

CHAPTER 6

Can the Communist Party Maintain Its Dominant Position?

by *Tsutomu Murano*

As its economic reform and market-opening measures begin to function well, Vietnam, like China, has managed to do without basic political reform. However, it will be difficult for Vietnam to maintain its current regime unless it carries out reforms or amendments of its political system. Amid the collapse of socialist regimes in East European countries in the latter half of 1989, the Vietnamese leaders have been strongly conscious of this. Without destroying the existing political framework of a one-party system, they have made efforts to amend and improve the political system and process.

To grasp Vietnam's present situation and predict its future, therefore, it will be necessary at least to analyze real aspects of the political reform and its management as well as the organization and activities of the Communist Party of Vietnam itself.

1. Stagnant Party Organization and Strengthening of Leadership

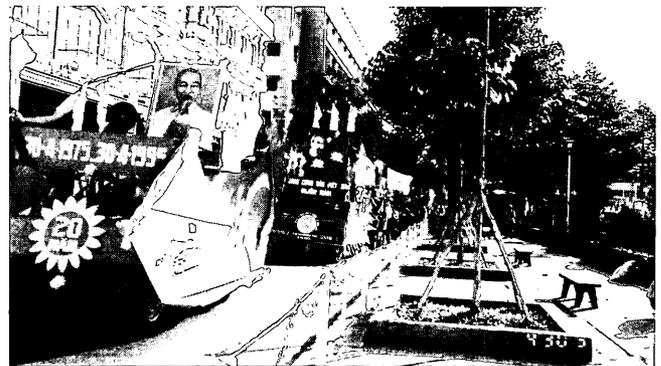
The New Constitution, enacted in 1992, stipulates under Article 4 that "The Communist Party of Vietnam is the force leading the State and society." This article refers to the leadership of the Communist Party. And thereby the Communist Party is guaranteed that it is the one and only legitimate political party. In fact, however, it has come to light during recent years that despite its role to lead the State and society, the Communist Party's power itself has declined and become stagnant in expanding its organization.

Above all, the member of the Communist Party increases slowly. The total number was 2.12 million in 1988, 2.09 million in 1992, and 2.15 million at present. These years it stands at more or less 2.10 million. Meanwhile, the size of the population increases annually at the rate of 1.5 million. Consequently, it is obvious that the

percentage of Communist Party members vs. the total population has undoubtedly decreased.

Another problem it now faces is the graying of the party members. Despite the fact that new party members annually exceed 80 thousand in the latter half of the 1980s, during recent years the number stands at 50 thousand to 60 thousand annually. Of these figures, young men or women occupy one half at best. Therefore, the average age of the party members increases year by year. Take Ho Chi Minh City for instance, the average age is 44.3 years old. Reportedly, of the total Communist Party members, retired leaders and those who no longer have energy for party activities account for 30%. In other words, active party members who can engage in party activities account for only 70% of the official number.

In addition, the expansion and increase of the institutions and departments, which have no party's chapter, causes a headache to the party leaders. Especially in villages in the Mekong Delta, in the Southern part of Vietnam, where not a few villages have no Communist Party members at all. Even in urban areas, there are "blank territories" where the party's chapter has no presence and therefore the party cannot exert influence. Such a blank



Cerebration Parade for the 20th Anniversary of Saigon Falls in Ho Chi Minh

territory is on the increase and exists even in the activities for various sectors, which initially derive from "Doi Moi" (renovation), including sectors concerned with foreign economic relations, joint ventures and private enterprises. Moreover, such situations also exist in intellectual activities, in scientific and technological fields, as well as in the fields of literature and arts.

Corruption and decrease in morality are also remarkable among party members. And scandals are an everyday occurrence. Cases involving party cadres are disclosed time and again. In case the Communist Party cannot trust general party members and regional members completely, the roles of the central leaders become much more important, and they have to bear a heavy burden. Under these circumstances, the Communist Party tried to strengthen its leadership. As for the Politburo, the highest leadership of the Communist Party, the position of the candidate for proper members of the committee was abolished while the number of proper committee members increased from the number of 13 to 17 in the Extraordinary Plenum of the Central Party Committee held in January 1994. In the Central Committee members, likewise, the position of the candidate for members was abolished at the Seventh National Party Congress while the committee members increased from 124 to 146, and finally they further increased to 161 in the Mid-Term Party National Congress held in January 1994. In regard to the Secretariat, the number of members often increases and decreases, and it is difficult to pinpoint a trend. Another thing that can be said of the party leadership is that a great number of the leaders are replaced at every National Party Congress. Thus, rejuvenation of leaders is in progress. The average age of the member of the Central Committee dropped to 56 years old at the time when the Sixth National Party Congress was held.

Let's take a look at the new Central Committee members who were supplemented in January 1994. Out of the total 20 members, 15 are under 55 years old, with the youngest member being 47. Such a rejuvenation plan is essential to revitalize the leadership and avoid "arteriosclerosis" or rigidity. It can be said that the Communist Party has energetically addressed such a problem.

Externally, the Communist Party has made efforts to

make itself transparent, open to the people, and beloved by the people mainly through such measures as freedom of information, as seen in the announcement of the results of the items adopted in the National Congress, and in the hearing of opinions from non-party congress members about the draft documents for a Party National Congress. But coherence is not always maintained in this regard. Although the contents are almost at same level, information may or may not be available depending on the situation. Such old practices remain unchanged.

Despite these efforts, a ratchet effect has not appeared on preventing the people's departure from the party. Such a trend can be clearly felt even by foreign travelers visiting Vietnam. Because they have often heard people expressing criticism and grievances against the Communist Party. By contrast, it seems that the more the Communist Party tries to make efforts to change the people's image of it, the less popularity it gains. And its identity seems to wane among the people.

2. Reform of Political System and Reality

After the Doi Moi started and especially after the East European countries' socialist regimes collapsed, the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam has promoted political reform under the slogan of "We the people are fundamental."

The National Assembly has undergone drastic changes. Indeed, in the 1980 constitution, the National Assembly was stipulated as the highest organ of state power and the sole organ with constitutional and legislative power. But the National Assembly used to convene semiannually for only five days respectively. It was a national assembly where representatives merely raised their hands in favor of proposals made by the Council of Ministers which, in fact, were nothing but the party platform. The Communist Party amended such a practice, and extended the period of plenary session to two weeks, effective from the seventh session of the Eighth National Assembly held in June 1990. It further extended the plenary session to 25 days in the fourth session of the Ninth National Assembly held in 1993, and to 29 days in the fifth session of the Ninth National Assembly in 1994.

As a result of the extended period of the plenary session, the time for discussion of the bills becomes longer, and substantial deliberation is now carried out. Consequently, opinions opposing part of original bills or reserved opinions have been expressed. There are some bills which are unable to pass the assembly. As in the case of the reorganization plan for departments and agencies which was submitted to the National Assembly in 1992 and finally turned down, bills are sometimes rejected unless prior discussion has been carried out. As for matters in which people are keenly interested or matters involving with pressing economic or social problems, the National Assembly provides time during the period of the session to representatives. Thus, they can express opinions representing voters' voices in their constituency, and influence ministers, who sometimes have to promise to take up the matter concerned in a positive way. Such a case is no longer rare in the National Assembly.

As for Administrative Branch, the existing "Council of Ministers" was replaced with the "Government" and, at the same time, the "Chairman of the Council of Ministers" with the "Prime Minister", both in the 1992 amendment of the constitution. Thus, power and responsibility are greatly strengthened. Likewise, the "Council of State," an organ which used to function as the head of state, was replaced with a newly established post of the "Country's President." In this way, the function of the head of state was independently established. In addition, reform and improvement of the judiciary branch is in progress. Though attached to "political, civic, economic, and cultural" conditions, human rights have been approved.

As mentioned above, the Vietnamese political system has recently been shaped as a constitutional state formed of three independent branches, the legislative, administrative and judiciary branches. The political system has come to resemble that of the West. Yet, there is a major fundamental difference. Especially, a decisive difference lies in that the Vietnamese political system simultaneously incorporates a mechanism guaranteeing a one-party system under the Communist Party. Above all, the most important point is that the election system guarantees an overwhelming majority of seats occupied by the Communist Party members in the National Assembly. (At present 92% is occupied by them.)

Under the Doi Moi, the election system was also amended. According to the previous law, the minimum age for the National Assembly was 21. In other words, adults with a minimum age of 21 had the right to be elected to the National Assembly, but, in fact, they had no right to run for the National Assembly. The reason is that the Vietnam Fatherland Front, an umbrella organization for mass association used to select from the candidates who were recommended by institutions or workplace units and prepare a final list of candidates. The 1992 Election Law amended this point and approved the right of candidacy in favor of individual persons. But independent candidates had to pass the Vietnam Fatherland Front's screening to have their names listed. Therefore, candidates who opposed the Communist Party were excluded during the screening process. In fact, in the 1992 election, there was a total of 38 people who voluntarily manifested their intention to run for the National Assembly. However, only two people were finally left and listed as candidates. (Both of them failed to be elected.) In this way, a candidate list showing an overwhelming number of the Communist Party members is compiled. Then the election is held.

3. Situation Opposition Groups Face

As has been pointed out previously, a guarantee is constitutionally incorporated in the system so that the Communist Party may take an overwhelming majority in the National Assembly. The situation mentioned above takes place in elections. Therefore, unless the Communist Party internally divides, there is no possibility of the party's existence being legitimately threatened. As often reported, there are intra-party conflicts between conservatives and reform-minded members of the Communist Party. However, such conflicts are not of a fixed nature, but differences in opinions over the speed of reform plans. Usually, both sides reach a compromise and the conflicts are settled before they become serious.

Consequently, are there no dissident groups in the party? Those who took action for democratization of politics and the multiparty system are few. At most, they include Tran Xuan Bach (member of the Politburo, Secretary who lost both position in 1990), Bui Trinh (vice-Editor of the "Nhan Dan" who was expelled in 1991) and

the Club of Resistance Fighters (an organization of veterans in the Southern part of Vietnam). Besides, there are few other men or groups whose existence is known outside the party from 1992 onwards.

Meanwhile, apart from inside the Communist Party, it is often reported outside the party that demand for democratization and criticism against the Communist Party are promoted by men of letters, scholars and intellectuals. Recently, activities by Phan Dinh Dieu (mathematician) and Duong Thu Huong (novelist) have drawn attention. But under strict pressure by the authorities, these people are compelled to battle a lonely and sporadic fight. The question is how widely hidden support for them has been spreading among the people. Being regarded as sympathizers of the Western way of thinking, they have found even intellectuals opposing their thoughts. Unlike Andrei Sakharov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, their cases are entirely different.

Now, let's take a look at the anti-establishment movement intending to directly overthrow the government. More recently, some cases have been reported in this respect, including cases with the "Scientific Socialist Party" (exposed in 1990) and "The Forum of Freedom" (exposed in 1993). But the authorities strengthened their control against these movements and all these movements were nipped in the bud. Unlike these underground organizations, the most difficult thing for the authorities to handle is the existence of religious organizations. Among them are "The United Buddhist Church," which has a tradition of political movement, and the Catholic Church. Being well aware of the influence these organizations have, the leadership of the Communist Party has been continuously put under pressure by means of intervention in personnel matters. Indeed, every religious organization is carrying out activities in their own regions, because they do not have believers nationwide. Consequently, their power is not strong enough to resist the government on their own.

4. Regime Scenario

As mentioned above, it seems that influential groups or organizations with enough power to overthrow the foundation of the Communist Party cannot be found

anywhere at present. But grievances against the Communist Party have accumulated. No doubt, confidence in the party will become shaky. If plural factors happen to combine, we cannot say that there will be no threat to the government.

The key to the problem is economic trend. If economic growth continues to maintain its rate at 8 to 10% and higher in the future in the same manner as it has during recent years, and yet inflation stabilizes at less than 10%, the unemployed who reportedly accounts for 20%, will decrease, and the general public will voice few grievances. The Communist Party came out with the "Resolution on Industrialization and Modernization" in the Seventh Plenum of Central Committee convened in July 1994, which was in good time. The plan aims at doubling the per capita GDP in ten years (1991-2000). That requires achieving annual economic growth rate at 9.4%. Thus, it can be assumed that this project is designed to serve as a "prescription" for the above-mentioned situation.

However, if economic growth loses its momentum, and inflation is refueled at the double-digit level as before, the Communist Party will not be able to keep its promise. Then, grievances against the party will explode from the social bracket including the unemployed and veterans who have never gotten benefit from the fruits of the Doi Moi. Moreover, if religious organizations take action in sympathy, the democratization movement acts openly, and they join in the movement, nobody cannot deny that there is a possibility that a situation may develop to the point where the authorities have to deploy riot police on a large scale. In such a case, more fierce reaction than overseas Chinese had in Tiananmen Square incident will be made by overseas Vietnamese, who once escaped Vietnam as boat people and political exiles in large numbers. Meanwhile, the move of the Vietnam People's Army may draw attention, but it is under the control of the Communist Party. Therefore, the army will not take action unless the situation becomes extremely serious.

For the time being, Vietnam can expect the influx of foreign capital and an increase in foreign aid. Now, it seems unlikely that the Vietnamese economy will lose its momentum. Under the circumstances, if Vietnam pays attention not to refuel inflation, no crisis will arise against the current regime.