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Mahatma Gandhi of Vietnam

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Over half-a century, Nguyen Ngoc Huy (1924-1990) became a giant among those across the world seeking a democratic Vietnam, so much so that he earned the title "the Gandhi of Vietnam" as his methods of change.



Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) brought the United Kingdom, then one of the world's most powerful nations, to its knees by using peace, love and integrity



Huy made major contributions to the evolution of Vietnam- albeit certainly delayed since 1975- towards multiparty democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Leaders should not be judged only by the success or failure of a particular goal. India is now free. Vietnam still languishes in totalitarianism, but both Gandhi and Huy were exemplary leaders of the 20th century. One of Huy's books, *Survival of a Nation*, was described by Nguyen Cao Quyen, the former judge and prisoner of war, as presenting a system of governance combining the principles of democracy successful in Western civilizations with the unique characteristics of Vietnamese culture. "Had (Huy's) principles been applied to Vietnam following the departure of the French in 1954," he added, "or after President Ngo Dinh Diem's assassination in 1963, there might not have been a Vietnam War."

Nguyen Ngoc Bich, chair of the National Congress of Vietnamese Americans (NCVA), has noted that, in addition to his political legacy, Prof. Huy left "an enormous body of scholarly writings that would take future generations years to absorb."

Gandhi's goal was to set India free and to fight for the rights of repressed communities of Indians through non-violent means. Martin Luther King Jr., said, "Christ gave me the message; Gandhi gave me the method."

At 21, Huy went to work at Vietnam's National Library, where he 'devoured books' and wrote articles on youth, politics and poetry. He composed the "Unknown Hero", which was first recited in the schools and later sung to honour fallen soldiers. When suppressed by the authoritarian Ngo Dinh Diem government in the '60s, Huy took refuge in Paris, where he continued his studies while working at odd jobs. In 1963, he earned a Ph.D. in political science at the Sorbonne.

Self-Discipline

Gandhi believed that continuously challenging his self-discipline improved his commitment to achieving his goals. He was focused always. He "would free India or die in the process."

Huy was similarly self-disciplined. Bui Diem, South Vietnam's ambassador to America in the 1960's, noted "... a special trait of his personality that was so persistent that it became dominant over his whole political life. He was devoted to the idea of reform at every stage of his political activities and he consistently tried to put that idea into practice."

Gandhi's convictions were the most important factor in his success. He had the ability to inspire the Indian people to believe in themselves and their goal of freedom. One of his strongest beliefs was that "willpower overcomes brute force".

A Vietnamese researcher on Huy's life noted, "Dr. Huy's passion for his mission touched everyone, young and old alike. His charisma transcends frontiers and races. Like the myth of Sisyphus, Dr. Huy struggled uphill to build a democracy for Vietnam....(H)is determination was a fire that lit people up like a lighthouse and guided thousands of us..."

Relating to People

When Gandhi spoke to large audiences, listeners felt he was speaking to them individually.

Huy related to many as inspirational poet, professor, politician and author. His literary output included over twenty books in Vietnamese, French and English; seven monographs; nine lectures delivered at universities in Vietnam and the U.S.; a book of 115 poems. His academic home after South Vietnam fell in 1975 until his death from cancer in 1990 was as a research scholar at Harvard University.

At times, Gandhi had to be flexible to counter British tactics. In exile in France, Huy also had to compromise. Encouraged by his wife to continue his education, he relinquished his role as the family's main breadwinner. Their daughter, Nguyen Ngoc Thuy Tan, remembers her mother as an "unknown hero" from that period.

Transcending Adversities

The first time Gandhi rose to speak in court, he could not utter a single word due to fear. This early humiliation drove him to become one of the best public speakers of all time.

For his part, Huy returned to Vietnam and went on to hold various high-level government positions and to teach at a number of Vietnamese universities. He wrote numerous newspaper articles, seeking to promote democracy and motivate youth to become active in politics. He collaborated with Dr. Ta Van Tai of Harvard and Tran Van Liem, the former Chief Justice, on a three-volume code of Vietnam jurisprudence.

Integrity

Gandhi would accept no deviation to the principle of non-violence. He would rather go to jail (and often did) rather than go back on his word about non-violence.

The Alliance for Democracy in Vietnam (ADV) was formed in the U.S. in the early 1980s. Dr. Huy, with only one dark suit and contributions from his supporters, went around the world several times to educate and recruit many Vietnamese who became members of ADV.

Huy's message was always non-violence as well. He realized that, since Vietnamese refugees from totalitarianism were dispersed across the world with no military and limited financial resources, they had to rely on others to exert leverage on the party-state in Hanoi.

Leadership styles

Gandhi promoted love and peace in times when another leader would have made a call to arms. So did Prof. Huy.

In 1986, Huy founded the International Committee for a Free Vietnam (ICFV) with the support of European, American, Canadian and Australian legislators. Serving as honorary members, we parliamentarians committed ourselves to work for the restoration of human rights and basic liberties absent since 1975 in Vietnam. Many of us came to know and love Dr. Huy during his travels in the 1980s. Need I say more about describing Dr. Huy as "The Gandhi of Vietnam?"

In closing, permit me to make some comments on the human dignity, governance and economics in Vietnam today, mostly drawn from the Economist Intelligence Unit July 2011 Country Report.

Human Dignity

The party-state in Hanoi continues to exploit approximately 86 million Vietnamese in the same manner as when it seized South Vietnam in 1975. No-one but the party-state in Hanoi knows how many prisoners of conscience there are today, but the following are representative of those in its gulags or facing persecution.

Minorities in the central highlands, known as Montagnards, face harsh persecution. This spring, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that the regime had intensified its repression of Montagnard Christians pressing for religious freedom and land rights.



Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Lý, calling for a democratic election and a multiparty state, was sentenced to eight years imprisonment in 2007. He subsequently suffered two strokes and was released into home detention on condition that he return to prison to serve out his sentence. Unfortunately, he appears to be again now in custody.



Ms Le thi Cong Nhan is a Hanoi based human rights lawyer who was jailed in May 2007 for four years for "conducting propaganda against the state."



Unified Buddhist Church Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do has been confined without any charge in his monastery for years under police surveillance. Four Hòa Hào Buddhists were sentenced in 2007 to prison for protesting the imprisonment of other Buddhists. Cao Đài members were in 2005 sentenced to up to 13 years in prison for delivering a petition calling for religious freedom.



Hòa Hào Buddhists



Cao Đài Buddhists



Catholic priest Peter Phan Van Loi has been held under house arrest without any charge. The Hmong Protestants in the northwest and the Khmer Krom Buddhists in the Mekong River delta also face persecution.



Trần Khai Thanh Thuy, the well-known novelist, has played a key role in the democracy movement. In 2010, she was sentenced to 42 months in prison.



Pham Thanh Nghiênn did advocacy work on behalf of landless farmers. In 2010, she was sentenced to four years in prison followed by three years under house arrest on charges of spreading anti-government propaganda.



Lê Công Dinh spoke up for bloggers, human rights defenders, and democracy and labour rights activists. In 2010, he was convicted of 'attempts to overthrow the state' and sentenced to five years of incarceration.



Nguyen Tiên Trung, in his twenties, while studying in France, established the Youth Assembly for a Democratic Vietnam, and later met with the president of the Council of Europe, Prime Minister Harper and many other democratic leaders. Returning home, he was drafted into the army and later sentenced to seven years for advocating democracy.



Lawyer Trần Quốc Hiên defended farmers whose land was confiscated and published articles online. In 2007, he was sentenced to five years imprisonment and two years house arrest on release for 'spreading antigovernment propaganda' and 'endangering state security'.



Nguyen Hoàng Hai (Diêu Cày) is known for hard-hitting internet postings calling for greater democracy and human rights and for participation in protests against the Chinese party-state foreign policy. In 2008, he was sentenced to 30 months in prison on tax charges.

Cù Huy Hà Vu, legal scholar, government critic and dissident, was sentenced to seven years in prison on anti-government propaganda charges in 2011 following the country's most high profile trial in decades. He will reportedly be retried next month, although the identical result appears to be pre-decided.

Until the party-state improves its record, Human Rights Watch calls on the Obama administration to reinstate the designation of Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for violation of religious freedoms. (<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/03/24/testimony-sophie-richardson-tom-lantos-human-rights-commission> shows how to find HRW's recommendations as to how governments can respond effectively to the abuses suffered by Vietnamese human rights defenders.)

Political Outlook

Counter-intuitively, the Economist predicts the Vietnamese party-state will continue to strengthen ties with the West. Military links with the U.S. have become closer, as indicated by joint military exercises in the South China Sea in August 2010. American concerns over human rights and religious freedom remain a major source of bilateral tension. Matters are further complicated by President Nguyen Minh Triết seeking to maintain warm relations with the Party in China.

Economy

The real GDP growth is forecast to slow to 6% for the year. Inflation will accelerate to an average of 18.8%, causing weakened private consumption and investment growth. Price hikes of this magnitude cause severe pain to families and can quickly escalate to hyperinflation. Pressure to tackle the persistently wide trade deficit also continues.

Corruption is a major and growing problem. The Next Generation Conference was told yesterday in Orange that about three quarters of Vietnam's people live in rural areas, where incomes are approximately 40 percent of what urban residents obtain.

Conclusion

The life of Nguyen Ngoc Huy was exemplary to the point that the Vietnamese Diaspora and many others might pledge to follow his teachings on human rights and democracy until the end of our lives. Today the Alliance for Democracy in Vietnam and the International Committee for a Free Vietnam, inspired by Dr. Huy, work hand in hand to produce resolutions that call for Vietnam's party-state to free prisoners of conscience, open up fair trade with other countries, allow multiple political parties, and conduct free and transparent elections.

We all know that if Dr. Huy or his followers governed Vietnam today, having won office in a free and fair election, the governance of the Vietnamese people would be most different today. Let us re-energize our work around the world to make democracy a reality in Vietnam.

Thank you.