

Harvard Asia Quarterly

Loyal Opposition: The Rise of Vietnamese Dissidents

Posted on January 28, 2006 by the Editor

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The East Asian Economic Crisis has not only forced many countries to implement sweeping economic reforms, it has also been a source of considerable political changes in the region. For the most part, democratization and the push for political reform in Asia has come primarily from social forces exerting pressures upward from the lower levels of society. Vietnam, however, is a unique case study because the impetus for political reform has come not from groups such as the urban middle class, students, or the military, but from within the elite ranks of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) itself, frustrated at the pace and scope of development.

The Political and Economic Context of Dissent

Facing a stagnant economy and a demoralized, war-weary populace, the Vietnam Communist Party launched bold foreign and economic policy initiatives at its 6th National Congress in December 1986. This Chinese-style reform program, *doi moi* (renovation), introduced market reforms and diminished the role of central planning. Markets opened and individuals were allowed to participate in private economic activities as well as operate in the labor market. The government encouraged export-led growth and courted foreign investment, which topped \$16 billion by 1998. Hanoi

enjoyed 7-8% growth for the first decade of *doi moi*, and was set to become the next "tiger" economy. In addition, there was also an abbreviated political liberalization, known as *coi mo* (openness) that resulted in a lively intellectual and political dialogue until the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Yet instead of democratic pressures arising from students, the church or workers, the challenge to the VCP came from within its own Politburo and elite ranks.

Although the party advocated "broadening democracy" as early as 1986, it was not pluralism that was being embraced. When General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh spoke of "democratization" he meant enhanced debate and discussion over policy *within* the party. Democratic centralism was not being practiced, as all decisions were made by a handful of top leaders who had little understanding of details or local circumstances. This resulted in economic stagnation. The political discourse in which Linh was engaging was influenced by the debates in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Vietnamese leaders were cognizant that a multi-party system, albeit one in which the communist party remained a dominant political force, had emerged in Hungary when opposition parties developed from less formal reform "circles" founded by regional officials who banded together. They were also familiar with Gorbachev's tolerance of different political viewpoints as long as they "serve the cause of socialist construction." The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe was a traumatic event for Hanoi, now convinced that political pluralism threatened its survival. The Central Committee issued the "Three No's" — no calling into question the leadership of the communist party, no calling into question the correctness of the one-party state, and no movement towards political pluralism — while the military publicly justified "revolutionary violence" to defend the regime.

The Central Committee's March 1990 Plenum, one of the longest and stormiest sessions in Vietnam's history, resulted in the rejection of any multi-party system or democratic reform and the sacking of a Politburo member, Tran Xuan Bach, for his advocacy of political reform. Bach had warned "One cannot think that turbulence will occur only in Europe while in Asia things remain stable. . . All

socialist countries are now in a process of evolution to move forward, have outstanding differences be solved, and need to break off the long-existing stress and strain of old things.” Bach’s emphasis was to “firmly maintain stability in the political and economic social domains, especially political stability.” But to do so meant political reform, though not a multi-party system. In a widely-publicized December 1989 speech, he encouraged the party to tolerate greater diversity of political ideas. “There is still unrest among the people. They are demanding more democracy and social justice.” Unlike his colleagues in the Politburo, he scoffed at the idea that one could have economic reform without political change. For Bach, economic liberalization could only be successful if coupled with political liberalization: “You can’t walk with one long leg and one short one, and you can’t walk with only one leg,” he pronounced in a January 1990 interview.

But to a hyper-defensive party, the policies that Bach advocated were far too radical and thus rejected outright. The Central Committee attributed socialism’s collapse in Eastern Europe to “imperialist and reactionary plots” rather than to internal factors, and upheld the VCP’s monopoly of power for the sake of stability: “Only with political stability can we stabilize and develop the economic and social conditions [and] step by step reduce the difficulties and improve people’s lives.” Since 1989, there has been almost no political reform as the party feels that any liberalization would lead to the loss of its monopoly of power and undermine its legitimacy. The party’s intransigence has led to a decline in popular support and legitimacy, forcing many frustrated party members and dissidents to speak out.

Vietnam is a one-party state in which all political activity is monopolized by the Communist Party and anyone who challenges the Party is harshly dealt with. So why have dissidents become emboldened recently? I suggest four reasons: First, the government’s xenophobia has halted any political reform. The leadership has identified two distinct threats. The first is the threat China poses to Vietnam’s territorial integrity. In the short-run, the Vietnamese believe the Chinese are too focused on building up their economy to pose a major threat. That leaves the Vietnamese to

focus their attentions on the second threat, subversion through "peaceful evolution." This is the threat created by the growth of democratization, human rights and other Western values which will cause the dissipation of Marxist-Leninist-Ho Chi Minh ideology and the VCP's monopoly of power. The Vietnam People's Army's 1998 *White Paper* revealed that its utmost security concern did not originate out of its northern border: "The plots to interfere in Vietnam's internal affairs in the disguise of 'human rights' and 'democracy,' the intrusion into this country by means of culture and ideology, activation of subversion and destabilization for the purpose of replacing the current political and social system, are all great menaces to Vietnam's security and national defense." In short, the VCP is determined not to surrender any political power. After watching with horror in 1989 to what happened to their Eastern European counterparts, the VCP spends much of its energy maintaining its rule.

Second, a malaise has taken hold of Vietnam as *doi moi*, which had such wonderful results initially, has died out. While Hanoi enjoyed years of 7 to 8% growth, it is now, according to the World Bank, sustaining only 2% growth, and perhaps even less if it does not take bold steps in reforming and restructuring its economy. Vietnam's reluctance to reform clearly played a part in the 60% reduction in foreign investment in 1998. Vietnam's future economic growth is dependent on continuous and substantive reform. These reforms, such as privatization of state-owned assets, will challenge the authority of the state as well as its ideological underpinnings. The Asian economic crisis also had a devastating effect on the Vietnamese economy, as much of its foreign investment and major trading partners are Asian, and its competitiveness dissolved in the face of devalued currencies. Vietnam has not coped well with this crisis. Conservatives within Vietnam's leadership blamed the Asian economic crisis on capitalism, while reformers blamed it on "crony capitalism," imperfect markets and excessive government intervention. For two and a half years, there has been no major decision by the Politburo, which has been completely deadlocked since the 8th Party Congress in 1996. There is tremendous resistance to implementing these

necessary reforms from within the conservative-dominated politburo, thus emboldening dissidents on the side of the liberals.

Another cause of malaise has been the peasant protests occurring throughout the countryside, notably in Thai Binh, as local-level officials appropriated land for themselves and their families and friends, as well as imposed an egregious number of "taxes" on everything from schools to land usage. This has been taking place since 1997. That the VCP's traditional base of support is up in arms has caused grave consternation among the elite. Many realize that the party must reform its methods of governance or continue to lose popular support and legitimacy. Yet the party still places the blame for the peasantry's woes on bad cadres rather than bad policies.

The economic downturn, including the flight of foreign investors, as well as the peasant protests, are centered on one issue: corruption. Vietnam has a weak legal infrastructure and few of the tools needed to regulate the marketplace. As a result, the scope of corruption is enormous. According to international watchdogs, Vietnam has one of the world's most corrupt societies, adding 5 - 15% to project costs for foreign investors. As the former Prime Minister, Vo Van Kiet, complained: "The state of corruption plus incapacities, red tape and domineering behavior, and the lack of a sense of discipline among numerous officials in various state machines at all levels and branches. . . have. . . jeopardized the renovation process and brought discredit to the party's leadership." Daniel Chirot contends that the single greatest variable in understanding the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe is corruption. What he called the "utter moral rot" that communist society in Eastern Europe bred has perhaps become the most serious issue for the communist regime in Vietnam.

Finally, Vietnam is more vulnerable to exogenous forces. Both the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and the economic growth, until late, of its "tiger" neighbors have acted as important influences on Vietnam. With the hosting of the November 1997 Francophone Summit, Hanoi found itself under intense French pressure to release 40 dissidents and to cease

restrictions on the press, which resulted in the authorization of one French TV crew to film the remote prison camp where a prominent dissident was being held. Human rights dominate every meeting between Vietnam and the United States. As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told her Vietnamese hosts during a recent visit: "Human rights is a permanent issue for us. It is not going to go away." And, of course, the Internet is changing the way that Vietnamese are able to communicate both among themselves and with exile and dissident groups abroad. While exogenous forces are not going to change the nature of the Vietnamese political system, they do embolden critics.

Who Are The Dissidents?

Calls for political reform within Vietnam are interesting for a number of reasons. First, they come not from outside the polity, but from within and often from the highest echelons. The leading dissidents are not disenfranchised malcontents or zoo electricians but are often life-long party members who have impeccable revolutionary credentials. And unlike outsiders who have nothing to lose by challenging the state, the Vietnamese dissidents have everything to lose: their positions and status, as well as those of their children. The major exception to this has been a few southern dissidents, many of whom gained their political consciousness while protesting the Republic of Vietnam regimes, joined by members of both the Catholic clergy and the outlawed United Buddhist Church of Vietnam, who have protested against the government's control of religion. Unlike Eastern Europe where the forces of change were autonomous groups in society, those in Vietnam are too weak. There is no public or underground independent labor movement in Vietnam. Moreover, the size of the urban proletariat is quite small. Even a radical and politicized student movement, as can be found in South Korea or Indonesia, is missing in Vietnam, a country in which only 2% of the population graduates from tertiary education. As one graduate student told a Western journalist:

Foreigners ask me why students don't go to the street as they did in China or Indonesia. It's simple. If you're in college, you're either the child of a cadre and you think that the system is O.K. Or your family

is wealthy and is benefiting from the system. Or you're the first kid from a poor farmer's family ever to go to college. You're not going to ruin your family's chance for a better life by demonstrating [for] democracy.

I have analyzed the writings and views of 25 well-known dissidents since the launching of *doi moi* in 1986. No doubt, there are far more. Estimates range from "at least 54" (Amnesty International) to 200 (State Department) to over 1,000 (exile groups). With the September 1998 presidential amnesty no prominent dissidents remain imprisoned. Nonetheless, countless others remain under surveillance or suffer harassment by the police.

Of the 25 dissidents, 16 were party members, 9 of whom were eventually expelled from the party, and two of whom voluntarily resigned. Only seven of the dissidents have served lengthy prison sentences and, of those, most are southerners without ties to the party. The average age of Vietnam's dissidents is in the mid- to late-60s. All but two are male. Geographically, they are predominantly southerners, though several live in exile in France and the United States. They represent a wide range of occupations: seven of them are writers, journalists or editors, and two are doctors. They also include a geologist, an historian, a mathematician, and an economist. There are also several former security officials, including the chief of cabinet in the Ministry of Interior and a high level official in the Central Committee's Internal Security Bureau. Three were members of the VCP's Central Committee, while two others were high-level officials within the Central Committee's various departments. Over half of the dissidents served in the military during the "War of National Liberation," either as cadres, soldiers or propaganda officials; one was second in command of Hanoi's forces in the south. Four participated in the anti-colonial war. Several were members of the National Liberation Front, including one of its original founders, Dr. Duong Qunh Hoa, and several of its ministers.

Among the most notable are Bui Tin, a Colonel who served in the South during the war against America and then in Cambodia, who later became an editor at the party daily, *Nhan Dan*. General Tran

Do was a top ideologue in the Party, a long-time head of the Central Committee's Ideology and Culture Commission, and second in command of Hanoi's forces in the south. For his letter writing campaign in 1998, the Central Committee censured him and then expelled him from the party in January 1999. Dr. Duong Qunh Hoa, who was one of the original founders of the National Liberation Front in Saigon in 1960 and the Minister of Health in the Provisional National Government, resigned from the Party in 1995. Duong Thu Huong is an internationally acclaimed novelist, who was labeled by General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh as the "dissident whore" after publication of her second novel, *Paradise of the Blind*, for which she was expelled from the party and later arrested. Nguyen Thanh Giang, a prominent intellectual and geologist, gained notoriety for his attempts to run for a seat in the National Assembly as an independent candidate. He was arrested in March 1999. Two younger academics, Ha Si Phu, a biologist, and Phan Dinh Dieu, a mathematician, have written some of the most intellectually stinging attacks on the ruling ideology to date. One of the most important dissidents is a veteran revolutionary from the South, Nguyen Ho, who founded the group Club of Former Resistance Fighters in 1986 after serving as a top VCP official in Saigon. The group, which comprised hundreds of war heroes and former members of the *Viet Cong*, was critical of Hanoi's treatment of the south after the war, Hanoi's downplaying of the role of the *Viet Cong*, and Hanoi's handling of the economy since reunification in 1976. Others include southerners Nguyen Dan Que, who founded the Vietnamese chapter of Amnesty International, and the former academic Doan Viet Hoat, who founded and oversaw an independent newspaper, *Freedom Forum*, before it was shut down and he was imprisoned.

For the most part, these dissidents had been members of the ruling elite. They had nothing to gain and everything to lose by embarking on their various courses of action. These are people with a deep commitment to the revolution and to the Vietnamese nation. Most spent much of their lives working for Vietnam's independence and sovereignty. They are patriots above all else. As Harvard historian Hue-Tam Ho Tai wrote about Duong Thu Huong, "she continues to believe that the ten years she spent dodging bombs and bullets in

the central highlands were the best years of her life. They are the inspiration of her many themes and one source of the moral authority she brings to her new role as a political dissident.”

For all these reasons, these 24 people are perhaps most dangerous to the regime. They carry an enormous degree of respect. They have acted in positions of leadership. They have proteges and supporters within the regime. As leaders and writers they are charismatic. They are, by and large, an old group and it remains to be seen whether another generation will emerge. But an older group, even a small one that is no longer in power, can be a catalyst. The leadership has only to look at the outpouring of popular support for Imre Nagy in Hungary or Alexander Dubcek in Czechoslovakia to find instances of political reform and the collapse of the communist party’s monopoly of power.

Because most of these dissidents are, or until recently were, party members, in many ways they appear to be a nascent loyal opposition rather than a subversive counter-revolutionary group. These dissidents do not necessarily want to be dissidents. Having dedicated most of their lives to the revolution, to wars of liberation and to the party, they are enormously patriotic and many remain loyal to the party, though unhappy with the policies implemented since reunification. And even if they have become more critical of the party, few deny the important role the party has played in the nation’s independence. Even non-member Ha Si Phu has used the analogy of the boat (the party) to cross the river (independence). But on the far shore, it has simply encumbered the country and has not allowed Vietnam to catch up to its peers.

Most see themselves as loyal oppositionists within the party who want to raise issues and policies that will strengthen Vietnam and rejuvenate the party. In the Sino-Confucian-Marxist tradition, intellectuals are bound to the state and career advancement is linked to loyalty to the regime. Therefore, the demands of these dissidents, in general, are reasonable and fairly moderate. For them, serving as a loyal opposition and making demands on the party and on the government is not only a right, but also a duty. As Merle Goldman writes about the duty of intellectuals in Confucian

societies: "Confucianism did not legally guarantee a loyal opposition, but it justified one ideologically. To criticize government misdeeds was not the literati's right, as in the West, but their responsibility."

But this type of system has drawbacks for the process of democratization: few intellectuals will stick their necks out to challenge the state because it is the state that controls their careers. This is a real problem for gaining a broader base of elite support to compel the state to alter its current policies. As one dissident, Bao Cu, complained: "In today's struggle for democracy, intellectuals are supposed to be the leading flag. But is that really so, or is the opposite true? Could it be, that deep down, intellectuals themselves are afraid of democracy; that with democracy they might lose certain privileges, immunity and interests considered exclusively theirs through the ages." He makes an important point. What explains the dissidents' inability to gain a wider following? One explanation belies the real shortcoming of the movement: they have real trouble working together. This is not hard to fathom when one understands all the myriad elements of dissent. Dissidents including life-long communists, supporters of the old Saigonese regimes, Buddhist monks and intellectuals simply desiring freedom of expression are often mistrusting of one another. Divided, Hanoi is able to isolate and control them.

The Issues at Stake

The dissidents have focused their demands on four major issues. First, they call for greater democratization. To be sure, few actually call for a Western-style multi-party democracy, and even less for the disbanding or the overthrow of the VCP. Rather, their demands focus on establishing a greater independent role for the National Assembly and creating more transparency in decision-making. Second, they advocate the rule of law, the abolition of governance by party decree, and the cessation of the party's ability to stand above the law, enshrined in Article 4 of the current constitution. Third, Vietnam's political dissidents demand greater intellectual and artistic freedom, especially freedom of the press. Fourth, they are highly critical of corruption. Although some would like to see the

VCP completely surrender economic decision-making to market forces, many others are critical of unbridled capitalism. As corruption-inspired peasant protests throughout the country have been at the top of the party's agenda, the critics' attacks on corruption have not fallen on deaf ears. But the party wants to lead the attack, and not allow the initiative to fall into the hands of outsiders who could use it to further their own agendas. For example, dissidents have used the issue of corruption to attack the party for having become a "new class," a corrupt elite alienated from the masses.

In short, these issues revolve around the party's linkage of its own interests and survival with those of the state. In other words, can one be a patriot without supporting the VCP? These critics are aghast at the arrogance of the party, whose membership constitutes less than 2% of the population, yet represents the interests of all the people of Vietnam.

Issue 1: The Power of the National Assembly

Although on paper, the National Assembly is the supreme organ of the state, in reality, it is a rubber stamp for the VCP. The NA was dormant from 1949 to 1960, while the other law-making organ of the government, the Ministry of Justice, was shut down from 1961 to 1981. Of the 8,914 legal documents promulgated between 1945-1986, only 62 were laws; the rest were decrees, ministerial directives or executive orders. After the reunification of the country, the National Assembly continued to do little more than rubber stamp party decisions at its month-long biannual sessions.

With the advent of *doi moi*, the National Assembly took on new importance because of the urgency of creating a legal framework to oversee Vietnam's transition to a market-oriented economy. Some reforms, such as secret balloting and the loosening of press restrictions, were implemented. The National Assembly is asserting itself by passing more laws needed for the reform process, debating policies made by the party, and has even refused to endorse the party's nominee for a ministerial position. According to one official, the National Assembly is becoming a "dialogue partner" for the party. In the context of a communist society where the VCP has

always monopolized decision making, the more assertive National Assembly is extremely popular.

Yet it is hardly an independent body. In addition, the party directly controls the Assembly through interference in its elections. Little is left to chance. Not only are there rigid quotas of men and women, intellectuals, workers, soldiers, and peasants in the National Assembly, the number of non-party members is also regulated. During the election for the 9th National Assembly, for example, 30 of the 32 independent candidates were disqualified for technical reasons. Neither of the two independent candidates was elected. The Vietnam Fatherland Front, a party-controlled umbrella organization, manages the elections and oversees three rounds of screening for all candidates, regardless of who nominates them. Nguyen Thanh Giang is a case in point. Giang, a prominent geophysicist who works for the government's Geological Survey Department, was "rejected" by his "co-workers." Although he received 96% of the vote at a neighborhood meeting, he only received "30 percent" at his office. Despite having 300 colleagues, only 16 were allowed to vote — most of whom were members of the party cell.

Few have called for the establishment of a multi-party political system, and even fewer have called for the disbanding of the VCP. The Hungarian model, in which opposition parties emerged from within a communist party that retained its leading role in politics and governance, is appealing to many. But most dissidents simply want a de-politicized forum where experts and those with different opinions can openly debate ideas and national policies. For these critics, the natural venue for such debate is the National Assembly. Legally, individuals may become members, so the VCP could continue to dominate an open forum without contending with other national-level political parties.

Fear of political instability has diluted open calls for the establishment of a pluralistic system with contending parties, but calls for the end of the totalitarian dictatorship and an open dialogue over policy are unanimous among dissidents. Bui Minh Quoc, one of the most outspoken dissidents, has simply argued that for the time

being there should be more debates over political reform: "Stop considering the topics of multi-parties and pluralistic systems taboos, but organize public and fair debates on these matters so that people can take appropriate steps together in the effort to democratize the country in peace, stability and development." The National Assembly is seen as the appropriate venue for such a dialogue. General Tran Do, another outspoken dissident, wrote to the Politburo: "I still agree with and support the political leading role of the party. I think such a role is necessary. But leading does not mean imposing. Party leadership does not mean party rule." Do has not explicitly called for a multi-party democracy, but said: "I think this reform should include the abandonment of the party's absolute and total control of everything. The party should only keep the role of political leadership and let the National Assembly, the government and the Fatherland Front have their own responsibilities and independent authorities." Other critics have tried to persuade the party leadership that pluralism is not necessarily going to arrive at the communist party's expense and that, to the contrary, competition would revitalize the party.

What Do and others are saying is that the party has made, and continues to make, mistakes that could be averted if there was more debate and discussion within the *existing* political framework. For the party, this means challenging its infallibility and empowering individuals to question its policies. As Hoang Minh Chinh said: "The root cause of all miseries of the nation and people of Vietnam is Article 4 of the Constitution. It declares the party's exclusive right to rule. The party is therefore placed above the fatherland, nation, and everything else."

Issue 2: Demands for Rule of Law

Calls for the party placing itself "under the laws and on equal footings" is at the heart of the dissidents' demands. Rather than calling for political pluralism, most simply demand a strict adherence by the party to the rule of law and the creation of an independent judiciary. Because of Communist Party control of the judiciary through interlocking directorates, laws and the court system simply serve the Communist Party. The legal sector must be

strengthened and freed of political interference. There has been some progress, but many obstacles remain. For example, 30-40% of the judges and law staff in the country do not have law degrees or other professional training but are simply party appointed bureaucrats. Moreover, the Vietnamese legal system is ill-equipped to rectify the situation. The first law college in Vietnam was set up in 1979, and by 1993 the Hanoi Bar Association had only 50 members. Because of the increased demands that a market economy places on the legal system, the Bar estimates that Vietnam currently needs between 500-1,000 lawyers.

A key aspect of *doi moi* has been a commitment to establishing more detailed laws governing society. To this end the National Assembly has been in a fit of law-making activity of late. On the one hand, we should be pleased by this commitment to the rule of law. The problem, though, is that most of these laws are terribly flawed, and in one way or another many defeat their intended purpose by continuing to give the communist party the authority to intervene. Most commonly, laws grant a host of freedoms to the citizens, but have a caveat: those freedoms must not violate the security of the regime and stability of society. This is a common loophole that renders many of Vietnam's laws mere window dressing. There needs to be a commitment by the party to truly abide by the rule of law that it is obviously trying to promote.

Issue 3: Ideology and The New Class

Whereas all of the dissidents are against the authoritarian nature of the communist regime, not all are against socialism. Some are concerned about being stuck in a half-capitalist-half-communist system. Others argue that such a system is untenable and that a complete rejection of socialism is necessary. As Phan Dinh Dieu wrote: "We must admit that communist theory and 'socialism,' with the radicalization of class contradictions and class struggle, with the imposition of a hasty economic collectivization regime of centralized management, of monopoly of leadership of the party have done great harm to the country." Ideology is a tool by which the VCP maintains its monopoly of power, rather than fosters economic development.

They are alluding to a phenomenon first expounded by Milovan Djilas in *The New Class*, in which he argued that the communist party becomes a class in its own right and, hence, the actions of party members become more guided by their class interest rather than the interests of the party or the nation in whose name they rule. "I put a question to the leaders in Hanoi," Dr. Duong Quynh Hoa told a journalist: "What is your final goal- the final goal of the revolution? Is it the happiness of the people, or power? Then I answered the question. 'I think it is power.'" The dissident's perception is that the party is acting in its narrow class interests, preserving its power and not ruling in the people's interests.

Likewise, many have denounced the "red capitalist" cadres who use their public positions for personal gain through kickbacks or through stealing state resources that they control. "The accumulation of wealth by the new capitalist class in Vietnam today is [achieved] by using authoritarian and deceptive tactics to robe the properties of the government and people," according to Nguyen Thanh Giang. The party acknowledges the gravity of corruption and smuggling and has launched large-scale anti-corruption campaigns, but asserts that they are by-products of the reform program. What landed Giang in jail, according to exiled dissident Doan Viet Hoat, was the fact that Giang had argued that "corruption is not simply a by-product of the market economy, but mainly the heritage of privileged power and benefits." The most well known attack on the "new class" comes from the novelist Duong Thu Huong's *Paradise of the Blind* (1988), her second book, now banned in Vietnam, is the story of a young guest worker in Russia who is confronted by the hypocrisy of her uncle: a dour cadre, an ideologue whose life revolves around smuggling and corruption in order to survive.

Issue 4: Freedom of the Press

In a 1999 survey of press freedom across East and Southeast Asia, Vietnam scored at the bottom. Although Article 69 of the 1992 Constitution claims that "citizens are entitled to freedom of speech and freedom of the press," in reality, under the dictates of socialist realism, all periodicals and newspapers are owned and controlled by the regime, forcing dissidents to publish their own "samizdat"

newspapers. As Stein Tonneson noted, "The role of the 'photocopy shops' in creating a civil society in Vietnam cannot be exaggerated." There was also a subsequent rise in the number of clandestine publishing houses and, according to a report by the Ministry of Interior, by 1988, only half of the 400 newspapers were licensed and nearly 40% of the books published that year were done so illegally. The most well-known *samizdat* papers were *Freedom Forum* and the news letter of the Club of Former Resistance Fighters, *Tradition of Resistance*. Both have been banned and their editors arrested. Increasingly, dissidents have been able to circumvent the government's control over the press through the Internet, leaving one government official to complain of the "sins of modern communication."

Press freedoms have varied according to political needs. For example, General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh needed the press in 1986-1988 to help him implement reforms through a stubborn and recalcitrant bureaucracy. As a carrot, he eliminated much of the party's censorship of works and urged the writers not to "bend your pens in order to please people." As a result of Linh's efforts, the press had considerably more freedom and, for the first time, journalists were allowed to write about the negative aspects of Vietnamese society and governance. Instead, the major dailies began printing investigative stories to expose corruption.

But liberalization was short-lived due to the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Tiananmen massacre. Linh reversed himself, ordering writers to stop writing "only about negative phenomenon." Pre-revolutionary works were once again banned, and what little freedoms the press had earned in 1987-1988 were restrained. Eight magazines and newspapers were shut down, while several editors were purged.

To date, the press remains firmly controlled and those who challenge the state are punished. The editor of the business daily, *Doanh Nghiep* [*Enterprise*], who published an article about high-level corruption within the Department of Customs regarding the purchase of four patrol craft, was arrested for "revealing state secrets" and later charged with "abusing democracy and intruding

on the rights of the state, social organizations and the people's interest." At the same time, the press had a very free hand in covering the two largest corruption cases in the state's history (regarding state-owned enterprises engaged in real estate speculation, involving hundreds of millions of dollars in fraud and embezzlement). Obviously the government and the party wanted to send out a very clear signal to would-be corrupt businessmen. Despite widespread peasant protests in Thai Binh from 1997-1998, there was a press blackout for five months. Only then were the legitimate interests of the peasants, such as official corruption, summarily acknowledged. The foreign press was banned from the region altogether. The current General Secretary has repeatedly met with top media officials demanding that they toe the party line and "support revolutionary ideology." On May 19, 1999, the National Assembly passed a largely re-written press law that concentrates control over the media.

The dissidents argue that aside from being a violation of Article 69 of the Constitution, which clearly states that "Citizens have the right to freedom of expression; freedom of the press; the right to be informed; the right to assemble, to form associations, to hold demonstrations according to the regulation of the laws," censorship and the government's monopoly of the media hurt the country in many additional ways. For them, an independent media will not lead to instability and anarchy, but to a more effective and accountable government that would be responsive to the concerns of the citizenry at all times. Likewise, Phan Dinh Dieu argues that intellectual freedom is essential to the country's economic development, and calls for the "liberalization of information exchange." "New ideas and thinking, which are valuable sources for supporting the creation of wealth and prosperity in the new age, if found opposite to the party's lines, have all been prohibited." Dieu frames his argument in economic terms: the marketplace, dominated by economically rational producers and consumers, needs the free flow of information. Vietnam cannot catch up with the rest of the world economically, or become integrated into the global economy without a significant change in the information policy of the state.

Conclusion

The dissident movement in Vietnam is nascent and still small. Yet its power lies in the social and political positions of its members. As lifelong members of the communist party, both veterans with impeccable revolutionary credentials and the finest intellectual minds in the country speak with moral authority and reason. Although they are by no means a uniform group, they share several moderate goals. Most want to work within the current legal-constitutional structure by empowering the National Assembly to govern in a legalistic society, in which a free press provides information and serves as a public watchdog. Few advocate a truly pluralist system. They want to strengthen this system, not undermine it. But their frustration with the party's monopoly of power, control of the National Assembly, corruption, refusal to liberalize and reform the economy, and the lack of intellectual freedom and freedom of the press, have led this core of dissidents to challenge the party's methods and goals. By not reforming, they argue, the party is steadily losing its legitimacy and popular support. These dissidents wish to serve as a loyal opposition and contribute to the development of the nation. But to an insecure regime which has rested on its laurels and employed coercion to maintain its monopoly of power, these dissidents are a threat not only to the regime itself, but to the nation as a unified and independent entity, and must, therefore, be crushed.