Freedom

In the years 1987-89 freedom blossomed in Vietnamese society, not only within trade and commerce but also in art, culture and the emerging political and ideological debates. For the first time, visitors to Vietnam were able to have frank political conversations with Vietnamese colleagues and friends who no longer repeated official viewpoints but spoke their own mind. At the same time, the Vietnamese media became bolder in their criticism of bureaucracy, corruption, abuse of power and mismanagement. Several thousand prisoners, who had been held in re-education camps in southern Vietnam since 1975-76, were released in 1987-88.¹⁰

In the autumn of 1989 the party leaders put on the brakes and the movement towards more freedom stopped. But there was no vigorous repression of the Chinese kind. The new and freer ways of the two previous years had come to stay though were not allowed to develop any further. By 1992 it was easy to notice that the Vietnamese had grown accustomed to speaking openly not only with each other but with foreigners as well (this was still new and somewhat daring in 1989). In 1992 dissenting views could be vocalised within restricted circles but not

loss of the position as vice-chairman of the National Centre for Scientific Research, see "Adieu Dr Dieu", *FEER*, 12.8.93: 9.

¹⁰ For an insider's description of life in a Vietnamese re-education camp 1975-79, see Tr an 1990.

in the media. The limits for what was allowed were defined through administrative and judicial measures such as withdrawal of publication licenses, replacement of editors, arrests and public trials. Amnesty International reported some sixty politically motivated arrests in 1990-91 of former inmates in the re-education camps, religious leaders, authors and others who "conspired against the state" (Amnesty International 1992). Amnesty's report for 1992 claimed that in 1991 there were at least 80 political prisoners in Vietnam. Several were held in custody for sustained periods without trial. Others were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment for having disseminated their opinions and trying to organise opposition groups. An opposition of 80 is perhaps not much but on 10 January 1993 the Moscow-based *Radio Irina* (broadcasting in Vietnamese) published a list of more than 400 political prisoners. The list was said to have been put together by a "National Front for Unification and Liberation of Vietnam" (SWB Summary FE/1591 B/6-10). Already in 1992 *Radio Irina's* vehement attacks against the Vietnamese communist regime had led to Vietnamese protests to Russia, and in 1993 the Russian authorities decided to close down the radio station.

Despite obvious violations of international legal standards, Vietnam has subscribed to the international conventions on human rights and actively striven to accommodate its legislation to them. In March 1990 Vietnam engaged in a dialogue with Amnesty International by sending it an *aide m emoire*, promising a possible revision of certain old decrees which allowed the authorities to hold Vietnamese citizens without trial for "re-education". However, Amnesty International also criticised the Vietnamese Criminal Code of 1985-86 and the Criminal Procedure Code of 1989 because they make it possible to hold Vietnamese citizens in custody for up to four months without a court decision and, in case of serious crimes, indefinitely (Amnesty International 1992: 16). The new Vietnamese constitution of 1992 improved the human rights situation at least partially in that it establishes that no one can be detained without a ruling from the People's Court or the People's Office of Supervision and Control (or at least its approval). However, it makes an exception for "flagrant offenses" (Vietnam, S.R. 1992b: §71).

At the time the new constitution was adopted, the party's publishing house *Su That* [Truth] also published a Vietnamese translation of the international conventions on human rights with a commentary by Vietnamese law specialists (Truong dai... 1992). The constitution included an entire chapter on the "fundamental rights and duties of the citizen", explicitly referring to human rights.¹¹ The chapter offers a strong legal basis for respecting human rights in Vietnam but it is contradicted in other articles of the constitution, as well as in several laws and of course in practice.

Two laws setting strict limits to the freedoms hailed in the constitution are the press and publication laws. During the first years of Doi Moi, the press became far more independent but this development stagnated. The current press law was adopted in December 1989 with 422 votes for and 37 against (Turley 1993: 337), and promulgated the following year (Vietnam, S.R. 1990). The law has both positive and negative elements. On the one hand it affirms every citizen's right to full access to information and to openly criticise the party and the state in the press; much of the effort of the press to strengthen its position as a watchdog has in reality focussed on criticising mismanagement and corruption. On the other hand the same law has an entire chapter on how the state is to manage the press; furthermore, this involves forbidding the media to "incite the population to oppose the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, or to undermine the national unity bloc". Both before and after the adoption of the press law, a number of newly-established newspapers were banned and several editors were forced to

¹¹ The chapter affirms equality before the law; right to political participation; general suffrage; right and duty to work; freedom of enterprise as determined by the law; property ownership rights; right to education; right to carry out research, make inventions and engage in literary and artistic creation and criticism; right to health protection; right to build dwelling-houses; equal rights of the sexes (and a ban on discrimination against women and acts damaging their dignity); children's rights to protection, care and education; right of war invalids and revolutionary martyrs to preferential treatment; freedom of movement (that is, "The citizen ... can freely travel abroad and return home from abroad in accordance with the provisions of the law"); freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of the press; the right to assemble, form associations and hold demonstrations; freedom of belief and of religion; the inviolability of the person and the domicile; and the right to lodge complaints and get them examined (Vietnam, S.R. 1992b: 29-39).

resign (Information Freedom... 1991: 236). Repression was most severe in the south, probably because the press remains more independent and outspoken there than in the north.

Behind every newspaper or other media in Vietnam there is an association or institution, which has to apply for a permit in order to be allowed to publish its organ. The boards of these associations are responsible for the contents of their publications. The Vietnamese press does not have to pass through any government censorship before it is printed but editors who do not want to lose their jobs have to be careful about what they allow to be printed.¹² If a newspaper prints something unacceptable to the organisation that owns it, the editor can be dismissed. If the contents are unacceptable to higher authorities and the organisation supports its editor, then it may lose its permit. The system of organisational responsibility ensures that ideological issues are seldom or never discussed in the Vietnamese press. Journalists are told to give accurate information and to reveal mismanagement and corruption if they are able to establish positive proof of this, but they are not expected to advance divergent ideas in basic political matters.

Hence, when answering the question, 'Is there a free and independent press in today's Vietnam?' the answer must be 'no'. The press is neither independent nor free in any absolute sense, but it is significantly freer and more independent than used to be the case before 1987. The new press law confirmed the new practice of criticism of corruption and mismanagement that was instituted by former secretary general Nguyen Van Linh, but did not permit further developments towards greater freedom. Article 69 in the constitution of 1992 may seem to represent an improvement: "The citizen shall enjoy freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of the press, the right to be informed, and the right to assemble, form associations and hold demonstrations in accordance with the law". But those who wish to prevent too much freedom can refer to article 30 in the same constitution: "The State undertakes the overall administration of cultural activities. The propagation of all reactionary and depraved thought and culture is

¹² Article 2 in the law on the press: "The press is not censored before going to print or on the air" (Vietnam, S.R. 1990).

forbidden; superstitions and harmful customs are to be eliminated".¹³ Article 32 also prohibits "all activities in the fields of culture and information that are detrimental to national interests, and destructive of the personality, morals, and fine lifeway [sic] of the Vietnamese" (Vietnam, S.R. 1992: 23). That these are not inactive paragraphs was demonstrated in December 1992, when four people in Ho Chi Minh City were sentenced to between 16 months and three years imprisonment for having assisted a foreign film company to produce the "reactionary and defamatory" film *Loving the Song from Vietnam* (SWP Summary FE/1575 B/18, 31 Dec 1992).

Unlike the press, Vietnamese publishing houses have to submit all manuscripts for approval before they are printed, and unauthorised literature may not be imported or disseminated. Despite this system, the book market has grown considerably under Doi Moi, and many books have been published which would have been banned a few years ago. However, non-conformist books are normally published in far too small quantities. Once they are sold out — and this happens quickly — they are copied in "photocopy shops" and spread more or less openly. The same thing happens with literature smuggled in from abroad, particularly in the south. The role of the "photocopy shops" in creating a civil society in Vietnam cannot be exaggerated. A number of clandestine publishing houses have also emerged, some of which issue dissident books. According to the Japanese news service Kyodo, no less than ten such unauthorised editors and publishers were arrested in 1992 (SWP Summary FE/1581 B/8, 8 Jan 93). This was part of a government counter-offensive in the cultural field which in 1993 led to the adoption in the National Assembly of a new publication law reconfirming the system of official permits and strictly prohibiting:

- "1. Material detrimental to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam or the unity of all its people.
2. Material inciting violence or war of aggression, fomenting

¹³ This is the official translation. The translations in FBIS-EAS-92-093-S and *Sūdostasiën aktuell*, July 1992, are a little less harsh: "The State uniformly manages cultural activities, strictly prohibits the propagation of reactionary concepts and decadent culture, and combats superstition and outmoded customs."

hatred among nationalities and peoples of various nations, propagating reactionary concepts and culture, disseminating a degenerate or decadent lifestyle; promoting crime, social vice and superstition; and damaging good Vietnamese morals and customs.

3. Material revealing party, state, military, national security, economic and foreign affairs secrets; secrets involving the personal lives of citizens; and other secrets stipulated by law.

4. Material distorting history, rejecting revolutionary achievements, discrediting great Vietnamese men and national heroes, or slandering and damaging the prestige of organisations or the dignity of citizens." (SWB Summary FE/1761 B/6, 7 Aug 93).

The new law makes it possible to prevent virtually anything from being published, but of course this does not mean that the government is actually going to clamp down on the newly-won freedoms. Several factors are going to determine the fate of freedom of speech: a) the degree to which the government *intends* to use the new law in actually repressing cultural and political life; b) the *capacity* of the government to actually do so; c) the amount of *fear* that the law and certain repressive acts will instill in Vietnamese intellectuals and which makes them refrain from writing or publishing texts they would otherwise have produced.

The third of these factors is important. Doi Moi and Vietnam's vastly increased contact with the outside world has already significantly reduced people's fear of the authorities. Indeed, it is questionable if the government will be able to instill such fears in the population once again as new factors have arisen. Imported and pirated cassettes and videos are nowadays available in every town. It will be difficult to prevent people from seeing satellite television. The expansion in the flow of information from abroad has also induced state television and radio to provide far more accurate and less selective information than before.

The attempts to curtail cultural and intellectual freedom are partly a result of an older generation's qualms about a depraved Western culture, partly a result of the Hanoi leadership's anxieties arising from

the events of 1989-91 in China, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.¹⁴ However, even in the first Doi Moi years there were reactions against independent-minded intellectuals. The review *Van Nghe* in Hanoi was then very important for authors seeking new means of expression. In 1987 the review published a number of short stories by the highly innovative author Nguyen Huy Thiep. In one of the short stories, the eighteenth century hero Nguyen Hue (Quang Trung), who is often compared to Ho Chi Minh, was attributed an active erotic life. This and other aspects of Thiep's writings led to reactions from the old guard, and in December 1988 the editor of *Van Nghe* was dismissed but this in turn led to massive protests from other Hanoi intellectuals (Information Freedom... 1991: 237). They were bolder then than before or since. Even so, the Vietnamese Writers' Association has continued to stimulate authors applying new perspectives. Hence, in 1991 the Association's yearly prize was given to an author (Nguyen Khac Truong) who had written a far-from-heroic account of the anti-American war in South Vietnam.

The Doi Moi period was also characterised by a thorough-going purge of the Vietnamese Communist Party itself, with no less than 78,200 members being expelled between 1987 and 1990 (Thayer 1992: 349; Turley 1993: 330, 337).¹⁵ Most of those expelled were targeted for being incompetent, abusing power or being corrupt, but there were also those who were purged because of deviant political views. Those cadres showing too much enthusiasm for the reform process in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were clearly at risk. In 1990 the young Tran Xuan Bach, the most energetic protagonist of reform in the Vietnamese Communist Party, was expelled from the politburo and the party. He had been responsible for liaison with the communist parties of other socialist countries and seemed to have become too much influenced by what was

¹⁴ For the smooth way that Vietnamese authorities quelled the beginnings of a student movement, see Thayer 1992: 357. For an overview of some important cases of political activity which have not been tolerated, see Schellhorn 1992b: 239-41.

¹⁵ The purge slowed down in later years. In the first half of 1993, only 139 members were reported to have been expelled from the party, while 562 altogether had been subjected to disciplinary measures (SWB Summary FE/1774 B/10, 23 Aug 93).

going on there. Since his expulsion from the party, Bach has not been heard of. No one seems to know where he is.

Two other outstanding cadres were also expelled from the communist party in 1990-91: the military journalist Bui Tin and the author Duong Thu Huong. Bui Tin had joined the communist party as early as 1946 and was editor of the Sunday edition of the party newspaper *Nhan Dan* when in August 1986 he first started to oppose the policy of the party. He wished the party to return to the broad national line policies of 1945-46 and proposed adoption of a multi-party system. In 1990 he was in France where he gave an interview to the BBC World Service in Vietnamese, revealing much information about party history and the power struggles between his mentor Vo Nguyen Giap and other party leaders. As a consequence Bui Tin was expelled from the party (Thayer 1992: 360-2) and then decided to stay in Paris writing his memoirs. Duong Thu Huong had been an active writer of propaganda during the war against the USA and also participated in the war against China in 1979. In her novels she has described how North Vietnamese war veterans were disappointed with the outcome of the war they fought; how instead of achieving the socialist paradise of their dreams they received an unfree and poor society. After making several public statements, she was expelled from the party in July 1990 and in 1991 she was arrested and charged with inducing foreigners to smuggle her manuscripts out of the country (Thayer 1992: 359-60). She was freed only because of French foreign minister Roland Dumas' visit in November 1992. By then several of her books had been translated and published in French (Duong Thu Huong 1990; 1991a; 1991b).

In the autumn of 1992 dissident intellectuals seemed to become a little more active again. This led the most senior members of the party's Central Committee to convene in January 1993 before the fourth plenum for a discussion on how the demands for democratic reform should be encountered and how to avoid a situation emerging similar to the one in China in 1989 (Kyodo News Service 5 Jan 93, SWB Summary FE/1581 B/8, 8 Jan 93). In his opening and concluding speeches at the plenum general secretary Do Muoi promised to sharpen controls of cultural and artistic activities. He said that the party would "analyse sabotage activities of hostile forces in culture and arts to

counter their conspiracies and tricks positively and efficiently" (SWB Summary FE/1592 B/6-7, 21 Jan 93; FE/1593 B/5, 22 Jan 93). This was a signal starting the process leading up to the adoption of the publication law in July 1993.

Revival of Religion and Ritual

Although the liberalisation of the economy has not led to any comparable liberalisation in the cultural field, it has coincided with a religious revival. The secularisation process has been halted by a return to family rituals,¹⁶ Chinese astrology, Buddhism, Christianity and, on the moral-political level, to classic Confucian teachings. Publishing houses in Ho Chi Minh City are now publishing the kinds of classic works that since 1975 have been printed only in Houston, Texas.¹⁷

Most Christians in Vietnam are Catholics, but among the ethnic minorities in the central and southern highlands Protestant churches have again started to recruit members. Of the two sects that played such a prominent role in South Vietnam between the 1930s and 1960s, namely the Cao Dai (syncretic) and the Hoa Hao (predominantly inspired by Buddhism), only the former has been heard of recently; it remains active in several southern provinces.

Buddhism probably has the greatest potential for rallying a majority of the Vietnamese population to opposing the regime. Vietnam has a long history of conflict between Buddhist monks and secular (Confucian) authorities. To put it crudely, Confucianism has been the moral creed of men, the powerful and the north, Buddhism the religious faith of women, the poor and the south. In the 1920s, Marxism took over the role of

¹⁶ For a vivid description of the return to pre-1945 rituals in two north Vietnamese villages, see Hy V. Luong's chapter in Ljunggren 1993: 259-91. The same observation was made by the Dutch anthropologist John Kleinen in a paper presented to the conference *Vietnam Between China and the West*, NIAS, Copenhagen, August 1993.

¹⁷ 1992 thus witnessed the republication of the philosopher and historian Tran Trong Kim's basic study of *Confucianism* from the 1920s. Tran Trong Kim was director of schools in Hanoi during the French period and prime minister in the Japanese-sponsored government of the State of Vietnam from April to August 1945 (Tran Trong Kim 1992). He facilitated the Vietnamese revolution by resigning from his post during the crisis after the Japanese surrender.

Confucianism as the this-worldly opponent of Buddhist escapism. The Buddhists tried to renew their teachings and adapt them to the modern world but were unable to compete with the communists and the new syncretic sects. The main weakness of Vietnamese Buddhism has been its limited institutional presence; the number of monks and pagodas has been much lower in Vietnam than in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. However, the Doi Moi period seems to have witnessed a forceful Buddhist revival. In 1988, a *History of Buddhism in Vietnam* was published in Hanoi with support from the Toyota foundation. The first edition of 2,000 copies was sold out almost before it had reached the bookshops. The book gives an objective account of the early phases of Buddhist history but concludes by criticising Buddhists for failing to prescribe a way of bettering the human condition. Nonetheless, towards the end the author adds: "No theory can please all. Buddhism has every reason to continue to exist and its history will continue to unfold" (Nguyen Tai Thu 1992: 427).

In 1992-93 a conflict emerged between the Vietnamese government and a number of Buddhist monks who no longer wanted to operate within the confines of the state-sponsored Vietnamese Buddhist Church (VBC). This conflict has much to tell us about culture, religion and politics in contemporary Vietnam. The conflict first erupted in 1992 over the state's involvement in the funeral of the chief monk, Thich Don Hau. There were warnings already then that monks might immolate themselves in the same way they had done in the 1960s though there were no episodes during the funeral itself (*Asiaweek*, 13.1.93). However, on 21 May 1993 in Hue, a Buddhist (though not a monk) did commit suicide through self-immolation but not publicly and for reasons that are disputed. The authorities seem to have taken away the body immediately after the event and tried their best to avert publicity (*Libération* 27.6.93; Weggel 1993: 249). Partly because of the suicide, partly for other reasons, a conflict developed between the Vietnamese state and parts of the Buddhist communities in Hue and Ho Chi Minh City. What really happened is not clear. According to Vietnamese groups in exile, there were massive popular demonstrations in both cities, leading to the arrest of a number of monks. In Hue the dispute erupted after the suicide mentioned above, in Ho Chi Minh City after an attempt by the police to

rescue a representative of the state who was conducting talks with local Buddhist monks and who allegedly was prevented from leaving the talks when he wanted to (FEER 5.8.93).

According to the Vietnamese government's Religious Affairs Commission, the reason for the man's self-immolation in Hue had nothing to do with state policies. He had been denounced by local people because he performed "many filthy acts with young women novices", one of whom had become pregnant. Panic-stricken, he had taken his own life (SWB Summary FE/1761 B/3, 7 Aug 93).

Behind these events is a conflict over the institutionalisation of Vietnamese Buddhism and the political control of this process. The Vietnamese Buddhist Church (VBC) was established at a congress in 1981 with the blessing of the Vietnamese government. This church was meant to incorporate the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Church (VUBC), which had existed in South Vietnam since 1964, but the VUBC continued its independent activities in exile and seems to have maintained a following inside Vietnam as well, with the monk Huyen Quang as a leading personality. For several years he was forced to live in a monastery distant from his own, and in June 1993 he wrote a letter to the Vietnamese government demanding full freedom for the VUBC. The negative reply that the government's Religious Affairs Commission sent to Thich Huyen Quang in August 1993 is interesting for what it reveals of the government's approach to religious dissidents. It accuses Huyen Quang of undermining national unity, undertaking illegal and unconstitutional acts, acting in ways that are at variance with Buddha's teachings, and failing to show repentance. The three value systems against which the unrepentant monk had sinned, according to the government commission, were genuine Buddhism, national unity, and the law. The fact in itself that the government wrote such a letter shows something about its general approach to religiously-based disturbances: the government tries to encompass all religious communities in state-approved and state-controlled institutional frameworks. When community leaders do not comply, the government tries to *persuade* them while at the same time doing its utmost to isolate them from their local followers. It is essential to portray trouble-makers as isolated, mistaken individuals and to deny the existence of anti-government movements or sentiments

among followers of any particular faith. On 27 September 1993, the VUBC (in exile) reported that yet another Buddhist demonstration had just taken place in Hue, in response to a rumour that the Venerable monk Thich Tri Tuu had died in custody. The Vietnam News Agency not only refuted the false rumour of the monk's death, but also denied that any such demonstration had happened at all (SWB FE/1810 B/9 Oct 93).

Even though there has been a revival of religious interest and practice in Vietnam, and the constitution affirms every citizen's right to freedom of belief and religion, we may still ask, 'Is there religious freedom in today's Vietnam?' Even in this domain the text of the constitution and the practice of the government contradict each other. All religions are equal before the law, and the law protects the places of worship of all faiths and religions. But the constitution adds that no one is allowed to misuse beliefs and religions to contravene the law and state policies (Vietnam, S.R. 1992b: §70). This passage has been used not only to interfere with the unauthorised Unified Buddhist Church but also against certain movements among catholic and protestant Christians. In 1991-92 a number of administrative sanctions were made against protestant priests in the south and against a catholic movement demanding greater independence from the state (Amnesty International 1992; Guilbert 1991). In August 1993, politburo member Vu Oanh reviewed religious work in a catholic quarter of Ho Chi Minh City (SWB Summary FE/1777 B/8, 26 Aug 93), and shortly afterwards a dispute erupted between the Vietnamese government's Religious Affairs Commission and the Vatican over the nomination of a new catholic archbishop in Ho Chi Minh City (SWB Summary FE/1802 B/4, 24 Sep 93).

It is thus clear that the combination of religious revival and increased freedom in Vietnamese society has created political problems for the Vietnamese state, leading to disturbances and repression. Can revived religion in the long run undermine the state? Religious life in Vietnam is multifarious and lacks well-established centralised institutions to represent the faithful. As yet there is little reason to believe that either the VBC or the VUBC is seen by most Vietnamese Buddhists as their representative. Indeed it is extremely difficult to say how many

"Buddhists" there actually are in Vietnam. The *Far Eastern Economic Review's* correspondent in Vietnam, Murray Hiebert, estimates that the Buddhists represent "two-thirds" of the population (FEER 13.5.93). In a letter to the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the president of a Paris-based Vietnam Committee on Human Rights claimed that the Buddhists "represent 80% of the population" (FEER 24.6.93). The problem with such figures is that Buddhist faith is difficult to define since religion is not very institutionalised. No powerful religious leaders exist who can defy the regime in the same way as the Iranian ayatollahs under the Shah or the bishops in Jaruzelski's Poland, but this may change. The new religious movements may become catalysts for social discontent, and coalesce around certain Buddhist monks. If the government then acts against these same monks, this may rapidly lead to disturbances and confrontations of much greater magnitude than those which happened in the summer of 1993. Such developments remain far more likely in southern and central Vietnam than in the north.

Legislation

Much has already been said about the Vietnamese constitution of 1992. However, it has been accompanied by a great number of new laws. In the 8th National Assembly, which sat until 1992, the new legislative drive was led by the president of the law commission, the Western-trained lawyer Ngo Ba Thanh. Her aim was to apply a system built on the rule of law, and in 1992 it was officially confirmed that everyone (including the party) should be responsible before the law and the constitution (Ngo Ba Thanh interview 1992). The work on new laws was continued by the 9th National Assembly in 1993, but without Ngo Ba Thanh. She failed to be reelected in 1992 because the Fatherland Front had decided she should stand for re-election in a part of Ho Chi Minh City where the three other candidates were men with substantial local backing.

The legislative work started in 1987 with the adoption of an investment law whose purpose was to attract foreign capital. It was followed by several other laws regulating economic activities. Foreigners were accorded the right to rent houses. It was made possible to transfer houses and apartments from one family to another against payment of

"compensation", and foreign banks were allowed to establish themselves in Vietnam. The new press law was adopted in December 1989 after much controversy. In the summer of 1991, the 8th National Assembly adopted a Legal Code — something which had not existed before.

Technically speaking, the constitution adopted in April 1992 was not new but a revision of the 1980 constitution. However, the revisions were so thorough that it makes more sense to speak of it as new. The chapter on the rights and duties of the citizen has already been described. The greatest changes in the new constitution concerned the so-called "multi-sector commodity economy", a euphemism for market economy or capitalism. Ideologically, the constitution adjusted Vietnam to the changed global situation. It no longer defined Vietnam as belonging to a socialist camp but as one sovereign state in a world of sovereign states, which all ought to have good relations with Vietnam. The communist party is still said to have the leading role in state and society, and Marxism-Leninism is mentioned several times in the preface but in a nationalistic form: "Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought".

The constitution was adopted only after the National Assembly had discussed four different draft versions, which had all been sent back to the government for revision. Many parts of the new constitution are also clearly compromise solutions: vague general principles are defined and then it is added that this will be specified in laws. It would be easy to criticise the constitution for want of precision but this lack is an expression of the way the constitution came about. Although the party had defined the general guidelines, the text itself was not dictated by the party. It was the outcome of a genuine political process with much bickering between various viewpoints and interest groups. The constitution-making process involved a sustained dialogue between the government and the National Assembly. The want of precision also makes it possible to interpret the constitution in various ways and thus makes it more likely to last than its predecessors.

From a socialist viewpoint the new constitution has been criticised for reducing some of the social rights (free education and health care) that were previously guaranteed. This has been defended by pointing to the fact that it is no longer financially possible to satisfy these requirements.

In July 1992, after the adoption of the constitution, general elections for a new Assembly were held. The Assembly met in September, and again in July 1993, to continue the legislative work. One of the most difficult tasks was to agree on a new land law which was to define how individual households' constitutionally guaranteed "long term user rights" should be defined in practice. According to the constitution, all land in principle belongs to the whole people. Hence a number of questions arose, like: How long should a long term user right last? Could it be inherited? Could it be sold? On what basis should land disputes between households, hamlets and villages be solved? Indeed, these and related questions had already led to much controversy before, and continued to do so during the discussions of the law. In December 1992 the 9th National Assembly debated a proposition from the government but concluded by sending it back together with a resolution requesting the prompt production of a more acceptable text (SWB Summary FE/1579 B/6 6 Jan 93). After the long session in the summer of 1993 where 52 deputies spoke out about controversial articles in the land law, it was finally adopted with "high unanimity" or a "great majority of votes" (SWB Summary FE/1742 B/5 and B/8, 16 Jul 93). The law defines "long term" as meaning 20 years for short term crops (mainly rice) and 50 years for long term crops (timber, rubber). After the end of the term, user rights can only be withdrawn from a household if it has failed to exploit its land adequately. User rights are inheritable and can be transferred against payment of compensation (in practice this means sale although the term "sale" is never used). The main practical implication of the general provision in the constitution that all land belongs to the people as a whole is thus to legalise the distribution of land that has taken place since 1988, and to avoid that anyone can demand land back which they once owned. The work that has been put into the new land law is indeed quite impressive, and the law should make a good contribution to a continuation of the tremendous increase in Vietnamese agricultural production that has taken place since the

dissolution of the collectives.¹⁸

Apart from the land law and publication law, a number of tax laws were also passed in the July 1993 session: on income tax, sales (or profit) tax, special consumption tax, import-export tax, and agricultural land use tax. In addition the Assembly adopted a law on oil and gas, and on operational regulations for the National Assembly's committees (SWB Summary FE/1742 B/5, 16 Jul 93). Furthermore, eight laws were planned to be discussed and if possible adopted in the second half of 1993: six new laws on State Business, Business Bankruptcy, Labour, the State Budget, Power and Order in the Promulgation of Legal Documents, and Environmental Protection; and two revised laws on the Organisation of People's Councils and Committees, and Elections of People's Councils (SWB Summary FE/1757 B/4, 3 Aug 93).

The comprehensive legislation undertaken in Vietnam in recent years is new in Vietnamese history, although Vietnamese historians have pointed to the impressive legislation carried out by the Le dynasty in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as being equally comprehensive (Quoc trieu hinh luat 1991). At first, the legislation was put forward in an attempt to calm the fears of overseas investors by guaranteeing their interests, but the legislation has since gained a momentum of its own. The existence of the historical laws of the Le dynasty makes it possible to imagine that contemporary legislation is built not only on foreign impulses but also on an old national tradition. Laws in themselves, however, do not create the rule of law. It remains to be seen if Vietnam will actually be governed by these new laws. So far they are probably not sufficiently well known by the population to effectively regulate society.

Decentralisation

Even before 1986 the provinces enjoyed considerable de facto autonomy in Vietnam even if they had to portray their decisions as applications of directives from the central government. With the introduction of the Doi

¹⁸ For an optimistic view of Vietnam's agricultural possibilities, see C. Peter Timmer's chapter "Food Policy and Economic Reform in Vietnam" in Ljunggren 1993: 183-206.

Cuts in the Military

The size of the Vietnamese army was drastically reduced after the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia and the cancellation of the substantial Soviet aid to Vietnam. It was cut from more than one million men to approximately half of that. Half a million men is still, however, a very large army. The main reason cited for not cutting it further is that it would lead to an even greater unemployment problem. Armies in China and Southeast Asia should not be compared to European armies because they participate to a much greater extent in all the domains of society at large. The Vietnamese Army publishes the *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, which is one of the most important of Vietnam's very few newspapers. The former editor of this newspaper is now general secretary of the Vietnamese Association of Journalists. Vietnamese army companies build roads, own hotels and guesthouses.

Moi policy, the provinces became even more independent. This had some financial reasons in that the provincial administrations were allowed to keep most of the taxation income from a rapidly increasing rice production.¹⁹ Many provinces took advantage of this and became more autonomous. However, in order to enforce the new laws adopted in 1992 and 1993, the central government needs to reassert its authority. If the National Assembly makes a majority decision concerning the interests of one region against the wishes of representatives of that region, it may well lead to a show of strength. So far decisions have mostly been made through a consensus process. This has favoured the provinces because it has not been possible to impose burdens on them that they did not themselves want to assume. Majority decisions on the national level can lead to many kinds of regional conflicts. The economically advanced provinces in the south may for instance refuse to subsidise the interior, and poor provinces with rich natural resources may ally themselves with foreign investors to undermine the national environmental protection policies. Regional differences have been deepened because the Vietnamese government, after some initial hesitation, decided to designate the most economically developed areas as "economic zones". Among them are not only the Ho Chi Minh City region, but also the areas around Da Nang and Hanoi-Haiphong.²⁰ This means that they will take priority over the other areas in the development of the infrastructure.

¹⁹ For Vietnamese taxation reforms between 1988 and 1992, see Gates & Truong 1992: 12-4. (The great year of new taxation laws was 1993).

²⁰ In his new year's speech at the start of 1993 prime minister Vo Van Kiet emphasised that decision: "Our state has determined three key economic zones to be developed in the strategy up to the year 2000, namely Hanoi-Haiphong-Quang Ninh, Ho Chi Minh City-Bien Hoa-Vung Tau and Danang City in central Vietnam, which have harbours and international airports. These zones will be developed not only for their own sake but also in the interest of the whole country." (SWB Summary FE/1579 B/7, 6 Jan 93 and FE/1802 B/6, 24 Sep 93). Stage one of a master plan for the development of high tech industry in the southern zone was adopted by the Vietnamese government in late September 1993 (SWB Summary FE/0301 WB/2, 29 Sep 93).

²¹ The military is not allowed to compete on the market and accept cooperation and competition by other sectors. (SWB Summary FE/1795 B/6, 16 Sep 93).

The Vietnamese army and police are centralised bodies which at least formally are fully independent of the provincial administrations. A few years ago, a European Vietnam watcher remarked that the Vietnamese might perhaps have misinterpreted Montesquieu's principle of the separation of power. Instead of separating the legislative, executive and judicial branches, Vietnam has divided power between the central government, the provincial governments and the army—with the party acting as coordinator.

However, it must also be emphasised that more recently the Vietnamese have developed a kind of separation of powers between the legislative, executive and judicial branches. Under the supervision of the National Assembly, the central government is striving to take over much of the party's former coordinating role.

A Self-Confident National Assembly

Though it seems rather contradictory, Vietnam is currently trying to combine the principles of a one party state with Western ideas of checks and balances between separate branches of government. Hence the political platform for the transition to socialism presented to the 7th Party Congress contained the following contradiction: "The Vietnamese state represents the *unity of the three arms of government*—legislative, executive and judicial—with division of functions and devolution of powers while ensuring uniform guidance from the central level" (Vietnamese Communist Party 1991d: 63). If the National Assembly, the government and the judiciary are "arms" of a one party state, then power is not divided, only the tasks of government have been split between different institutions; in other words, power remains in the hands of the party politburo. During a debate in 1991 on a draft for the new constitution, the president of the National Assembly Vo Chi Cong said the state was going to remain unitary and that there would be no separation of power (Pike 1992: 77).

The question of separation of powers remained unresolved both in the text of the April 1992 constitution and in the laws on government, tribunals and "People's Control Organs" adopted in September-October 1992. As mentioned, the party still has "the leading role in state and society" yet is also responsible before the law. However, because the party is not a constitutionally-defined body, the laws have nothing to say about how decision-making power is to be divided between government and party, between cabinet and politburo. My interviews in Hanoi in September 1992 gave me the impression that the politburo was still making all the major decisions, though far more details than before (particularly in economic matters) were left to the government. The question is, for how long will the government and National Assembly be satisfied with this state of affairs? Among the reforms brought about by

the 1992 constitution was instituting a new position of state president, to replace the Council of Ministers. The President, who is elected by the National Assembly, is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, designates the chief judges and nominates the prime minister who then in turn selects the cabinet ministers. This resembles the Western democratic system and involves a much clearer separation of responsibilities than before and may very well function without any instructions or guidance from the politburo.

The Vietnamese National Assembly has traditionally limited its role to rubber stamping the proposals of the government, which in turn has only executed very detailed decisions of the party politburo. But the National Assembly has itself played a crucial role in the legislative process since the mid-1980s, eagerly debating many important issues and sending proposals back to the government for revision when they were not satisfactory. However, even under the old system (where the National Assembly elected the prime minister) on one occasion a third of the deputies voted against the party's official candidate (see the chronology: June 1989).

It is not only the National Assembly deputies who have increased their influence but also the Assembly's huge secretariat. Indeed, against all expectations, the former deputy minister of justice was not promoted to minister in the new cabinet constituted in the summer of 1992. Instead the young director of the National Assembly law commission's secretariat, Nguyen Dinh Loc, was nominated. He had already wielded at least as much influence on the new legislation in his function as head of the secretariat as had the leading officials in the ministry.

The elections of 1992 were not democratic in any reasonable sense of the term but they rejuvenated the National Assembly. Only 26% of the new deputies had been members of the previous assembly and they are considerably younger than the members they replaced. Fewer of them were military officers and far more had a university degree. The 9th National Assembly meets more frequently and for longer sessions than its predecessor, the first session lasting from 19 September to 18 October 1992 (Weggel 1992b: 539) and the great legislative session in the summer of 1993 lasting a full month. A significant number of the deputies now have politics as their main profession.

The 9th National Assembly could have tried to compensate for its undemocratic mandate by adopting a critical posture to proposals coming from the government. The relationship between a cabinet dedicated to carrying out reforms and a National Assembly bent on scrutinising the government measures could represent a starting point for a general democratisation of the Vietnamese state in a way that would not threaten social stability. Then the party and its politburo would gradually assume a symbolic role, comparable to the one retained by certain European kings and courts with the introduction of constitutions in their respective states in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

So far, however, the 9th National Assembly has not engaged itself in any public quarrels with the government. The first session did not signal much independence to the outside world when general Le Duc Anh was reported to have been unanimously elected as President (Weggel 1992b: 541) and decisions which had been made in advance by the party were accepted without protest. However, the decision to send the proposed land law back to the government with demands for revision did represent a kind of independent action. As mentioned previously, the land law was adopted only after heated discussions over many controversial issues and with only "high unanimity" or a "great majority" ("high unanimity" must mean something less than unanimity). This also applies to the other newly adopted laws. For the law on profit tax and the law on oil and gas, Vietnamese radio even reported the figures: 321 voted "yes" to the former with 16 voting "no" and 10 abstaining; 335 votes "yes" to the latter with five "no" and seven abstentions (SWB Summary FE/1736 B/9, 9 Jul 93). The radio did not, however, report the reasons put forward by those who voted against nor who they were. Did some deputies vote against all the new laws? In case they did, were they "socialist conservatives" afraid of sneaking capitalism, or radicals who wanted more drastic reforms? For commentators depending on open sources, such questions remain unanswered.

It seems fair to say that the 8th National Assembly did create an arena for national Vietnamese politics and that the 9th Assembly is building on what was achieved. There are now genuine political discussions about important matters, if not the *most* important or controversial ones. The party now provides mandatory guidelines on

much fewer questions than previously and it should be possible, under the current system, to develop a kind of informal parliamentary opposition though no such opposition seems yet to have emerged.

A Non-Assertive Foreign Policy

During the last one hundred years, two attempts have been made to use Indochina as a basis for achieving a status as regional great power in Asia (Tønnesson 1992a). The first attempt was made with the establishment of the French Indochina Union (with Hanoi as capital) just before the turn of the century. By combining her navy with her Indochina landbase, France was able to claim great power status in Asian and Pacific affairs together with Great Britain, the USA, the Netherlands and Japan. The French position was undermined by the Japanese occupation and the Vichy government's collaboration with Japan during the Second World War and, after that war, the Vietnamese and Chinese revolutions prevented France from regaining its lost position.

The second attempt was made after 1975, when the American "parenthesis" in Vietnamese history was over and the whole country once again was ruled from Hanoi. This time it was a home-bred communist regime that tried to create an Indochinese bloc based on the special socialist ties existing between Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Once again the attempt failed, partly because of the drawn out guerrilla war in Cambodia that was sustained by Thailand, China and the USA, partly because of economic stagnation in Vietnam itself resulting from economic isolation and the application of an ineffective development model.

The economic crisis and the cuts in Soviet aid led to a drastic reduction of Vietnam's regional ambitions, with power politics replaced by a focussing on economic modernisation. The attempt to secure a friendly (client) regime in Cambodia was abandoned. Laos was given the freedom to direct its trade mainly towards Thailand and, as mentioned earlier, the size of the Vietnamese Army was reduced. Vietnam also expressed a desire to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

normalised in November 1991 (Furuta 1992: 171).

The security faction with its pragmatic stance of rapprochement (or kowtowing) to China is opposed by a number of more Western-minded nationalists who see Chinese expansionism as a threat to Vietnamese independence. Many of those harbouring this view were educated in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (from the Vietnamese perspective a part of the European "West"). The modernising and nationalist viewpoint seems to dominate the foreign ministry and the economic ministries, who are influenced by the international business environment, and by diplomats with contacts in a number of countries. Certainly, China is far less important to Vietnam economically and diplomatically than it is in terms of military security. It is also interesting to note that the "logic of Vietnamese nationalism" in the present situation works in favour of the reformers rather than the security people. In Vietnamese history it has been highly significant that nationalism and communism have followed a similar path (in the struggles against France, Japan, the USA and China). Nowadays the more orthodox among the communist leaders advocate a non-assertive almost self-effacing policy in relation to the only great power that might threaten Vietnam's national sovereignty. Thus, the Vietnamese nationalism they have created through decades of propaganda may now turn against them.

When the influential Nguyen Co Thach lost his post as foreign minister and all other positions just before the normalisation with China in the autumn of 1991, it was a clear victory for the security faction. The lack of a more favourable US response to Thach's overtures played into the hands of those who were seeking a Cambodian solution by placating China. Unlike Thach, his successor, Nguyen Man Cam, is not a member of the politburo. The dismissal of Thach was thus a clear rebuff to the foreign ministry (Pike 1992: 80). However, when China started exploring oil off the Vietnamese coast in September 1992, Cam got a chance to show that his ministry had not been completely marginalised. The security faction opted for "silent diplomacy" in Vietnam's dealings with China, but Cam proved himself strong enough to convince the party leadership that it was necessary to make an official and public protest against the Chinese action.

(ASEAN)²¹ and in 1992, together with Laos, acceded to the so-called Bali Treaty of 1976 on peace in Southeast Asia (Nguyen Vu Tung 1992). A foreign policy analyst in Singapore predicted that Vietnam would cultivate one or two special friends in the ASEAN countries in order to influence the group towards supporting for Vietnam in its conflicts with China (Yeong 1992). However, Vietnam also normalised its relations with China; when China in September 1992 started to search for oil in waters near the Vietnamese coast that Vietnam considered Vietnamese, Hanoi did not feel that it could react with anything stronger than protests.

Behind this less ambitious foreign policy was a recognition in Hanoi that military strength, ideological affinities or state alliance patterns are not what mainly will be leading countries to a place in the sun in the twenty-first century but rather economic and technological performance (Duong Quoc Thanh 1991).

There seems to be consensus on this in Vietnam today. However, two factions still oppose each other in the making of Vietnamese foreign policy. On one side are those who think it is too risky for Vietnam to stand alone on the world arena and who fear westernisation. They are afraid of a conflict with China and therefore opt for a pragmatic rapprochement with China. They argue that, by securing peaceful relations with Vietnam's giant neighbour, it will be possible to concentrate on economic reforms and to combine a market economy with the continued leadership of the communist party. This view seems to be supported mainly by the security faction of the political elite in Hanoi. As far as Vietnam's contacts with China are concerned, the army and the ministry of defence seem to play a more important role than the foreign ministry. Each time the Chinese act in a provocative manner, it seems to be the army that advocates patience, caution and concessions. The party committee of international relations is also influential in the formulation of Vietnam's China policy. However, it should be emphasised that it was state-to-state relations and not party-to-party relations that were accentuated when Sino-Vietnamese relations were

²¹ ASEAN consists of Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

Vietnam finds itself today in a dilemma between China on the one side, the ASEAN countries, Australia, Japan, Europe and the USA on the other. The continuation of the close relationship between China and the USA after Tian An Men Square and the continuation of the US embargo against Vietnam in 1991-93 made it impossible for Vietnam to replace the Soviet Union with the USA as a counterweight to China, even though the reformers in Hanoi most probably wanted to do this. They faced a cold shoulder in Washington. The US Seventh Fleet, which has reduced its presence in the South China Sea since the loss of its bases in the Philippines, would probably remain passive today if there were a Sino-Vietnamese confrontation over the control of the Spratly Islands. The Vietnamese navy would be no match for the Chinese, whose navy has been significantly upgraded, partly due to purchases from the Ukraine (Garver 1993). Chinese prime minister Li Peng's visit to Hanoi in December 1992 can be seen as a sign of China being interested in precluding a rapprochement between Vietnam and the USA though Li Peng made no concessions in the outstanding conflicts between the two parties. No progress seems to have been made since concerning border disputes. However, from the Vietnamese side it was reassuring that China agreed not to impede the ongoing negotiations in any way; and indeed, a first round of boundary negotiations started in Beijing in August 1993 (SWB Summary FE/1777 A/1/3, 26 Aug 93). During Li Peng's December 1992 visit to Hanoi, the two states also signed four different agreements on economic and cultural cooperation (Weggel 1992c) and China promised Vietnam an interest-free loan worth USD 14 million (FEER 17.12.92). The United States, by contrast, have adopted a wait-and-see policy in relation to Vietnam while struggling to define a coherent policy towards China. It remains improbable that the USA should be willing to put its relations with China at risk for the sake of the only country that has defeated the USA in war. As Keith Taylor has argued, the only option that Vietnam has of establishing a counterweight to China is for it to convince the US to take the lead in a Western drive to support Vietnam. Since this is highly unlikely to happen, Vietnam therefore seems compelled to kowtow to China for a long time no matter how much this conflicts with the logic of Vietnamese nationalism (Taylor in Ljunggren 1992).

The foreign policy dilemma of Vietnam is mirrored in divergent views on how to use the naval base in Cam Ranh Bay. Cam Ranh Bay in southern Vietnam has one of the world's finest natural harbours. It was used by the French fleet until 1955, then by the US navy and from the late 1970s by the Soviet Union, who constructed a wealth of new facilities there. Some Russians still remain in Cam Ranh Bay though for a long time the Vietnamese have hoped that they will leave. The question arises then if the facilities should be offered to units of the Chinese navy, or the Indian, or if the French and Americans should be invited back. The security faction seems to be thinking about the possibility of offering some facilities to China, i.e. for refuelling and repair (Tran Cong Man interview 1992) whereas some members of the reform group view the situation in the South China Sea the same way as the leading ASEAN countries: the presence of the US navy is needed to counter Chinese naval expansion.²² The possibility that the USA might once again be allowed to use the Cam Ranh Bay base has been mentioned by the Vietnamese side during the negotiations conducted about the return of the remains of US soldiers (Huynh 1992: 343).

It will be interesting to see which foreign flag is first raised in the Cam Ranh Bay once the Russian flag has been lowered.

The Party's Monopoly Preserved

Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese Communist Party has refused to introduce "pluralism" or a "multi-party system". In 1989 Hanoi even went as far as to let two small non-communist parties (which for many years had supported the Communist Party) "dissolve themselves". They defended their action by claiming that the parties' leaders had become too old and that there had been no recruitment of new members. It is interesting to note that, at the time of the dissolution, similar "fellow traveller" parties in the German Democratic Republic had turned against

²² This is the impression I got during the little "oil crisis" of September 1992 from interviews with general Tran Cong Man and general Vu Xuan Vinh and from conversations with researchers at the foreign ministry's Institute of International Relations. For the conflict in the South China Sea, see Donckt 1991. Ramses Amer at the Peace Research Institute in Uppsala is also undertaking a study of this conflict.

the ruling party.

The arguments used in the Central Committee's report to the 7th Party Congress for refuting a multi party system are quite interesting:

There can be no democracy without centralism, without State discipline and order, without civic responsibility. Democracy must go hand in hand with the law. Real democracy is distinct from authoritarianism and totalitarianism on the one hand and anarchy on the other. ...

...In the context of this country, there is no objective need to establish a pluralistic political system, a multi-party system with opposition parties. Recognition of a multi-party system with opposition parties means facilitating the immediate and lawful surfacing of the forces of reaction and revenge living in the country or returning from abroad to act against our homeland, our people, and our regime. This is something that our people will never accept (Vietnamese Communist Party 1991d: 22-23; see also Elliott 1992: 139).

This quotation provides a key to understanding the question of democracy in Vietnam:

On the one hand the communist leaders conceive of their homeland, people and regime as being one and the same. By way of its historical achievements (the liberation from French colonialism, victory over US imperialism and defence against Chinese hegemony) the Party has gained a right to lead, represent and embody the nation. To introduce a multi-party system would for them mean letting loose those "traitorous" groups who supported the enemy and were defeated in two long wars. It would mean putting their great national achievements at risk.

On the other hand it is noteworthy that the quotation refers to "the context of this country" because this involves a recognition that, in countries with different conditions, democratic political systems may coincide with the national interest. The reference may also be taken to mean that if Vietnamese conditions change, there might be objective reasons for allowing more than one party. How could conditions change? They could change with the emergence of a loyal opposition with clear national credentials and no apparent links to the former South Vietnamese regime. To be acceptable in Hanoi, such an opposition should be neither reactionary nor revanchist but should operate on the basis of a shared dedication to national unity.

In Vietnamese publications and in statements concerning the

issue of democracy, three kinds of arguments are generally used for having no more than one party:

The first argument is universal and valid at all times. It says that there is a basic difference between bourgeois and socialist democracy (Thai Ninh & Hoang Chi Bao 1991; cf. Do Nguyen Phuong and Tran Ngoc Duong, 1992). It sees bourgeois democracy as being individualistic and mainly protecting privileged individuals against the collective interests of the working class and the people at large. It sees socialist democracy as being built on the active participation of the masses in a political process led by a proletarian party with close links to the people at large and with their interests constantly in mind. This argument can still be heard in doctrinaire circles but it seems to be on its way out.

By contrast, the second argument is gaining ground, even if it has not (yet) been developed theoretically. It too is valid at all times but it is not universal. It postulates a basic difference between Western and Asian concepts of democracy, claiming that Asian culture is not as individualistic and not as obsessed with freedom as is Western culture. Asians think of society as a big family with joint interests, where each person is responsible for the well-being of the household, the hamlet, the village and the country. Hence it would only be natural for an Asian to loyally submit to a righteous and successful government. In Vietnam when this (unofficial) argument is used, it is always made with reference to the various non-communist authoritarian governments in Asia. Hence it is argued that the introduction of Western-style democracy in Asia would not be congruent with the Asian mentality. It would lead to anarchy, disorder and bad government. This in turn would impede the economic development that constitutes the real test of a government's quality.

The third argument is neither universal nor valid at all times. According to this argument, a fully developed democracy is only applicable for highly-developed societies where the citizens have sufficient education and knowledge to understand the political process and make up their own minds. Furthermore, it is also believed that the basic material needs of the citizens must be satisfied before they vote out of conviction rather than selling their votes to the highest bidder. In a peasant society like Vietnam, a multi-party system with universal

suffrage would lead to clientelism and large scale selling and buying of votes. Irresponsible politicians would make exaggerated promises in order to be elected to office, and they would be likely to succeed. This third argument is often heard in conversations between educated Vietnamese. Though they consider themselves sufficiently mature and ready to adopt a democratic system, they do not trust the general population's ability to fulfill the obligations of a citizen in a liberal democracy. They often refer to electoral malpractices in other Asian countries who have tried to adopt a multi-party system. There is a clear element of disdain for ordinary people in this argument, even though such disdain may be less warranted in Vietnam than many other countries: despite the country's poverty, Vietnamese schools have been fairly good in that there was only 12% illiteracy among adults in 1989. Probably the educated Vietnamese elite would have preferred the European system a hundred years ago, i.e. a democratic system with restricted suffrage. Because this seems an impossible proposition at the end of the twentieth century, they instead opt for enlightened party rule, at least until the time when Vietnam has become sufficiently prosperous (and has a sufficiently large middle class) to adopt a genuine democracy.

The above arguments are often discussed among those Vietnamese who are in touch with Westerners. Policy makers and researchers are eager to find out how politics and government are organised in advanced democratic societies (the Scandinavian countries are popular objects of study). Despite this interest in discussing democracy, the Vietnamese intellectual elite have not gone at any lengths to actually demand democratic reforms. From a democratic point of view the years 1992-93 were not promising. The press started using a Chinese term for a sneaking Western influence: "peaceful evolution".²³ As a Westerner, one should think that "peaceful evolution" is something desirable but in Vietnam it is something that people are warned against. The constitution of April 1992 made it clear that the party would continue to play a leading role in state and society and, as mentioned,

the elections held three months afterwards were as restrictive as ever. It was claimed that 99.3% of the population had voted, despite the fact that the electorate had only a limited number of officially-approved candidates to choose from. Initially it seems that the Hanoi reformers intended to let a substantial number of "independent candidates" compete for office. But only two independents got through the elaborate screening process, and they were not elected. The reason seems to be that party officials on the intermediate level of the bureaucracy set up all sorts of obstacles to those persons who tried to stand for election (Nguyen Dinh Loc interview, 7.9.92; cf. Phung Van Tuu 1992). In Vietnam afterwards they called it the "elections of the shrimps". The political process was compared to an aquarium with fish swimming forwards, crabs walking sideways and shrimps moving backwards. The shrimps had had their day in the election process but the fish could not be held back for long. They would continue to advance.

As such one might ask, can the Vietnamese Communist Party retain its hold on the population? The answer is probably yes, but not without serious problems. Growth in the private sector seems already to have caused recruitment problems for the Party.²⁴ When private enterprise was prohibited, Party membership was a necessary component of a successful career. Advancement within the Party hierarchy and state bureaucracy was almost the only way to achieve relative prosperity. This no doubt facilitated recruitment. When market forces were let loose, they opened up other and more rapid ways to prosperity. At the same time, the value of state salaries was reduced, many Party privileges were removed and the Party was purged of many corrupt members. Today it is only possible to combine prosperity with public or Party office if you are corrupt. Corruption has no doubt become more widespread and earnings from it much larger than before, though the struggle against corruption has also been intensified. The Party, police and press all pledge to conduct a relentless war on corruption and in 1991 Vietnam introduced a death penalty for serious abuse of state property or public

²³ In January 1993, the Party review *Tap Chi Cong San* published an article by colonel Tran Ba Khoa entitled: "Heighten Vigilance Against Peaceful Evolution Schemes of the Hostile Forces" (SWB Summary FE/1588 B/4 16 Jan 93).

²⁴ No precise information on this issue is publicly available. What is said here builds on impressions from conversations with Vietnamese and with foreigners who have recently visited Vietnam.

offices (Elliott 1992: 138) and in December 1992 punishments for corruption and smuggling also became much stricter (SWB Summary FE/1579 B/6, 6 Jan 93). A combination all of these factors has made the Party far less attractive than it was before and it has become difficult to find qualified party members who are willing to fill important public posts. It is unlikely to help much that former general secretary Nguyen Van Linh, now in a capacity as adviser to the party Central Committee, in the autumn of 1993 urged the Party to strengthen politburo member Vu Oanh's Mass Mobilisation Department (SWB Summary, FE/1800 B/3, 22 Sep 93).

The declining value of fixed state salaries has also impeded the efficiency of the state sector in general. The quality of health care, of education in universities and schools and of services in other public institutions has deteriorated because the best qualified personnel have either left their jobs in order to engage in business activities or supplemented their jobs with other profitable activities. This has created a structural problem which is likely to increase in the years ahead and may also contain the seeds of future political conflicts between government officials and the new business elite.

Preliminary Conclusions

The rapid economic transformation of Vietnam has already had a number of important social and political consequences. Family and kinship has reemerged as the basic networks in the economy and society. Social injustice has increased. A tiny class of "entrepreneurs" and corrupt government officials have prospered. The great bulk of the Vietnamese population, both in rural and urban areas, have increased their standard of living, whereas a quite significant group of poor people who have neither land nor work probably are worse off than before. There has been an intellectual and religious renaissance, but intellectuals as well as non-conformist religious leaders are still forced to operate within strict limits defined by the government and reinforced in recently adopted laws. The National Assembly has carried through very substantial legislation and has achieved far more self-confidence and influence than previously. Within the sphere of public administration the provinces have further increased their de facto autonomy vis-à-vis the

central government. The Army has been subjected to severe cuts but continues to play a significant role in the economy, internal affairs and foreign policy as well as in the media. Vietnamese foreign policy has become more open, less assertive and geared towards securing markets, loans and investments. Hanoi is about to normalise its relationship with the USA, hopes to become a full member of ASEAN (together with Cambodia and Laos), and feels obliged to placate its enormous northern neighbour; China seems bent on forcing Vietnam to repent for its past attempts to break out of its subservient role in the Confucian hierarchy of nations.

Like China, Vietnam has abolished anything resembling socialism in the economy but at the same time has retained the party monopoly and pretends to continue building on Marxism-Leninism. This begs the question, why is it that communism has survived as a political system in Asia (Vietnam, China, North Korea, Laos) when it gave way to various forms of democratic regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (and in Africa)? If we attempt to answer this question, it may become easier to understand the characteristics of Vietnam in the post Cold War world.

Why has Communism Survived in Asia?

After its great triumphs in the 1970s, when it reached its zenith, the international communist movement entered a period of deep crisis lasting from 1979 to the great collapse in 1989-91. The crisis had many causes. Two of them were endemic to the communist system as such but gained increased importance in the 1980s because the leaders both of the Soviet Union and China tried so hard to remedy them:

- 1) The inefficiency of collectivised agriculture.
- 2) The lack of flexibility of the centrally-planned economy.

These two problems have plagued the socialist countries throughout their entire history. Agricultural collectives and centralised planning made it possible for the state to control and redistribute significant proportions of a country's overall production but it also severely limited the possibilities of achieving growth in overall production output. The gains achieved by a state adopting a socialist system were thus only realised in the initial phase; later on there were no more gains to be made. The longer a state preserved a planned economy, the more backward it would become compared to states with growing economies.

In the 1980s, four additional factors contributed to the decline and fall of the socialist development model:

- a) The new computer technology. In the beginning, it was thought that huge mainframe computers could solve the problems of the planned economies by allowing them to cope with their organisational complexities. Instead, changes in computing allowed the radical decentralisation of information processing. The West was easily able to quickly take advantage of and utilise this new technology but not so the socialist states dependent on central planning. Technologically these socialist planned economies were hopelessly outdistanced and economically they were outperformed.

- b) New satellite media. With the advent of the satellite it was no longer possible to defend a given communication culture from external influences. The number of cross-border radio and television broadcasts, telephone calls and telefax communications grew enormously. Thus it was no longer possible for the communist states to prevent their populations from finding out what the rest of the world looked (or

pretended to look) like. This made the population of the socialist states realise how backward they were (Schellhorn 1992b: 241).

c) A highly educated middle class. This class emerged as a result of the great emphasis that socialist states put on education. Young people, who did not share their parents' contempt for the oppressive and exploitative systems that had provoked the growth of communism, felt a growing desire for freedom to use their intellectual capacities for other purposes than just serving the party and state.

d) Reforms. Somewhat rejuvenated communist regimes tried to carry out 'uncommunist' reforms such as private incentives, market opportunities and reduced social security. In themselves, these reforms represented an admission of past mistakes and of basic flaws in socialist economic management. By attempting to solve the basic problems of the socialist planned economy through the introduction of such reforms, the regimes undermined the legitimacy of their systems.

All four factors contributed to the crisis of the communist regimes in Asia as well as Eastern Europe, but with very different consequences. Why did the regimes in Asia survive while the European ones (including the Soviet Union) fell apart? Seven possible reasons for this shall be discussed here (see also Elliott 1992: 140-1):

1) Asia was less industrialised. Peasants constituted a much greater part of the population than in Europe (more than 80% in Vietnam). For communist regimes it has proven easier to get support from the countryside than from the towns. This applies not only to Asia but also to several countries in the Balkans where a significant proportion of the rural population continued to vote for the communists even after free elections had been introduced. In connection with the events on Tian An Men Square in 1989, the rebellious students did get some support from workers in Beijing but not from the countryside, where most of the Army soldiers had been recruited. One reason why the small urban middle class in Vietnam has behaved so cautiously and not demanded reform is probably related to its awareness of the tight control that the regime retains over the rural population.

2) China, Vietnam and North Korea are all countries where a single ethnic group dominates completely (the Viet in Vietnam constitute 88% of the population). This has made it difficult to exploit ethnic

conflicts in attempts to undermine the communist regimes. In China and Vietnam (but less so in North Korea) the communists also have nationalism on their side. The Chinese communists maintain that they fought whole-heartedly against the national enemy during the Second World War, unlike the Guomindang. It was the communists who managed to unite the Chinese nation after decades of internal division. The same applies to Vietnam, where the history of communism and Vietnamese nationalism have been intimately related from 1941 until today. Vietnamese anti-communists have always failed in their attempts to mobilise nationalism in their service but have had to build their support almost exclusively on religious, humanitarian or future-oriented ideas.

3) China, Korea and Vietnam are characterised by a shared Confucian heritage. Some of the similarities between Confucianism and communism (collectivism, hierarchical principles, ancestor worship, absence of institutionalised religion, disdain for commerce, admiration for the righteous intellectual who sacrifices personal interest in the service of the people and leads them on the right path) has been used by a number of scholars to explain the outstanding communist successes in East Asia (e.g. Woodside 1989; Trinh Van Thao 1990). Only in one important respect have these scholars had difficulties with their argument: Confucianism emphasises order and harmony whereas communism is an ideology of struggle. However, in order to explain the survival of communist regimes in the 1990s rather than the victories of communist revolts in the previous decades, the Confucian ideal of harmony is of great importance as contemporary Chinese and Vietnamese propaganda against pluralism and multi-party systems capitalises on the Confucian ideals of stability and harmony.

4) It is important to remember that the communist regimes in Europe and Asia have compared themselves to very different neighbouring countries. For East Europeans the alternative to socialism was the sort of society that existed in Western Europe and the USA. Prosperity and political democracy appeared to be two sides of the same coin. Many people believed that they could rapidly improve their general standard of living by abolishing the socialist system and introducing a market economy coupled with political democracy. People living in the

communist states of Asia were more inclined to seek inspiration from the newly industrialised economies in East and Southeast Asia (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand). These countries were at best semi-democratic and had for sustained periods combined economic growth with various forms of authoritarian rule. Even Japan, although adopting a democratic constitution in 1945, did not till 1993 experience the most crucial event in the democratisation process: the resignation of a government, its defeat in elections and resulting formation of a new government. Democracy is above all a system facilitating the peaceful transfer of power. In Asia, democratic transfers of power are rare events indeed. However, in 1993 there were two important ones—in Japan and Cambodia—and, though this may promote the advantages of democracy, Hanoi still sees little reason to accept democracy as a necessary ingredient in the modernisation process.

5) In the communist states of Asia, the first generation of revolutionaries still wielded much power towards the end of the 1980s. By contrast, the European communist states were ruled by second or third generation leaders. The first generation is evidently more dedicated to preserving revolutionary achievements than those who have been brought up under socialism.

6) China and Vietnam made a greater success than did the European communist states of reforming themselves away from socialist planned economics. One reason for this success was that China and Vietnam had not yet transformed themselves from a mainly agricultural to an industrial society to the same extent as had their East European counterparts. They could benefit from the advantage of backwardness: the social and economic consequences of dismantling uncompetitive industry and planning bureaucracies were conspicuously smaller in China and Vietnam than in Eastern Europe. The Chinese and Vietnamese could therefore more quickly concentrate on building up new competitive enterprises.

7) Finally there was a significant difference between the attitudes of the Soviet leader in the 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev and the foremost communist leader in Asia, Deng Xiao-ping. Whereas Gorbachev almost consistently refrained from using force against the population, even when his regime was threatened by total collapse, Deng Xiao-ping had the

Chinese Army shoot at the demonstrating masses in Beijing. Sensational repression can be an efficient way of defending a regime and such repression may even influence neighbouring countries. After the massacre in Tian An Men Square, Vietnamese students were not exactly tempted to provoke something similar in Hanoi, Hue or Saigon. Thus the Vietnamese communist regime benefitted from what had happened in Beijing without itself being obliged to take on the job of cracking down on their youth.

To sum up, in comparison to their European communist counterparts, the Asian communist regimes have been able to remain in power and stay overtly communist. In Vietnam's case, this has been possible due to a number of reasons: Vietnam remains very much an agricultural economy, it is ethnically quite homogenous and is led by a communist party that embodies the national struggle for liberation and unification. The culture is built on the same Confucian principles that are important not only in China and Korea but also in those other non-communist countries that the Vietnamese find it natural to compare themselves to (e.g. Singapore). In these countries democracy is by no means seen as a necessity for modernisation. Several first generation revolutionaries are still influential in Hanoi but the second generation is now in command of the state. The economic reform process has until now been far more successful than anyone could expect, and the Vietnamese government has indirectly gained stability from the wave of repression in China.

Is the communist regime in Laos as strong and viable as the Vietnamese one? A comparison of Laos and Vietnam may contribute to developing the above argument a little further. The two neighbouring communist countries have to a great extent followed similar paths. In its foreign policy Laos has either followed Vietnam's lead or functioned as a kind of precursor whenever Vietnam intended to change its course, e.g. in the rapprochement with China and the ASEAN countries from 1988 onwards. In 1992-93, the "special relationship" between Laos and Vietnam was reaffirmed. However, the communist regime in Vietnam seems to enjoy a stronger internal position than its Laotian counterpart. This has a number of reasons:

a) The historical roots of Vietnamese communism are deeper than

in Laos. The main communist leaders in Laos were originally just a tiny minority within the Viet-dominated Indochinese Communist Party and an even smaller minority in Laotian society.

b) Laotian communism has not been able to build on the same kind of "nationalist logic" as in Vietnam. Such a logic would in the case of Laos either involve liberation from Vietnam or an expansionist policy towards the Lao-speaking areas of Thailand. In relation to questions concerning their national interests, the Laotian communists have pragmatically reduced their ambitions to what Hanoi found acceptable. Such pragmatism has shielded Laos against disasters of the kind that took place in Cambodia though this has not necessarily made the regime in Vientiane popular. The ethnic structure of Laos makes the state more vulnerable to ethnic mobilisation than in Vietnam. In Laos, only 56% are Lao (lowland Lao), whereas in Vietnam 88% of the population are Viet (Kinh). In both countries the remaining population are divided between some 60-70 different ethnic groups. Another factor contributing to the vulnerability of the communist regime in Laos is the country's economic dependence on Thailand. The imbalance between Vientiane's political dependence on Hanoi and economic dependence on Bangkok may soon become a source of tension.

On the other hand, Laos is at present in a situation of economic progress, it has more national independence than ever before and receives a considerable amount of assistance from international donors (Ljunggren 1992a: 207-208). Furthermore, the improved relationship with Thailand has deprived the ethnically-based guerrilla groups of the support they formerly got from the Thai. It seems unlikely that the communist regime in Laos will fall as long as its two neighbours Vietnam and China remain communist and as long as the present economic trend continues. However, the present regime in Laos could certainly not be sustained if the communist regime in Vietnam were abolished. By contrast, the Vietnamese regime could most probably survive a change of regime in Laos.

On the basis of the above comparisons we can draw the conclusion that the communist regime in Vietnam is probably the most viable of the five now remaining in the world (China, North Korea, Laos, Cuba and Vietnam). The prevailing strength of the Vietnamese

regime will make it possible to retain an authoritarian political system for a long time, *if that is what the Hanoi leadership wants*. But it would also be possible to turn the argument around and say that precisely because the Vietnamese regime remains so strong, it might be able to introduce democracy without losing the degree of harmony, stability and national unity that is necessary to sustain continued economic growth.

The Vietnamese can afford to choose.

Three Scenarios

We shall now move on to discuss three possible Vietnamese political development models: the authoritarian, the disastrous and the democratic. However, first it must be said that a development of the East European kind, with a rapid breakdown of the communist regime and a take-over by anti-communist forces, is *unlikely* in Vietnam. The present leaders of Vietnam would not be willing to give up their power, even if there were to be a forceful revolt. And if such a revolt should occur, the regime could count on support from the Army and a large part of the rural population.

The only alternatives to a continuation of the present authoritarian regime thus seem to be, on the one side, open conflict, on the other democratisation from above. (It must be repeated that this report discusses "democracy" as a political system at the national level; an authoritarian state can very well practise various sorts of popular participation at the local level. The Vietnamese communists have done this to a considerable extent, and this has strengthened the regime).

The authoritarian development state

Most of the highly-industrialised countries have been through phases of more or less authoritarian rule, and these phases have not necessarily engendered less economic growth than the periods with democratic regimes. In Asia, much of the rapid economic growth in the so-called newly industrialised economies has been achieved under authoritarian political regimes. Only after many years of growth have the governments made certain concessions to demands for freedom and democracy coming from the expanded middle classes. Vietnam is at present trying to emulate South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan. The Vietnamese hope to be "Asia's next tiger" and have established close relations with the above-mentioned countries. When considering their successes it is not difficult for the Vietnamese to find arguments for insisting on social and political stability. Rather than becoming democratic it is therefore likely that Vietnam will develop its own kind of a "softened East Asian authoritarianism". In 1992, Börje Ljunggren claimed that the three Indochinese states were all moving towards a "softened authoritarianism"

and that the aim of the leaders in Hanoi and Vientiane was to shape and consolidate their versions of the "East Asian market-based one-party state" (Ljunggren 1992: ii, 29-30, 190, 200). This remains valid for Laos and Vietnam but the successful elections in Cambodia in 1993 may have given that country a sustainable multi-party system.

The main differences between Vietnam and the newly industrialised countries are Hanoi's continued allegiance to Marxist-Leninist ideology, the presence of the Vietnamese state at all levels of society and the Communist Party's role in the political process. The way to a political career in Vietnam has been via the Party rather than through business or the military as in many other Southeast Asian countries. If the Party should be weakened, it is possible that the Army will take over some of the Party's role as protector of the status quo. It is also possible that the Army will be more conservative than the Party and try to prevent reforms that are favoured by a majority in the Party's organs. In that case, the new business elite might play a political role of its own. If Party officials, military officers and business people band together in a conservative alliance, they may successfully prevent democratic reforms, using as their main argument the need to preserve social stability in order to sustain economic growth. This scenario involves a gradual fading out of communist ideology, which would be supplanted by a less ideological kind of nationalism. Marx and Lenin would largely be forgotten, while a "de-leninised" Ho Chi Minh would continue to be evoked as the uncle of the nation.

Indeed we shall be able to ascertain much of Vietnam's general political development by observing how Ho Chi Minh is seen and treated. Those who favour certain reforms will need to show that they are in line with good Ho Chi Minh thought. Discussions about Ho Chi Minh will therefore be a key to understanding contemporary issues. Was he a communist or a nationalist? In what sense was he a democrat, in the socialist, universal or "oriental" meaning of the term? Differences in points of view can already be seen from the way some authors have approached Ho Chi Minh's thoughts. Whereas the historian Tran Van Giau, a member of the dissolved dissident club of war veterans in Ho Chi Minh City, writes about Ho Chi Minh's *humanism*, General Vo Nguyen Giap emphasises the *continuity* of Ho Chi Minh's thoughts and

Pham Van Dong his concern for the people's well-being (Vo Nguyen Giap 1991; Nguyen Van Linh et al 1992; Pham Van Dong 1993). At the time the centenary of Ho Chi Minh's birth was celebrated in 1990, the Vietnamese foreign ministry worked hard to persuade the USA to cancel its embargo against Vietnam. Researchers at the Institute of International Relations in Hanoi found support for this move by focussing their attention on the great leader's attempts in the years 1944-47 to get US support for the struggle against French colonialism (Vien quan he quoc te bo ngoai giao 1990). Those who think that there exists a special kind of "Asian democracy" may also try to find support in certain of Ho Chi Minh's activities and writings, emphasising his relations to China and several Southeast Asian countries through his vast networks.

It is by no means certain that Vietnam or any other countries that are modernising in Asia are heading towards democracy.

Crisis and Breakdown

A second scenario is that serious internal conflicts might emerge leading to civil war. Such conflicts might be provoked by an economic recession or political conflicts between reformers and hardliners might instead lead to bad management and serious economic setbacks. Conflicts could start in many ways: a revolt might break out in the south as a protest against Hanoi attempting to replace a popular local leader; unemployed youth might take action if the police tried to detain a Buddhist monk or other community leader; conflicts could arise between the business-oriented and security-oriented factions in Hanoi, each of them trying to mobilise popular support against the other; there could be a wave of popular outrage against the government if it became too lenient in its relationship to China; disputes between ethnic Viet and ethnic Chinese (Hoa) in Ho Chi Minh City could lead the government to intervene in protection of the Hoa and thus estrange the government from the majority. (The Hoa have once again assumed a vital role in the Vietnamese business community and ensure the maintenance of crucial links between Vietnam and investors in Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan.)

Many other sources of tension could be mentioned. If there were to be a conflict, it could rapidly lead to violent outbursts from crowds of unemployed youth. In order to prevent such a crisis scenario from

happening, it will be important to avoid economic setbacks, reduce unemployment and create political mechanisms whereby acceptable compromises can be worked out. Such compromises would most likely deal with the distribution of resources among the growth zones in the Mekong Delta, the densely populated northern delta and coastline, the central government in Hanoi and the poor provinces in the highlands.

Democratisation from Above

A peaceful democratisation of Vietnam could take place in two different ways. The first possibility is that the Communist Party, perhaps under a new name and after several years of economic growth, would feel so assured of its popularity that it would allow the establishment of a formal opposition. Political groups who at present are outside the legal political system would be permitted to organise, make their views known and be represented in elected assemblies. However, a political dividing line would be preserved between those already belonging to the political system and the newcomers represented as a result of the liberalisation. Protagonists of the regime would stand against an opposition made up of former dissidents.

The second model assumes that a democratisation process results from a development of political contradictions within the existing regime. A number of deputies in the National Assembly who are critical of the government's policies may form a loose group that more and more systematically works out alternative propositions. It would not be overly important if these politicians are members of the Communist Party or not. The National Assembly would be divided into loosely organised groups, or "parties", which would not have a formal membership. Commentators would loosely distinguish "left" from "right", "supporters of the government" from "the opposition", "conservatives" from "reformers". The labels would not at first be terribly important, but the groupings would after a while promote the candidacy of certain people during election campaigns and the opposition would need to create channels between themselves and the people in order to facilitate the voicing of public opinion and popular discontent as well as to build support. Thereby public opinion would be more integrated into Vietnamese politics, and the National Assembly would become a

genuine forum for the different sections of the population. This second model does not necessarily involve any kind of planning. Democracy could come about as a result of a development process similar to that which some European countries underwent during their modernisation in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries.

Conclusions

It is quite improbable that the Vietnamese communist regime will fall apart in the years to come in the way that the Soviet and East European regimes did during 1989-91. Such a general breakdown is more probable in North Korea, Cuba and even China than in Vietnam. Vietnam may indeed have the most solid of all the world's five remaining communist regimes. It is hardly conceivable that the communist leaders in Hanoi would voluntarily give away their power to what they see as reactionary and revanchist forces even if the latter should gain great momentum. If serious political change should be fostered by economic recession, religious and social conflicts, or by actions undertaken by returning Vietnamese exiles, then this would be more likely to take the form of a protracted crisis or civil war than a breakdown of the East European kind. In the 1992 yearbook of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, Frank C.H. Huynh asks what would happen if the Vietnamese regime collapsed: "who would pick up the pieces? At least half a dozen groups of overseas Vietnamese would be clamouring for a piece of the action; that will not be a stable and lasting solution." (Huynh 1992: 345). To this might be said that a collapse would be likely to foster new movements, even among those who today are members of the Communist Party. But the risk would anyway be high that the collapse would degenerate into violent conflicts and divisions along regional lines.

The strong foundations of the Vietnamese Communist Party and its solid hold on the Army make it most probable that the Hanoi leaders would counter any serious challenge to their power by the use of force. On the other hand, the solid foundations of the regime should also make it possible for the Hanoi leaders to accept a peaceful democratisation process, either by legalising the formation of alternative political parties or by allowing members of the National Assembly to form opposition groupings using both the Assembly itself and the public media as forums.

Much will depend on if the present economic growth continues. If the Vietnamese economy and the average standard of living continue to grow, the country's political leaders in the National Assembly,

government, politburo, Central Committee and provincial People's Committees will have the option of deciding for themselves if they prefer an "Asian model of development" with authoritarian rule legitimised through regular elective rituals, or if they dare entrust their people with a genuine democracy involving full respect for human rights, free general elections and a political mechanism that makes it possible to change government without resorting to violence.

In the years ahead, it will be extremely interesting to follow Vietnamese developments in the economic as well as the political domains. Swedish politicians, researchers, development assistants and private companies may have a unique possibility to do so because of Sweden's record as one of Vietnam's main foreign donors and because Sweden enjoys a lot of respect within Vietnam's national communist regime. The Swedes may thus observe and even influence developments in this country, which is still extremely poor but may have left poverty behind within ten to fifteen years. Indeed, if Vietnam gets far-sighted leaders, it may also develop a genuine democracy. However, it is more probable that the Vietnamese will adopt some kind of intermediate solution, an approach somewhere between the authoritarian and the democratic development models: a *softened authoritarianism*. It seems possible that Vietnam will develop in tandem with China but another possibility is that Vietnam becomes a "normal Southeast Asian state" where the Communist Party plays a much smaller role and where ongoing tensions exist within the governing elite between representatives of the Army, the middle class intellectuals and the new business elite. In that case, communist rhetoric will give way to a kind of Vietnamese nationalism with a Confucian flavour.

Singapore's senior minister Lee Kuan Yew, a staunch anti-communist, visited Vietnam in April 1992 and was appointed advisor to the government in Hanoi. On this occasion he was asked by a journalist if it were conceivable that Vietnam could become a member of ASEAN while remaining communist, Yew replied:

I would not phrase it that way. After 10 or 15 years of the market economy, and after the collapse of communism as an ideology worldwide, what distinguishes either Vietnam or China as communist in the old sense of the word communist, other than

they are one-party governments?...

So the correct way to look at Vietnam is to see it as an East Asian country like Taiwan or South Korea 15 or 20 years ago, with an authoritarian government and one-party system?

asked the journalist. Yew confirmed this with a minor reservation:

Except that they [the Vietnamese] are much more thorough in their controls ... right down to every village, every street and almost every family in the village. It's thorough, but increasingly becoming tenuous and loose... (*The Asian Wall Street Journal Weekly* 13.7.92.)

In the future, communist ideology will not play a great role. The question is if the Party will have the courage to let economic liberalisation be followed by political democracy even if this entails risks of massive desertions by Party members, conflicts between regions and social unrest. Another question which remains to be answered is: how is Vietnam going to be situated in the new power relations between China, Japan, the ASEAN countries, the USA and Europe?

The political situation in Vietnam remains open to change: the regime's hold on the population has been lessened but remains strong. The all-embracing fear of being heard or observed by police informers has been much alleviated. All kinds of viewpoints can now be expressed frankly in private but not in public. Within the Communist Party there are many divergent views, but Party discipline still prevents these divergences from being aired in public. In today's open environment, increased contact with democratic countries may be extremely important to Vietnam's continued development, not only economically, but also culturally and politically.

From a democratic viewpoint it is therefore essential to accommodate Vietnam in its wish to establish closer relations with as many countries as possible. The Japanese Vietnam specialist Furuta Motoo has written: "For its part, the international community, as it welcomes Vietnam into the fold, must take care that its economic aid and cooperation serve to promote reforms without destabilizing" (Furuta 1992: 170).

By contrast, a leading article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* on 7 January 1993, pointed to the likely destabilising effects of Vietnam's integration into an international market economy as something positive:

...we would argue that the greatest threat to communist one-party rule in Vietnam now is the highly subversive effect of trade and opening to the West. ... open markets lead to democracy; free markets have created middle classes that demand an end to authoritarian rule—witness Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand. Our guess is that the same will happen to totalitarian Vietnam ... only letting Vietnamese trade with Americans can fully empower markets to endanger closed politics.

At any rate, an intensification and diversification of Vietnamese relations with countries all over the world may help Hanoi defend the country's independence vis-à-vis its great neighbour to the north and also influence the Vietnamese regime in the direction of respect for human rights and democracy.

Schwartz

Chronology 1986-93

1986

- May Foundation of a dissident "club of resistance fighters" in Ho Chi Minh City; the club demands free elections.
- July Le Duan, secretary general of the Vietnamese Communist Party from 1960, dies and is succeeded by Truong Chinh (who was also general secretary in the period 1941-56).
- November The Laotian People's Revolutionary Workers Party's 4th Congress. Khaisone Phomvihane is reelected as general secretary. Decision to launch market-driven economic reforms.
- December The Vietnamese Communist Party's 6th Congress elects Nguyen Van Linh as new secretary general. Decision to launch market-driven economic reforms.

1987

- January Heavy fighting on the Sino-Vietnamese border.
- April The Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party adopts an economic reform package.
- Elections to the 9th Vietnamese National Assembly.
- June Pham Hung elected prime minister by the Vietnamese National Assembly.
- September 7,000 prisoners are released from re-education camps in southern Vietnam where they have been held since 1975.
- December Vo Van Kiet, Chairman of the State Planning Commission, submits a negative report to the National Assembly about Vietnam's economic development.

1988

March Prime minister Pham Hung dies and is replaced temporarily by Vo Van Kiet.

China occupies some of the Spratly Islands. Clashes between units of the Chinese and Vietnamese navy lead to the sinking of at least one Vietnamese ship.

June Hong Kong starts screening of Vietnamese "boat people" to separate "genuine" from "economic" refugees.

The Vietnamese National Assembly elects Do Muoi, the candidate of the Central Committee, as prime minister but reformers speak openly in support of the candidacy of Vo Van Kiet, and 36% of the deputies do not vote for Do Muoi.

July The first informal meeting between all partners in the Cambodian conflict is held in Jakarta.

1989

January Another informal Jakarta meeting.

March The first group of "boat people" is voluntarily repatriated to Vietnam from Hong Kong.

Election of National Assembly in Laos for the first time since the communists came to power. From a list of 121 candidates, 79 are elected for an indefinite term.

April Vietnam promises to completely withdraw from Cambodia before the end of September.

May The Cambodian question is discussed at the Sino-Soviet meeting in Beijing.

June Chinese suppression of Democracy Movement, including mass killings in Tian An Men Square.

UN plan for forced repatriation of Vietnamese "economic refugees" from Hong Kong.

August Unsuccessful Paris conference on Cambodia.

September Withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia.

October Laotian prime minister Khaisone Phomvihane visits China.

November Several communist regimes collapse in Eastern Europe.

December The first group of Vietnamese "boat people" from Hong Kong is forcibly repatriated to Vietnam.

1990

The resistance group of 1986 is discontinued; some leaders are arrested while others are invited to take up important positions within a new official veterans' organisation.

February Third informal Jakarta meeting discusses Australian peace proposal.

March Tran Xuan Bach, reformer and member of the politburo is expelled from the Vietnamese Communist Party after a stormy central committee meeting. It is made clear that Vietnam is not going to introduce a multi-party system.

UN presents a peace plan for Cambodia.

May 100th anniversary of Ho Chi Minh's birth.

June Proposal for a Laotian constitution is announced in Vientiane.

July USA signals a change of course in the Cambodian question; withdraws support for the Khmer Rouge and says it is ready to discuss the Cambodian issue with official Vietnamese representatives.

August The UN Security Council agrees on a peace plan for Cambodia.

- September Secret Sino-Vietnamese meeting in China.
- All parties accept the UN Cambodian peace plan at the fourth informal Jakarta meeting. A Supreme National Council is nominated with representatives from all four Cambodian factions.
- Vietnamese foreign minister Nguyen Co Thach meets US Secretary of State James Baker in New York; later he visits Washington.
- October Le Duc Tho, who has remained influential even after leaving the politburo, dies.
- November Indonesian president Suharto visits Hanoi.
- The central committee of Vietnam's Communist Party adopts a new "political platform" and a "proposal for a strategy of socio-economic stabilisation and development until the year 2000". It states that socialism will regain its vitality and "finally triumph".

1991

- January USA opens a "Missing in action" office in Hanoi.
- April The US State Department produces a "road map" for normalising its relationship with Vietnam.
- June 7th congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party.
- August Minister of foreign affairs Nguyen Co Thach loses his post, his place in the politburo and all other positions; he is replaced with the career diplomat Nguyen Manh Cam.
- A failed coup attempt in Moscow leads to the break up of the Soviet Union.
- October Paris accord on Cambodia.
- Prime minister Vo Van Kiet visits Indonesia, Singapore

- and Thailand.
- November Vo Van Kiet leads a Vietnamese delegation to Beijing, normalising Sino-Vietnamese relations.
- 1992
- The stream of Vietnamese "boat people" has ceased, but about 100,000 refugees live in camps of whom 62,000 are in Hong Kong.
- January ASEAN heads of government reach an agreement that Vietnam and Laos may accede to their 1976 treaty of friendship and co-operation (the Bali Treaty).
- February China passes a law stating that almost all of the South China Sea is Chinese territory.
- March UN produces a final peace plan for Cambodia.
- April Vietnams 8th National Assembly unanimously approves a new constitution (several earlier government proposals have been returned for revision).
- Singapore's former prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, now senior minister and still powerful, visits Vietnam and accepts the role of economic adviser to the Vietnamese government.
- May China makes an agreement with the US firm Crestone regarding oil exploration in an area which according to Hanoi belongs to Vietnam.
- July At the ASEAN countries' yearly meeting of foreign ministers in Manila, Vietnam and Laos officially accede to the Bali Treaty.
- Election for Vietnam's 9th National Assembly.
- September Vietnam protests against a Chinese ship exploring for oil within Vietnamese territorial waters .

Meeting of Vietnam's 9th National Assembly. General Le Duc Anh is elected president. Vo Van Kiet is re-elected prime minister.

November USA evacuates its bases in the Philippines.

After the US presidential election, Japan breaks with the embargo policy and lends Vietnam USD 369 million.

Kaysone Phomvihane, party secretary and president of Laos since 1991, dies. He is succeeded as president by Nouthak Phoumsavan.

December China's prime minister Li Peng meets Vietnam's prime minister Vo Van Kiet in Hanoi; they do not succeed in solving their border problems.

President George Bush slightly relaxes the embargo against Vietnam; US firms may now open offices in Vietnam.

1993

It is reported that the Vietnamese population has increased by 2.3% yearly in the period 1989-92.

January 4th plenum of the Vietnamese Communist Party's 7th central committee makes "the human factor" a central slogan and sharpens demands for control of artistic and cultural life.

President George Bush leaves to his successor Bill Clinton to decide if the embargo against Vietnam should be lifted.

March French President François Mitterand visits Vietnam.

April A (most probably fake) Russian document on US prisoners of war in Vietnam stirs up new problems in US-Vietnamese relations (a second such document is

published in September).

May UN-supervised elections in Cambodia have a very high turnout, and lead to the formation of a coalition government.

June The 5th Plenum of the Vietnamese Communist Party's Central Committee adopts a resolution on socio-economic renovation and development in the countryside.

Conflict between the Vietnamese government and Buddhists in Hue.

Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet visits France.

July President Clinton decides to unblock restrictions on the International Monetary Fund from lending money to Vietnam.

Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet visits Cuba.

The Vietnamese 9th National Assembly adopts a number of new laws, e.g., on land, taxes and publications.

Conflict between the Vietnamese government and Buddhists in Ho Chi Minh City.

The US and Vietnamese foreign ministers meet in Singapore on the occasion of the ASEAN foreign minister's yearly conference.

August Reports of year-long drought in central Vietnam

The two co-chairmen of the Cambodian government, Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen, visit Vietnam. Vietnam officially invites Prince Norodom Sihanouk to visit Vietnam.

The first round of Sino-Vietnamese negotiations on the demarcation of their common border starts in Beijing.

September President Clinton decides to retain the embargo on US

investments in Vietnam, but allows US companies to take part in development projects in Vietnam when they are funded by international agencies.

India's vice-president Narayanan on official visit to Vietnam.

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This report is based on material from the libraries of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) in Copenhagen and the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO), as well as on conversations and interviews made during August-September 1992 in Hanoi and Vinh (Nghe An province in central Vietnam).

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