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Political Developments in Myanmar and Vietnam

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POLITICS IN VIETNAM — IN SEARCH OF INTEREST

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About the Speaker

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POLITICAL IMPASSE IN MYANMAR

The claim that the political impasse in Myanmar has been existent ever since the current military government took control of it is anything but an exaggeration. The situation became further aggravated when the junta refused to transfer power to the National League for Democracy (NLD) which had won a landslide victory in the 1990 election; a situation that was exacerbated by the junta and the NLD's longstanding mutual distrust. Throughout its tenure, the junta has detained a large number of opposition party members. NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been placed under house arrest twice. In late 2000, however, news of a secret meeting between senior government officials and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who was under house arrest gave rise to some public hope of reconciliation between the junta and the NLD. These hopes were all the more heightened when the junta released Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from her second house arrest in May 2002. Yet, despite this, the national reconciliation meeting between the junta and the NLD stalled a few months after Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's release, much to the dismay of the public and the international community. These ostensible actions towards a resolution between the junta and the NLD came to naught when the government placed Daw Aung San Suu Kyi under so-called protective custody and detained a large number of NLD members in the wake of a clash between supporters of the government and NLD members in late May 2003. The entire remarkable nature of this endeavour at negotiating a national reconciliation between the junta and the NLD raises a number of questions: Why did the junta refuse to talk to the NLD until late 2000? Why did the junta finally decide to reconcile with the NLD? Why is the political impasse between the NLD and the junta so persistent? What are the prospects for democracy in Myanmar? This paper makes an attempt to answer all these questions by examining the state of the

national reconciliation process in Myanmar. However, due to the opaqueness of Myanmar's national reconciliation process, it is not easy to know the happenings within it. Therefore, this paper strives to surmise the goings-on of the process by assembling bits and pieces of information and rumours as one would solve jigsaw puzzles. Since most available evidence pertaining to the goings-on of the national reconciliation process is circumstantial, my proffered explanations are more suggestive than conclusive.

Why did the junta and the National League for Democracy (NLD) not have a political dialogue until late 2000?

A number of Myanmar watchers presented three different answers to this question:

A) Ne Win's continued presence made the possibility of a dialogue between the junta and the NLD impossible.
B) It was because pro-reform softliners lost the power struggle in the government.
C) The military was hostile to the NLD because the "military-backed" National Unity Party (NUP) lost the election.

A thorough examination of the political developments in Myanmar in the last decade clearly shows the implausibility of those three answers. Although Ne Win did, until recently, wield much influence over most leading members of the junta, there was no direct or indirect evidence of him being actively involved in the post-Socialist domestic politics. The recent conviction of his son-in-law and grandchildren on charges of high treason clearly suggest that Ne Win was not as powerful as he was often perceived to be, if anything, it proved that members of the junta were more interested in looking after their own interests than serving their former commander. Although it is true that the junta would have preferred the NUP to the NLD, one should not simply label the NUP as a military-backed party. Partly because of the first Chairman of the SLORC/SPDC, the late General Saw Maung's acrimonious relationship with some leading members of the NUP, senior military officers were even ordered not to play golf with members of the NUP. Moreover, nowhere in the country did the military help candidates of the NUP to win the elections. The result of the elections initially expected (or perhaps wanted) by the junta was that no party would win with a clear majority. Until late 1989, many senior military officers, especially General Saw Maung, thought this the most likely outcome. This hope that

no party would win the majority vote stemmed from the junta's desire to remain the most united and strongest institution in the country.

The power struggle argument does not stand because the supposedly pro-reform group was always weaker than the supposedly hardliner group. If the state of power struggle dictated the political development of Myanmar, softliners would not have any say in the socio-political and economic development of the country. The power struggle argument is little more than a misunderstanding of the power structure in the government. A large number of Myanmar watchers and a large majority of the population once mistakenly thought that General Khin Nyunt, leader of the supposedly liberal group, was more powerful than hardliners. The public saw Khin Nyunt on state television and in state newspapers more frequently than any other senior officials because he made inspection tours ten to fifteen times more often than other high-ranking officials. Moreover, people always saw him in the capacity of a powerful official; a view confirmed by the fact that he always sat next to Saw Maung at state ceremonies and always took precedence by walking before other senior officials. In a country where most of the information on the newspapers and television are devoted to the activities of influential officials, the frequent appearance of General Khin Nyunt on state television and newspapers made it seem as if he was the most powerful official in the government. The public also saw Khin Nyunt as an official who was capable of both giving them the most trouble and the most help. As could be anticipated, Khin Nyunt wasted no time in consolidating his power. On the pretext that it was necessary to maintain military surveillance of opposition groups in the country, he managed to expand his intelligence units with the excuse that intelligence agents had to be dispatched throughout the country in order to monitor these subversive groups. The belief that intelligence officers monitored the movements of anti-government activists around the country gave rise to public fear and disgust for the chief of the Directorate of the Defense Service Intelligence, Khin Nyunt. On the other hand, however, many people were equally convinced that Khin Nyunt would do something for them, if they could find a way to make their non-political grievances and non-political needs known to him.

In contrast to popular public opinion, most senior State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) officials did not recognize Khin Nyunt as the most

powerful official in the government. They were indignant that a relatively junior intelligence officer without much combat experience could be perceived as the most powerful figure in the government. Although they emphasized collective leadership, senior officials were not prepared to abandon the hierarchical nature of their organizations. Most senior officials tried to publicly show that they were as powerful, if not, more so, than Khin Nyunt. They objected to many of Khin Nyunt's proposals that countered theirs because they interpreted his actions as a presumptuous means of putting down their rank. In many cases, senior ministers and regional commanders attempted to prove that they were just as powerful as Khin Nyunt. In sum, most senior generals were more or less equally powerful and the junta functioned like a multi-polar world.

In early 1992, the SLORC revamped the government through the creation of several new ministries and promotion of lower level officers. All regional commanders and certain retired military officers who had been working as directors-general and as managing directors of certain government departments and corporations were made cabinet ministers. SLORC also promoted many light infantry division-commanders to the level of regional commanders. In March 1992, Than Shwe took over the chairmanship of the SLORC after Senior General Saw Maung's deteriorating health and nervous breakdown (brought upon by overwork) led to his retirement. Saw Maung was replaced only after he started criticizing National hero, General Aung San in speeches. Also, there was a rumour that senior members of the SLORC decided to dismiss their chairman upon Ne Win's request. This change in the leadership failed to bring any fundamental changes to the power structure of the junta. Although he was formerly a lecturer at the Central Institute of Political Science in the early days of the socialist period, Than Shwe did not seem to like making public speeches. In addition, Than Shwe never tried to portray himself as a strong leader in the mould of Saw Maung. Furthermore, his diffidence and reserved personality contributed to the public's perception that he was not a strong leader. The truth, as will be seen later, shows that Than Shwe was anything but a weak leader.

After the government shake-up, the responsibility to check the apparent growth of Khin Nyunt's power fell mainly on the new vice chairman. Maung Aye, who was known to be helpful and kind to his subordinates, disagreed with Khin

Nyunt on many issues. Unlike Khin Nyunt, he appeared more inward looking and was said to have wanted to adopt harsh actions against the political opposition and was reportedly against Myanmar's application for membership in ASEAN. Due to that, several Myanmar watchers branded Maung Aye a hardliner and Khin Nyunt a moderate. At first glance, one might find such a distinction quite sensible but upon closely examining the policies favored by Maung Aye and Khin Nyunt, it becomes increasingly evident that Maung Aye was not as hard-line as he was thought to be. By this same yardstick, Khin Nyunt was not as moderate as he appeared either. Although Maung Aye appeared to believe that Myanmar could survive in isolation, he was not totally against improving relations with foreign countries. Simultaneously, although he preferred to employ a flexible approach in dealing with foreigners and the political opposition, Khin Nyunt was unprepared to make any concessions with anybody that would make him and his fellow officials look like losers. If there was one thing that both Maung Aye and Khin Nyunt shared in common; they were both determined not to surrender to their opponents.

Late 1997 saw dramatic changes in the junta. The SLORC was replaced with a new military council, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). To the surprise of the public and the international community alike, several original members of the junta, including powerful ministers like Tun Kyi, Myint Aung, and Kyaw Ba, were dropped from both the SPDC and the cabinet. However, Than Shwe, Maung Aye, Khin Nyunt and Tin Oo continued in their positions as chairman, vice-chairman, secretary-1, and secretary-2 respectively. In a speech given to a group of senior military officers, SPDC chairman Than Shwe mentioned that he had to dismiss several senior officials because they were engaged in many improper and illegal business deals with foreign and domestic businessmen. Than Shwe, Maung Aye, Khin Nyunt and other SPDC leaders also hinted that the new military council would be more intolerant of corruption. Ironically, however, several well-known corrupt senior officials continued as members of the government. For instance, former Minister of Railway Transportation, Win Sein, was not dismissed from the cabinet until late 2001 although he was known to be one of the most corrupt ministers in Burma. He was merely transferred to the Ministry of Culture where there were fewer opportunities for corruption. Unlike most of the sacked officials, Win Sein stayed out

of various disputes between senior government leaders and did not pose any threat to any senior official. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the dismissal of senior military officials took place only after Senior General Than Shwe and Trade Minister Tun Kyi reportedly had a heated argument over corruption related issues. According to a well-placed source, Khin Nyunt had long submitted reports on corrupt activities of senior ministers and regional commanders to both Senior General Saw Maung and Than Shwe, but no action was taken until after the latter disrespectfully ridiculed his call for the need to reduce corruption in the government by saying that no one in the government was free from corruption (thereby insinuating that the senior general himself was likewise corrupt).

Although Khin Nyunt was never powerful enough to take punitive action against his rivals unilaterally, it was highly unlikely that Maung Aye and the late Secretary II, Tin Oo voluntarily joined Khin Nyunt to oust other senior officials. It had to be Than Shwe who convinced Maung Aye and Tin Oo that the government would suffer unless they found a way to weed out corruption. According to a well-placed source, Than Shwe was very disturbed by the growing corruption among senior government officers. He was increasingly worried that corruption might weaken his government to the point of eventual collapse. At quarterly meetings, Than Shwe frequently asked ministers and regional commanders not to be too corrupt. Apparently, after hearing the insulting remarks of Tun Kyi, Than Shwe probably feared that he might be sidelined as Saw Maung was, if he did not find a way to enhance his position in the government. Given these circumstances and the fact that most corrupt senior officials had been out of touch with combat units for about five years, late 1997 was indeed an opportune time for Than Shwe to stage an internal coup. At the same time, officials who were in direct contact with intelligence and combat forces, namely Maung Aye, Tin Oo and Khin Nyunt, were closer to Than Shwe than to other senior officers. With Khin Nyunt on his side, he could also count on the backing of Ne Win.

At first glance, because most ousted ministers were his archrivals, one might be tempted to view the ousting of senior ministers from power as the triumph of Khin Nyunt. In reality, however, it worked more in favor of Khin Nyunt's remaining rival, Maung Aye, for the field commanders who replaced outgoing ministers were

apparently closer to Maung Aye than Khin Nyunt. As a result, Maung Aye's position in the government and armed forces was more dominant than Khin Nyunt's. Simply put, Maung Aye's power base was much stronger than Khin Nyunt's. However, in spite of this power imbalance, both Maung Aye and Khin Nyunt appeared to understand that any confrontation between them would topple the government, thus spelling an end to their power. This uneasy understanding that they needed each other in order to keep their common enemies under control did work to their advantage. In avoiding confrontation between themselves, both parties clearly defined their interests and tried to confine their activities within them. Maung Aye's areas of interest included defense and commerce while Khin Nyunt's lay in internal security, education, culture, border area development and health. Whenever they had a conflict of interest, they apparently sought to resolve their differences through Than Shwe's arbitration because both parties were said to have followed and respected the decisions of the senior general.

The reduction of the number of contending groups in the government to two enabled Than Shwe to strengthen his position in the government. With the departure of his contemporaries, he became the most senior serving military officer in the country. Moreover, his role as arbitrator to the two contending groups afforded him more opportunities to appoint many of his loyalists to important positions within the government. In cultivating the image of a disinterested and neutral leader, he also managed to win the support and loyalty of both contending groups. Instead of supporting one group, Than Shwe used both groups as his power bases in a bid to consolidate his control of the government. While making use of both groups to control his political opponents, he also deployed the two groups as checks against each other. A well-placed source noted that prior to 1997, Than Shwe was merely one of several powerful figures in the government, upon the junta's reformation under the new name, the SPDC, he became the most powerful figure in government. The same source also noted that by late 2000, he came to be viewed by the government's inner circle and observers who were conscious of the goings-on of the government as a powerful leader almost on par with the former strongman Ne Win. Since much junior military commanders replaced all the outgoing ministers, Than Shwe could dismiss, remove or transfer them to new ministries with much more ease than he

could with outgoing senior officials. At the same time, he no longer had to compromise his own agenda in order to please or appease fellow officials.

In early 2002, a son-in-law and grandchildren of former dictator Ne Win reportedly attempted to stage a coup in collaboration with some military officers. Paradoxically as it may sound, this coup attempt made Than Shwe more powerful. As discussed earlier, Ne Win remained influential for more than a decade after the collapse of the Burmese Way to Socialism, and consequently, his family remained above the law and could act with impunity. Only upon the uncovering of the coup attempt by Ne Win's grandchildren, could SPDC leaders sanction Ne Win and his family. The junta arrested Ne Win's ill-behaved grandchildren and their father on grounds of high treason and promptly placed Ne Win and his favorite daughter, Sanda Win under house arrest. Although some former BSPP officials speculated that the placement of Ne Win under house arrest might pit Than Shwe against active pro-Ne Win military officials, well-placed sources noted that most military officers were unanimously indignant at the behaviors of Ne Win's family members and were satisfied with the arrest of the former dictator and his family members. Furthermore, as most serving military officials were promoted to top positions only in the last decade and were therefore never close to Ne Win, most of them were unlikely to intervene on Ne Win's behalf. Similarly, the public did not protest against the junta for rounding up Ne Win and his family. The approximately fifty people that I interviewed in Mandalay and Yangon noted that they and their acquaintances wholeheartedly welcomed the detention of the former first family. One even said, "If there was only one good thing that Than Shwe has done for the country, it would be bringing Ne Win and his family down."

With Ne Win out of the picture, Than Shwe did not have to subject himself to anyone's influence. This in turn implies that since late 1997, Myanmar's political development has been shaped more by Than Shwe's position on the prevailing political issues than the state of power struggle between softliners and hardliners.

Why did the military not want to work with the NLD? The answer, I think, lies in the way the junta and the NLD sought to legitimize themselves. The junta took control of the country by cracking down on the pro-democracy movement. A natural extension of this was to legitimize itself through "outlawing" or "de-legitimizing" the

pro-democracy groups. Likewise, the NLD tried to legitimize itself by de-legitimizing the military government, which had ascended to power by cracking down on pro-democracy groups. Throughout the 1990s, both groups spent more time and energy attacking each other than seeking a means of cooperation. Government officials and media portrayed Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as a person who did not cherish her own race or nationality, for she was then married to the late British academic, Dr Michael Aris. In retaliation, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and leading NLD members at times labelled military leaders as fascists. A then leading NLD member was even quoted as saying that some senior military officers might face court martial after the NLD took control of the country. The upshot was that they were unable to find any grounds for mutual trust, let alone cooperation. With the release of the election results, some retired politicians advised leading NLD members to work for the formation of a national unity government together with the military and ethnic minority groups. Probably enraged by the mistreatment of NLD members by the junta, the then NLD leaders rejected the idea of working with the junta and called for the complete transfer of power. The junta, for its part, was not prepared to transfer power to the party which incurred its hostility. Thus, it has continued to hold onto power by refusing to honour the results of the election.

Why did the military finally decide to have dialogue with the NLD and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi?

Many Myanmar watchers attributed a change in the junta's policy towards the NLD and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to Western economic sanctions against Myanmar. The junta could not afford to ignore western sanctions, especially following the Asian financial crisis. The western economic sanctions kept major MNCs away from Myanmar, thereby making it almost impossible for the country to overcome economic difficulties without western financial assistance and investment. The growing economic difficulties in the country, in turn had the potential to stir up looting and riots. However, according to a well-placed source, the junta was more concerned with the financial shortage in modernizing the Tatmadaw than the potential threats of domestic unrest. Why did the junta have to worry about modernizing the Tatmadaw when it did not need state-of-the-art weaponry to deal with the political opposition?

According to the same source cited above, it might have something to do with its distrust and fear of the Thai army. Both Thailand and Myanmar have their own reasons not to trust each other. The Myanmar military government was particularly disgruntled with the annual Thai-American joint-military exercise along the Thai-Myanmar border. The uneasy situation along the Thai-Myanmar border would intensify whenever Thai-American military exercises were in progress. In 2002, Thai border forces allegedly fired at Myanmar border soldiers at the time of a Thai-American joint-military exercise, known as Cobra Gold. In all probability, its keen desire of preventing the US forces of having any excuse or opportunity to encroach upon Myanmar territory resulted in the Myanmar military's purported refusal to return fire on the Thai army. Speculations were rife that had Myanmar been ruled by a democratically elected government, it would not have been threatened by the presence of US forces along the border. Prudently, the junta was aware that it could not rely on its biggest supporter, China, in time of crisis, especially since China's constant regard of Myanmar as a country of secondary importance. When former Thai defense minister Chaovalit visited China, Chinese leaders gave the Thai mission gift weapons twice the value of those given to the Myanmar military mission led by General Maung Aye. The Chinese government also asked the junta to pay interest on loans which were initially granted as interest-free. Most conspicuously, although senior Chinese leaders visited Thailand, Vietnam and a few other Southeast Asian countries, no senior Chinese leaders visited to Myanmar between late 1990s and November 2001. As noted by a local analyst, senior military officers were disappointed with the state of their relations with China. According to the same analyst, Myanmar military leaders knew that they would not be able to improve their relations with Western countries if they did not undertake any political reforms. The junta also encountered some problems in dealing with ethnic minorities. It made ceasefire arrangements with ethnic insurgent groups in order to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the NLD. The junta apparently did not know what to do with the demands made by ethnic groups at the (stalled) national convention. Simultaneously, military leaders did not relish being associated with the ethnic groups engaged in processing and trading drugs. It is, therefore, quite logical for military leaders to assume that if Aung San Suu Kyi were on their side, they could deal with ethnic minorities

decisively. Hence, it would not be preposterous to surmise that the junta would want to consolidate its position vis-à-vis the ethnic minorities by making peace with Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD.

Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest in 2002 differed from the first time she was released in 1995. In 1995, the country's economy was growing and the junta was in firm control of the country. At that time, the SLORC released Aung San Suu Kyi because senior military leaders believed that they could deal with the potential problems that might be created by the political opposition. In 2002, although there were no political organizations matching up to its coercive power, the junta was relatively weaker, both politically and economically. Military leaders came to the realization that they had to work with Aung San Suu Kyi if they wanted to retire with dignity.

The NLD has been far more conciliatory and flexible since early 2001 than it was in the early 1990s. However, senior military officers warily viewed the propitiatory gestures of the NLD and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as lacking because Daw Aung San Suu Kyi continues to call on the international community's maintenance of economic sanctions on Myanmar. Despite this, the junta has allowed Aung San Suu Kyi to travel around the country and engage in the reinvigoration of local branches of her party. The junta has also been more tolerant of the activities of the political opposition. Local branches of the NLD were henceforth allowed to engage in fund-raising activities. And since 2000, the government did not take any action against people who were critical if its policies. For instance, comedian Pa Pa Lay was jailed in the late 1990s for performing at Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's residence. Since his release, Pa Pa Lay has joked about the government on RFA's Myanmar language program. The government only went after those who tried to organize open anti-government protests. Therefore, in 2002, many people in Myanmar genuinely thought that reconciliation between the NLD and the junta was a real possibility.

Why is the dialogue not moving forward swiftly? What are the prospects for progress?

In spite of changes in its policy towards the political opposition, the government did not appear to be keen to undertake fundamental political reforms. This reluctance

stems from the anxiety that many senior government officials had over their personal safety and the future of their family-owned businesses once their tenure in government ends. Taking advantage of their connection with powerful people, children of many senior officials have established businesses in various sectors of the economy. According to some well-placed sources, the main reason for the snail's pace of the national reconciliation process is due to senior military officers' worries that political changes would possibly contribute "to the decline of their business empires." While senior military officers knew that they could not remain in power for long without undertaking any political changes, they were paralyzed by their fears of the actions that the NLD would take against them once they were removed from the positions of power. This catch-22 situation exists simply because of the senior military leaders' distrust of the political opposition. Senior military leaders discontentment also lay in the fact that they did not receive much credit for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and the relaxation of restrictions on the NLD. Senior military leaders, on their parts, like to think that they were the ones who were making concessions without any reciprocity from the NLD or the international community.

Military leaders wanted to set the rules for the dialogues between them and any political groups. In other words, they wanted political groups to play the game according to their rules. Since her release from house arrest in mid 2002, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi tried to avoid doing things that could offend senior military leaders. Although never openly stated it, the statements made by senior military officers implied that at the very least, for the time being, they wanted Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD members to devote their energy in helping the government improve its image so as to attract international assistance. However, when Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other leading NLD members toured the country whilst engaged in party organizational activities, senior military officers came to look at NLD leaders more as rivals than working partners. Local authorities discouraged people from helping Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her entourage while the latter was touring their regions. Members of the government-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) allegedly distributed anti-NLD pamphlets and organized anti-Aung San Suu Kyi protests while the latter was touring their townships. In spite of anti-NLD measures taken by the government, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi did not stop touring the

country and the public did not stop welcoming her whenever she came to their townships. However, as time passed, the USDA's local branches' anti-NLD protests became increasingly more and more aggressive when Daw Aung San Suu Kyi toured around their townships. By the beginning of 2003, many people predicted that a bloody clash between USDA members and NLD members was inevitable if Daw Aung San Suu Kyi did not desist from touring the country and if the government did not stop the USDA from organizing anti-NLD protests while Daw Aung San Suu Kyi visited their township.

Things came to a head on May 30, 2003 when a clash broke out between government supporters and NLD members while the latter, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi were touring some cities in central Burma. According to the government sources, the death toll was 4 and about 40 people were injured. The opposition sources, on the other hand, reported some 70 deaths and over a hundred injured people. Attributing the entire commotion to the unruly acts of NLD members and their supporters, the government placed the NLD general secretary Daw Aung San Suu Kyi under "protective custody", detained a number of leading NLD members including the deputy chairman U Tin Oo, and ordered the closure of NLD offices throughout the country. Overseas pro-democracy groups categorically rejected the government's accusation claiming that the commotion was a premeditated ambush orchestrated by some senior government officials. Although they privately denied all government allegations against fellow party members, NLD members who remained free refused to publicly comment on the current situation for fear of arrest. At the present moment, even though there is no way of ascertaining the truth behind the commotion, the finger of blame as pointed by the majority of the population and the international community is directed at the government.

Regardless of who was responsible for the entire clash, the incident was a major setback for the national reconciliation process. Right after the May 30 incident, the government resumed anti-NLD campaigns that were halted in late 2001 when secret meetings between government officials and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi were on going. The public hope of positive developments when government newspapers printed the pictures of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and senior government officials shaking hands and having meals together in the first two weeks of July were dashed

the moment they read the news articles underneath those pictures. Those news articles systematically portrayed Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as an obstinate, dictatorial leader and suggested that the failure of the national reconciliation process lay with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's obdurate constant refusal to appropriate the various senior military leaders' goodwill. Interestingly, while making these claims, these articles do not explain how Daw Aung San Suu Kyi failed to appropriate the goodwill of the generals. Furthermore, the articles suggested that not all NLD members shared the views of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. This is evident in an article published in the local newspaper on July 5 stating, "She (Daw Aung San Suu Kyi) acts as if she owns the NLD, in fact, she acts as if she is the sole proprietor of the organization. This is certainly not in tune with the desires of the rest of NLD party members." After reading the article, a retired government official noted that the government might be indicating through the article that while it no longer wished to conduct any more meetings with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, it might consider negotiating with other leading members of the NLD. A well-informed local analyst also pointed out that the mutual trust established between senior government officials and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in 2001 was gone and that under the present circumstances, the speedy progress of the national reconciliation process could only take place only if Daw Aung San Suu Kyi were no longer a part of it.

At present, there is no way of knowing the extent to which loyal analysts' interpretations are correct because the government has not made any public and direct comment on the future of the NLD. In spite of mounting international pressure and the punitive actions taken by some western countries, the junta remains firm in its refusal to release detained NLD members. Senior government spokesmen only repeatedly said that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will continue to remain in "protective custody" so long as her life is in danger.

What are the prospects for the democracy in Myanmar?

There are theoretically two ways through which democracy might be brought into Myanmar. The first scenario would be the toppling of the ruling military government. The question here is: how can the military government be brought down? Is it a feasible option? The regime change might take place if there were an internal coup, a

nation-wide uprising or an invasion by a stronger country. Under present circumstances, it is very unlikely that a successful coup against the present military leadership could materialize as pro-Than Shwe officers still control all important military positions. By this same consideration, it should also be noted that the society is too weak to organize a nation-wide uprising. Since most capable young political activists are either in jail or living abroad, Myanmar now lacks strong and capable underground political organizations which can operate within the country. Thus, most organizations call for nation-wide uprisings from foreign countries. Most people would not be prepared to join any anti-government movements until they can be assured that the cost of participating in such movements will not be very high. The current military government appears to have learnt from the mistakes of its predecessors. This is evident in its ability to take decisive preemptive actions against its opponents. They managed to keep the cost of joining anti-government movements very high by meting out harsh penalties to the participants of anti-government movements.

Secondly, Myanmar would gain democracy at the least cost if both the junta and the NLD are willing to reconcile. One might assume that the junta might agree to negotiate with the NLD if it did not have any other alternative. The proponents of western economic sanctions, therefore, argue that such sanctions would serve to weaken the junta to the point where it would have to compromise with the opposition in order to save itself. As I have argued elsewhere, economic sanctions imposed by western countries were counterproductive. As long as China and neighboring countries refused to impose similar sanctions on Myanmar, it would be the public and not the junta suffering the brunt of these economic sanctions. Therefore, if western countries really want to help the people of Myanmar, they should not base their actions on what they think Myanmar should be like or what they think Myanmar people should want or would need. They should, instead, try to understand the needs and wants of Myanmar's people and accordingly help them achieve those things at the least cost. Democracy can be introduced into Myanmar peacefully and at the least cost, only if the junta and the NLD agree to cooperate. At present, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for the junta and the NLD to instill confidence in one another. If both parties were to try to resolve their differences on their own, it could

take another generation of military leaders before any meaningful agreement can be reached. The two parties can only be brought together if a genuinely neutral third party manages to win both their trust and respect. While, the two UN envoys, Mr. Razali Ismail and Mr Pinheiro, have served as trusted negotiators, working alone as they do, they cannot hope to compel the junta to transfer power back to a civilian government. They can only facilitate dialogue between the junta and the NLD. Along with the negotiations undertaken by the two UN envoys, there needs to be constant international pressure on both parties. How can the junta be brought back to the negotiating table? Or rather, how can senior general Than Shwe be persuaded to return to the negotiating table? Since there is no love lost between themselves and western countries, senior military officers are not likely to heed the pressure from western governments as seriously as that from friendly countries. Therefore, China, ASEAN, India and Japan should work together to bring the junta and the NLD back to the negotiating table because the growing drug, HIV/AIDS, prostitution and refugee problems from Burma have direct spillover effect onto its neighboring countries. Since these problems are intertwined with the political problems prevalent in the country, China, India, ASEAN countries and Japan would have to help the government and opposition groups find a plausible and peaceable solution.

Conclusion

In sum, nobody seems to know when or how the ongoing political impasse in Myanmar will be solved. The mounting social, economic and political problems prevalent in the country will worsen if the junta and the opposition groups do not manage to find a way to negotiate and cooperate. The country is in critical need of a nationally unifying government comprising of the military, the NLD and ethnic minorities. Government officials and opposition leaders should in turn, set aside their personal egos and work together for the emergence of a capable government able to handle the ongoing social, political and economic problems in the country.

About the Speaker

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POLITICS IN VIETNAM — IN SEARCH OF INTEREST

Introduction

Politics in Vietnam is an arena that lacks interest from the outside world. In the current affairs of the region, many more issues rank high in the priorities of concern for the community and its governments, namely terrorism, Islam and modernity, and political succession in several countries. This year and the next few are critical years for the politics of many Southeast Asian nations, as we would be witnessing leadership changes in Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, and perhaps even Singapore. Furthermore, there is also the interest in greater China — including Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, with its full range of economic and political opportunities and challenges, for Southeast Asia, and for the world.

While political Islam and its terrors are much less relevant for Vietnam, other issues are important for them as they are for many other political systems, despite Vietnam's avowed communist ideology. Issues of political succession, regime adaptation to modernity, and the increasing ideology-reality gap are at the forefront of Vietnamese politics. These issues are key to the survival of the Vietnamese Communist Party, the ruling party, and the Vietnamese nation's stability. Instability there will affect the region. Unfortunately these issues in Vietnam do not receive adequate coverage in regional newspapers, and they tend to be in the shadow of the other regional issues. Whenever such issues do get coverage, however, they are covered with a certain angle that appeals to priorities of western societies. Another reason for the dissatisfactory coverage is there are other more interesting stories about Vietnam than about its politics. These include significant, laudable rates of economic growth, economic development, and business opportunities, and the increase in Vietnamese interaction with the outside world, with Vietnamese culture fascinating

the world in areas such as food, clothing, handicrafts, dances, and literature. It is not difficult to understand why Vietnamese politics continue to attract little attention. Even wire news agencies nowadays pay more attention to Vietnam's business and economy than its politics, as this particular correspondent confided:

> I must admit that I don't cover internal Vietnamese politics anywhere near closely enough to answer your question [on movement of leadership persons in the system]. [My agency] focuses heavily on business and financial news, and consequently, I rarely pay attention to political personnel moves unless they involve the Party general secretary, prime minister or deputy prime ministers, president, or a minister in one of the economic posts.[1]

There are a number of reasons why everybody should pay more attention to Vietnamese politics. For one, politics ultimately affects the economy and the business environment. Political struggles for position determine who gets into power and what kinds of policies are put in place. In Vietnam more than anywhere else except North Korea and Cuba, the ideological shifts from state socialism to market economy are not yet complete. Therefore, politics continue to affect economic policies in a big way. Another aspect of politics is the struggle among interest groups for influence over bureaucrats, politicians, and policies. Unfortunately, very little is known about interest groups in Vietnam. Knowing who is up, who is down, what is the balance of forces among the different factions determine helps in understanding to a large extent the policies adopted. Unfortunately, public information and analyses of such matters are rarely seen.

Second, politics in Vietnam is changing, and there are signs that the changes are towards greater pluralism among elites within the formally strait-jacket communist system. This is a feature that is not necessarily born of very recent times. We cannot unquestioningly apply the stereotype that communism equals strong government to Vietnam; or, it can only be applied in a very formal, structural sense, especially to state-society relations. Intra-elites wise, the system is more pluralistic than many other countries in Southeast Asia.

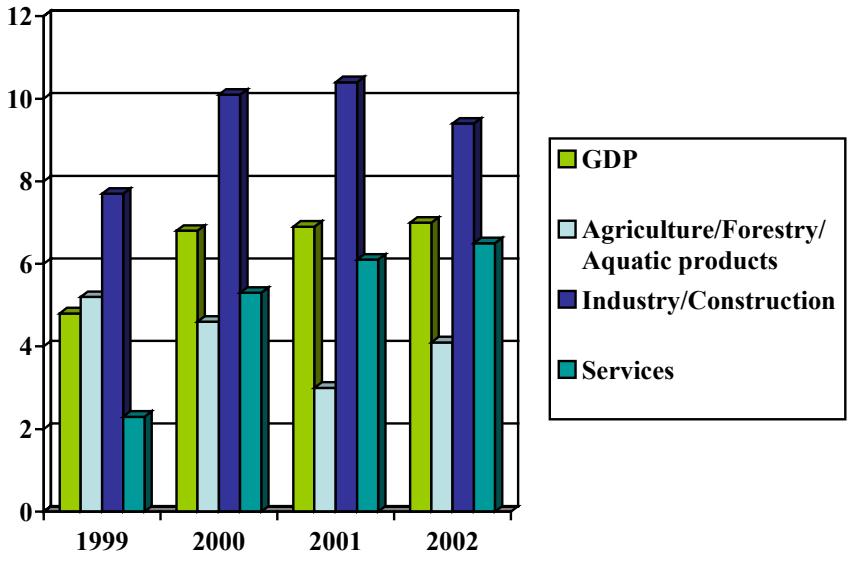
The rest of this paper accounts for the most prominent and recent political developments in Vietnamese elite politics that demonstrate this pluralistic nature. It also describes a few less than sensational developments to show that while the

pluralism is accepted and institutionalized, attempts are being made to make the elites more cohesive as a group and more accountable for results in governance. Finally, I will argue that scholars and analysts watching over Vietnam need a new model to explain intra-elite competition in Vietnam.

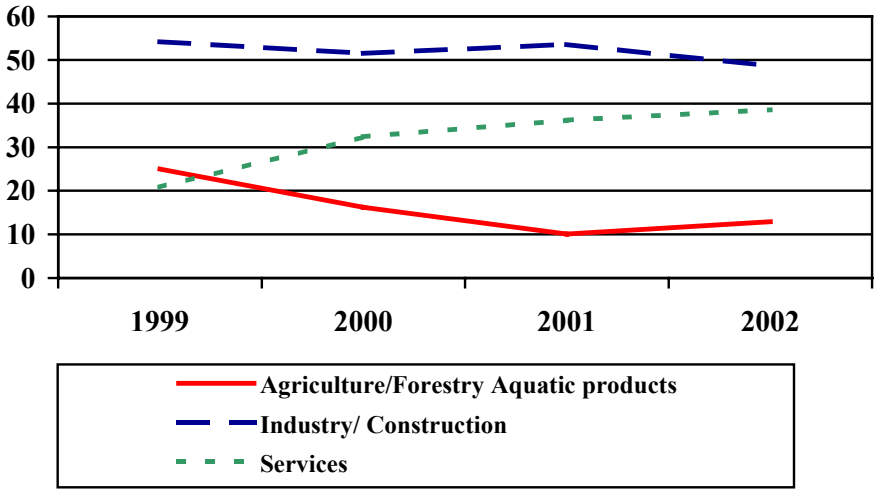
I Political Economy: Legitimacy now based on growth and equity, yet there are vacillations in power elite ideology

Since 1988, the Vietnamese economy has been growing steadily. While there were a number of relatively flat and bad years, such as during the initial years of reform in the early 1980s and during the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) in the late 1990s, in general the growth in Vietnam in recent years has been very respectable, if not excellent and topping Southeast Asian countries. While overseas investments had fallen by half in the initial years of the AFC and have yet recovered to the pre-crisis level, Vietnam has been able to maintain an acceptable level of foreign investments. In fact in 2002 it ranked among the top 20 out of 140 countries in attracting investments.[2] The growth rate in the past four years has averaged above five percent per annum, according to the Asian Development Bank (See growth chart below.)

GROWTH RATE IN GDP AND KEY SECTORS OF THE VIETNAMESE ECONOMY 1999-2002



The economic structure is also changing and appears to be characteristic of an economy taking off, evidenced by the strongly growing manufacturing and service sectors. Please see the charts below. The trends in the chart continued started in the early 1990s.



For a political scientist, the important political implication to be drawn out from these economic results is that the legitimacy of the political system has shifted. Before reforms, legitimacy was based on the Marxist-Leninist ideology, fused with nationalism. That system has largely failed in terms of the economic production system, although the redistribution system deserves modest applause. After reforms, albeit only very slow, legitimacy of one-party rule based on the Marxist-Leninist ideology has shifted to a two-legged system: Ideology of nationalism based on Ho Chi Minh Thought, and eudaemonic (economic performance) legitimacy. These two big ideas are encapsulated in the slogan "Rich People, Strong Country, Civilised Society" ("*dan giau nuoc manh, xa hoi van minh*"). This successful shift rode on the back of enormous and fundamental changes in economic production regimes, which a departure from Marxism-Leninism to Ho Chi Minh Thought allows. Individuals and private sector are now allowed to operate freely, although there are still obstacles to ensure that the state sector receives more resources readily than the private sector, such as in the area of bank loans.

Previous values of legitimacy:	**Present values of legitimacy:**
● — Marxism-Leninism ● — Nationalism based on some xenophobia tied to long history of foreign invasion ● State role in economy predominant, followed by collective's role. Private sector actively discouraged	● — Ho Chi Minh Thought - it is actually nationalism originating from national liberation, with sprinkle of Marxism-Leninism ● — Role of market economy without conceding totally the state's role ● Private economy encouraged together with collective economy, state role in production still evolving

This good economic performance provides the context under which much of the political developments of Vietnam in the past decade can be viewed. While the economy sparkled, little room for political discontent among the masses is left, in the sense that among the masses, the biggest issue of bread and butter has been well and truly resolved. There is no massive discontent that had existed in the late 1970s until the late 1980s. On the side, there has been a consistent band of dissidents, led by those who had been opposed or dissatisfied with the system since pre-reform days. Economic prosperity have also doused the belly fires of many a would-be revolutionaries.

The evidence in Vietnam seems to support the theory of soft authoritarianism of the early 1990s. In countries with soft-authoritarianism or neo-authoritarianism, the people are supposed to be satisfied with authoritarian rule so long as the authoritarian regime can keep economic performance going. In return, people would give the government a free hand in governance, including sacrificing some basic political rights. As usual, the theory needs to be qualified in many areas. Among the different countries grouped under the soft-authoritarian label in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were different shades of grey, and some countries have since gone further towards democratization, while others have not. In Vietnam's case, it has definitely entered the soft-authoritarian phase. Some liberalizing reforms had taken place in the late 1980s but the road towards full democratization is difficult.

Nevertheless, there have been reforms in lieu of democratization, and the

reforms are the regime's way of softening the ground. These reforms seek to increase accountability of the government rather than seek multiparty pluralism. When Vietnamese leaders speak of political reforms, they refer to administrative reform, and that is the buzzword at the moment. The country has made tremendous strides in that area, although they are usually taken only after careful calculation and experimentation to ensure those reforms do not affect political and economic stability.

There have also been fundamental shifts in the ideology of power elites regarding how to organize the economy and distribute the national product, and this shift is, by general consensus among all Vietnamese, irrevocable. There are some remnants of the old ideology left in political economy. Much of the 1990s as well as these early years of the 21st century have seen an unwillingness to move too fast and change completely. One among many instances of such hesitation is the land ownership issue. All land is supposed to be managed by the state and cooperatives. Under the first reforms, the 1992 Land Law allows private individuals to rent land for various purposes defined by the state. That reform has resulted in booming property prices, and agricultural output in particular rice has also shot up. Unfortunately, that was the last major breakthrough on the land regime. The issue has been under discussion for the last five years and there has been intense expectation that the Party would soon achieve the next breakthrough in land reform in the current term of the Central Committee. But the last, 7th, Central Committee meeting in January 2003 on this matter did not achieve that goal. Now, it is probably knocked off the agenda for a while. Another instance concerns private sector investments. The country had a fairly liberal foreign investment law in 1987 before it had a domestic Enterprise Law (equivalent to domestic investment and company law) in 2000. This span of thirteen years shows how much the state was unwilling to kick start a domestic private sector, until the AFC made them realize that foreign capital come and go, but domestic capital would mostly stay and must be mobilised for investments and growth. Most important, the regime is now entrenched in the thinking that economic activity that leads to productivity and increased output can help consolidate its performance legitimacy. These are important but two of many examples that show that the shift in the ideological base of the regime is incomplete and is taken in halting steps. It is no wonder that an economist has likened the Vietnamese economy to be a tiger riding a

bicycle.

To that extent, therefore, the major direction for economic policy has been set since the first days of reforms, but reforms have yet to deepen and intensify at a speed that can be said to be spectacular. Politics of ideology impedes, and so does the politics of interest groups. It is therefore important to follow the politics of Vietnam, including the subtle changes in personnel behind the scene.

II Major political developments

Domestic political developments in the past year

There are three major political developments in Vietnam in the last twelve months. These are the conclusion of the Nam Cam trial, changes in government structure and personnel after the 2002 National Assembly elections, and the continuing struggle among the elites of the political leadership. The three developments are inter-connected. Fallout from the Nam Cam affair did not affect the elections in any significant manner, but it strengthened the willingness of the Party leadership and the National Assembly to reappoint the incumbent Prime Minister for another term. That in turn affected the state of play and flow in leadership succession. The process of the Nam Cam trial reflected very subtle behind the scene struggles to keep clear of this hot potato, and has resulted in major shifts in political power.

Fallout from the Nam Cam Affair

In perspective, many countries in the world are afflicted with the disease of a nexus between the home-grown mafia and political leaders. In this sense, the Nam Cam affair is not new and neither should it surprise people. For Vietnam alone, however, the Nam Cam Affair is the first time at which a politics-gangsters link at the highest level of politics is exposed. This nexus calls into the question the Vietnamese Communist Party's claim that its monopoly of political power is justified by its historical mission as the guardian of important national values, which include national independence and moral incorruptibility and its tireless working for the interest of the people. That the Party took quick steps to amputate the rotting parts, with some casualties at the highest level, gives the system and the top leader and the post war system of collective leadership some credit.

Nam Cam is a mafia godfather who started many illegal gambling dens in Ho Chi Minh City in the late 1980s and who was well connected to the top leadership of the City's police force. Despite the city level connections, he was arrested in 1995. Central level leaders of the bureaucracy were involved in pleading for his subsequent early release from prison. When out of prison, Nam Cam realized the need to forge relationships higher up in the political leader, and proceeded to do so. When he was arrested again in the year 2000 for ordering the murder or a rival gang leader in Hai Phong City, investigations asked the question of how he could have been released given his criminal character. Those investigations revealed a wide network of friendship and nepotism. This network includes more than one hundred police officers at both local and central level, and top local administrative and party officials. On surface, the zenith of Nam Cam's political connections are two Party Central Committee members: Bui Quoc Huy, Deputy Minister (equivalent to permanent secretary in the Singaporean system) for Public Security, and Tran Mai Hanh, General Director of the national radio Voice of Vietnam.

But there are lingering doubts that the network stopped there, although they have not been proven. At least one top leader, National Assembly Chairman Nguyen Van An, is believed to have been faulted by the Party leadership for allowing his wife to have a social relationship with Nam Cam's wife. It was said that the matter was discussed among the top Party leaders, and was to be but eventually not discussed in a National Assembly meeting. In addition, keen observers would note that since late last year Nguyen Van An has had a Deputy who is also a member of the Political Bureau. This makes the National Assembly rather top heavy, which is unprecedented. Each part of the state apparatus usually has one Political Bureau member in charge, so having two is rare. The timing of appointment of the Deputy also suggest that Nguyen Van An is likely to fade out and to be replaced. Until investigations into Nam Cam's connections, it had been strongly speculated that Truong Tan Sang, Political Bureau member had a good chance of becoming the next Prime Minister succeeding Phan Van Khai. But Sang was Party Secretary of Ho Chi Minh City when Nam Cam was at his peak of power. The Party Central Committee officially reprimanded him for neglect of duties, and thus his chances of becoming the next Prime Minister are slim. It has also been said that Nam Cam even tried to buy the

friendship of Nong Duc Manh, the Party General Secretary and the top leader, but Manh demurred. One other leader from the Political Bureau, Le Minh Huong the ex-Minister for Public Security, also had to retire from his ministerial position for medical reasons but the popular belief is that he had to take responsibility for the huge number of police officers who collaborated with Nam Cam.

Those are the losers. But who are the winners and the new stars? The military is certainly a winner. Its prestige soared with its role in providing intelligence on Nam Cam's connections, as the police force was compromised. The military has more or less recovered from the indignities it suffered in 2000 and 2001, naming several aviation security incidents in which one involved an American Vietnamese dropping anti-regime leaflets from the an airplane over Ho Chi Minh City. Another deep cut was the retirement of General Le Kha Phieu from the post of Party General Secretary, after only half a term.

A star to watch is Phan Dien, a junior Political Bureau member. At the point of the 9th Party Congress in April 2001, he was a junior Political Bureau member. Sometime in late 2002, he was appointed to the Central Committee Secretariat, and even became its only Standing Member, which means he leads the Secretariat in the absence of the General Secretary to oversee daily affairs of the Party. While Phan Dien is not a direct beneficiary of fallout from the Nam Cam affair, the affair does create an atmosphere in favour of leaders who dare to do things and who are not afraid of behind-the-scene power manoeuvres. Phan Dien's personality — and that of Ho Chi Minh City Party Secretary Nguyen Minh Triet as well — seem to fit such a description. There has been no formal announcement of Phan Dien's appointment, which makes the whole matter look rather mysterious. In general, the politicians who are on the rise are those who have been appointed to the Central Committee Secretariat because each one of them has been appointed to take care of Party direction of the government apparatus on a daily basis, and Phan Dien is now the deputy leader of this Secretariat, second to the Party's General Secretary.

2002 National Assembly elections

The National Assembly is elected for a five-year term and in May 2002 the country elected its 11th National Assembly. The National Assembly election is a tightly

knitted affair, with the nomination process being tightly controlled by the Party and based on a formula of regional and sectoral quota that has been used for many years. The May 2002 election was fairly smooth and uneventful except for some fallout from the Nam Cam affair. Most, about 90 percent, members of the National Assembly are party members. Since the early 1990s, especially while under the leadership of Nong Duc Manh as Chairman, the National Assembly has become more assertive on its right to question the cabinet, and increasingly watching Q&A sessions on television have become a must for many people. The grilling that the National Assembly gives to incompetent ministers nowadays is fairly fiery. In addition, we should note that the National Assembly has passed amendments to the National Assembly Law that give the Standing Committee of the National Assembly the power to recall the cabinet. This measure has implications for the stability of elite politics in the future: strong disagreements between the leaders of the National Assembly and the cabinet may end in a no-confidence vote, although before that can happen the struggle would have played itself out to a conclusion within the Party behind the curtain. The National Assembly would probably be there to sanction the result.

The 2002 elections would have been unremarkable if not for the last minute rejection of three candidates. Two among them were Tran Mai Hanh and Bui Quoc Huy who were implicated in the Nam Cam affair. According to Party propaganda, nominees to the National Assembly elections are carefully selected for their ability and their moral integrity, and the selection process is supposed to have picked out and rejected individuals who are undeserving. Tran Mai Hanh and Bui Quoc Huy were in fact confirmed candidates. The affair demonstrates that the nomination system needs to be much more transparent and based on merit and stringent checks on candidates.

2002 Cabinet changes and 2003 Cabinet developments

Prime Minister Phan Van Khai took over as PM from the mid-term of the last National Assembly that ended in May 2002. His term has seen Vietnam maintaining macroeconomic stability and continued growth and development, although the economic results, as compared to the early 1990s, are not spectacular. Thus, while there have been calls for him to retire because of his advanced age, he was able to manoeuvre to stay on for another term after the May 2002 National Assembly

elections. At the speech he was said to have told the National Assembly it could be rest-assured that he would hand over his position as soon as he can. Other than his satisfactory record, the other reason for his reappointment by the National Assembly (upon the basis of support from top Party leaders) is that no others are ready to take over. According to a long-standing power sharing formula within the Party, the PM should preferably be a Southerner. Among them, the next most senior southerner Truong Tan Sang had become tainted. The others, such as Nguyen Tan Dung and Nguyen Minh Triet are considered still too young or too inexperienced. These two men are in their early 50s. Among the two, Nguyen Tan Dung has a head start because he has been Deputy PM for some time, but doubts remain about his capability. Nguyen Minh Triet's track record is based on his very successful stint as Party Secretary in Binh Duong Province, where the Vietnam-Singapore Industrial Park is located, and his reputation as a no-nonsense, squeaky-clean image. In the event that neither of these two men is considered to be ready, and if Phan Van Khai must retire, then it is possible that the Party would tamper with the power sharing formula to allow a candidate from another region to become PM, with adequate compensation for Southerners through the appointment of one of them to another equally important position. Vu Khoan, a current DPM and coordinating minister for trade and foreign relations, could be such a compromise candidate. Considerations that count against Vu Khoan include his age being only slightly younger than Phan Van Khai and he is not a member of the Political Bureau. We cannot rule out the possibility that Phan Van Khai may stay on till the end of the current term, and perhaps for another half term, if regional caucuses of the Party cannot compromise on adaptations to the power sharing formula among regions. Much then depends on negotiations leading up to the eleventh hour.

Other behind-the-scene policy changes

While leadership struggle goes on, who gets to be on top will impact on the speed at which reforms get going. But the general direction is still reforms, and there are a number of continuing reforms within the Party that are worth noting. These trends contain the message that this is a ruling party intend on delivering accountability by emphasizing results and the primacy of rules and institutions to check on abuses of

political powers, as well as checks on abuses of authority.

Personnel Policy

The first of these changes concern personnel policies, that is, policies regarding how both state and Party personnel are to be appointed, assessed, rewarded, and promoted.

Since December 2001 there has been a new policy of cadre rotation. It is new because it is something refreshing, yet it is not new if it is viewed in the light of history, as rotation is a feature of many large personnel systems and is ahistorical. Imperial governments had it, and so did the Party at times of war. But if we consider rotation as a way to train and test the quality of personnel, then the policy is new. This policy was announced after the ascendance of Tran Dinh Hoan to the post of Chairman of Party Commission on Organisation and Personnel. For most part of the Communist Party's history, this post is the second most important post in the Party, because it determines who gets into which Party and state positions and receive what kinds of benefits, up to the Political Bureau. Since the reestablishment of the Party Central Committee Secretariat that oversees the daily affairs of the Party, and the appointment of Phan Dien as its Standing Member, there has been a shift of balance of power towards the Secretariat. Nevertheless, Tran Dinh Hoan still determines personnel policies together with Nong Duc Manh.

Under this rotation policy, senior officials of each and every level are to rotate occupancy of positions among themselves to allow officials to acquire experience in all aspects of administration work — in different sectors and in localities and at the central level. Tran Dinh Hoan has even said that soon it will become possible for persons below forty years old to become heads of provincial administration. Some people have cast doubts on this declaration, given that the system is still entrenched in a seniority-based system. But if Tran Dinh Hoan was serious, then it is a move towards meritocracy, at least in thinking.

The reason for the policy, as Tran Dinh Hoan said, was that most up and coming cadres are from the post-1975 generation, while the war veteran generation is slowly but definitely fading out.[3] But there are other reasons. One is to make sure that officials at the central level are aware of the problems and potential of the grassroots, and vice-versa. Such exposure has become the standard after the 1997

peasant unrest in Thai Binh province. The policy is also a mechanism to test officials' mettle. Most important is its other aim of preventing long terms in office that would allow holders to dish out favours, thus reducing corruption. It appears, however, that this policy does not apply to the Political Bureau; none of its members has been rotated. In the past 18 months, approximately 15 to 20 Central Committee members (who occupy the ranks of Ministers, Deputy Ministers, or Provincial Secretaries) have been rotated. None of these changes have been earthshaking but ultimately these rotated officials are expected to return to the central apparatus to work.

A second change is the emphasis on responsibility. The Third Central Committee Meeting held in late 2001 decided on establishing a Members' Responsibility System, under which every member of the Central Committee would be put in charge of one area of work (for instance trade) and would have to take responsibility for successes and shortcomings. Each member would take the lead in making sure that Party decisions are well implemented as policies by the state apparatus. Each member is also supposed to conduct grassroots work, as well as be accountable for corruption and other ills that occur in their area of responsibility. There are also new demands by the Party on their personal behaviour and moral standards. Each member would be accountable to the entire Central Committee.[4] Also refreshing is that the same Third Meeting discussed and revised a number of bylaws for the Political Bureau, the Central Committee, Central Committee Secretariat, and other top level Party organs. While such bylaws have always existed, this is the first time they are being institutionalized. Further, the revisions were given stronger emphasis and publicity than in the past, although the exact details are still a secret.

III Some ideas on how to analyze intra-elite competition in Vietnamese politics

Scientists often erect models and seek to perfect them. This is with the purpose of representing, explaining, and predicting what goes on in reality. Over the years, analyses of Vietnamese politics have also been through this process. The efforts of the predecessors have been fairly accurate, to say the least, although no model has yet emerge as the overall winner. Each of these models tended to focus on one aspect of

politics and each has been valid in its own way. Reality is often complex, especially where human relations are involved.

In terms of explaining why and how intra-elite competition takes place, there has been little progress. The model of factionalism is still valid to the extent that there has been factional fighting standing for different interests. But the way these factions are labelled and spoken of suggest that these factions are somehow fixed in their orientation and stance. For instance, it is common to hear people labelling factions as either pro-reform or conservative factions, and of an earlier era, either pro-Soviet or pro-China. A key characteristic is that the labelling usually takes a binary form.

The factionalism model has had high utility in analyzing intra-elite politics. Factionalism has existed since the very first days of the setting up of the communist party. Historians tell us that the Vietnamese Communist Party was the result of the merger, in February 1930, of three parties established in the three different regions — North, Central, South — of the country. A united communist party almost became an impossible dream, and it indicated the fractiousness and ideological seriousness that Vietnamese take to their domestic politics. In the 1950s till the late 1960s, the pro-Soviet and pro-China factionalism model had been used to explain intra-elite competition. Factions were portrayed as fixated on their ideological positions as well as membership. Given the existence of an external threat, Vietnamese elites genuinely felt the crisis in the country and pursued their beliefs adamantly within groups that shared the same beliefs.

This factionalism model as it is now is not satisfactory. The context for ideology and politics has largely changed. First of all the elite system now is very different from that before reforms, when strongman politics meant two or three persons in alliance could dictate to the rest. When Le Duan (Party General Secretary, 1960-1986) died in his post, strongman politics started to wane. The competition among elites began to move towards one that is more rules-based. The final powers of decision, however, still lie in the hands of the Political Bureau members, and among them the hierarchy has been much more flatter than before, and thus power differences much less. Each Political Bureau member would have its own bases of power and unless there is a strong man, these members have a leverage against other

Political Bureau members, especially the top ones. Overall, there is a strong sense among leaders of the need to maintain unity, which demands compromises. After Le Duan's long tenure of 26 years, the Party has set out to prevent a repeat, and thus no General Secretary has been able to serve two terms since then. Given the sectoral and regional formulae for selecting leaders, within the Party and within the state apparatus, the system actually is able to prevent a strong man or even remove one. The example of for Party General Secretary Le Kha Phieu stepping down in 2001 shows that clearly.

Other changes demand a fine-tooling of the simple factionalism model. The main reason for this unsatisfactory state is that the factionalism of today operates in a different context. The war is long over, there is no external threat, and the economy is humming along. There are the market economy and the rat race. Factionalism at present, therefore, revolves around the paramount interests of the day — securing important state administrative and state business positions, and revolving around the business and economics, while giving their decisions a gloss of ideological rhetoric. More and more, analysts have to look behind the actions and speeches of leaders to find out the economic motivations behind what they say and do. More important, the formation of factions do change rather regularly as people are open to lobbying and bidding for their support.

A more appropriate approach than the factionalism model is that of interest group that are formed on policy issues, with an underlay of personal connections and factions. Certain factions are likely to follow a particular line but it does not mean that the membership of that faction will remain unchanged. Furthermore, there are now more lines of appeal and lobbying for interest groups. It used to be a strong leader overseeing the whole system and what he and his immediate friends said was the final word. The top leader of today, however, commands less inherent legitimacy and institutional support. Given that no Party General Secretary is allowed to serve more than two terms, the institution of the General Secretary will be weakened every 10 years and it is up to the new leader to forge a new alliance among his colleagues, which means strenuous compromises. This is in fact an opening for lobbying. If the top leader attempts to push through any policy without regard for the interest of other leaders he may be removed.

IV Conclusion

If things follow recent trends, then we can expect another round of leadership changes around the mid-term of the present leaders. The fallout from the Nam Cam affair has been rather toxic for some of them. This is because they have been less than discrete in their relationships with Nam Cam and the more important reason is they had been caught red-handed. Some others have benefited from the Nam Cam affair and have managed to extend their stay in the top strata, but they are also limited by their old age. To be sure, there is a movement towards more meritocratic and seniority elements in personnel policy, and the system is also seeking to be much more self-checking and accountable. This accountability will be based on results, not popular vote. Rotation of top officials below the Political Bureau level, the promotion of young officials, and the emphasis on responsibility are part of this movement. The era of strongman politics is over, and more and more, pluralism among the elites becomes institutionalized by the rules of the competition and by practice. Expect Vietnamese politics to continue to be exciting and bring forth important consequences for policies that will defy the bland, autocratic image of the past.

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