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RENOVATING THE  
**Vietnamese  
Communist  
Party**

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RENOVATING THE  
**Vietnamese  
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Party**



**Nguyen Van Linh and  
the Programme for  
Organizational  
Reform, 1987–91**

Lewis M. Stern

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*Dedicated to the memory of  
Professor K.S. Sandhu  
Director of ISEAS, 1972–92*



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# Introduction

The Vietnamese Communist Party (VNCP) has been preoccupied with renewal and reorganization for over a decade. Its regimen of self-reform has included efforts to eliminate inefficient, ineffective and corrupt cadre; recruit younger, skilled and better educated members; improve basic party chapter-level leadership and organization; and select and train a generation of party secretaries at all levels. These reform efforts have limped along since the late 1970s with an inconsistent momentum and have taken several forms, including the sustained attempts to reclassify party chapters and organized efforts to expel dead wood from the rank and file. During 1987–90, under the leadership of Nguyen Van Linh, party reform gained a new lease on life. The political consequences of economic transformation prompted the Vietnamese leadership to shape a parallel reform within the interiors of the party.

Linh's approach to party reform was unique in several respects. Linh relied less on mobilizational instruments – campaigns, exhortations, symbols – and more on bureaucratically co-ordinated programmes. Linh also utilized unique combinations of resources to attack specific party-related problems, often relying on media and selected mass organizations to propel his reformist agenda.

During 1987 and 1988 Linh fashioned a comprehensive package of party reforms that was more ambitious than the reformist goals of his predecessors. That package included efforts to empower local organizations to take on more responsibilities, parallel with the increasing economic autonomy gradually granted to enterprises. Under Linh the party also sought to introduce a more flexible style of management, rely increasingly on modern organizational skills and management techniques, and improve the training of party managers. The reforms also focused on confining the party to a more limited role as the conscience of the revolution responsible for fashioning social and political direction and maintaining the integrity of the revolutionary inheritance, while allowing responsibilities for daily governance to pass to a body of elected and appointed officials. The reforms attempted to guide the party towards quality control in operational matters and membership policy in a manner that emphasized responsiveness to direct, critical complaints against party personnel and organizations.

Under Linh, the party sought to instrument these goals through a variety of organizations, committees and local and provincial party committee meetings. Expanded sessions of provincial party committees were convened to facilitate the writing of Action Programmes intended to emphasize the pre-eminence of the economic reforms. Provincial and subordinate party organizations were empowered to orchestrate local Purification Campaigns at the branch, district and provincial party committee levels based on guidelines that governed the 1986 Criticism/Self-Criticism Campaign. Internal party and economic inspection teams were deployed at grass-root levels during the first quarter of 1987. Those teams were charged with closely monitoring and supervising the personal lives and individual morality of party members. Linh relied on visits to subordinate chapters by higher echelon party officials to supervise local party chapter self-inspection. He supported efforts by the party's secretariat to implement the revision of the party statutes put forth at the December 1986 Party Congress that shortened the length of the probationary period for candidates and allowed only minimal leeway for members found guilty of violations of the party's code of conduct. In addition, Linh sought to improve control department mechanisms at all levels by elucidating

their role as ombudsmen-like structures to process the complaints and accusations triggered by his policy of opening the party to some public scrutiny.

Linh's actions emphasized the need for sharing power between members of the polity. He strongly argued that party building should properly include non-party entities: "We should not leave party-building work entirely to party committees at various levels. . . . We should overcome the tendency to separate administrative and specialized work from party work". Linh stressed the division of state and party labour in a manner intended to prohibit the party from tampering with governance. At the same time as Linh continued to seek means to broaden political participation by non-party entities and to maximize the independence of action of mass organizations, he took pains to stress the extent to which the party would remain central to the process, and would continue to exert a strategic, guiding influence. At the Sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Federation of Trade Unions in October 1988 Linh stated:

It is true that, at present the working class and labourers are still dissatisfied with the party leadership and state management, but it is also true that they have never contended that there is any other political force that can replace the historical role of our party and state. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Under Nguyen Van Linh, plenary sessions of the Central Committee took on increasing importance in the decision process as a forum where competing views on policies and fundamental political issues were articulated and actively discussed. In large part, this was a result of Linh's flexible, inventive and somewhat unconventional mode of operating in the context of the Vietnamese bureaucracy.

At critical junctures between National Congresses of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Central Committee plenary sessions addressed pressing strategic issues and defined policy direction for the party organization, often in highly charged environments.<sup>2</sup> However, the plenum had never been a highly structured format. The statutes of the VNCP disposed of the plenum in one brief, uncomplicated article which decreed that Central Committee plenary sessions are held to

elect a Politburo, a Secretariat, and a General Secretary. The size of the Politburo and the Secretariat are decided by the plenary sessions. The Central Committee meets once every six months, and once every six months reports to the lower echelons (*cap duoi*) on the general situation and the work performed.<sup>3</sup> The meaning and impact of the plenary session have been more dependent on the operating style of the General Secretary and the chemistry of the Central Committee than on the party's formal rules.

At first, Linh used plenary sessions as a showcase for his policies and his skills as a spokesman for the new policies. He made strong speeches and took a highly visible, active role in representing his views on key issues at plenary meetings. Linh preferred a regular, predictable and more frequent schedule of plenary meetings in order to maximize his opportunities to lobby for his policies. However, by 1988 Linh was increasingly stymied by the closing of ranks of party conservatives, the glacial speed with which the party organization responded to pokes and prods intended to start the job of reshaping the organization, and the extent to which ineffective leadership, poor organizing habits and venality had saturated the core of the party. Though he was able to shift the balance of ministerial power more towards the advantage of non-Central Committee specialists, change provincial party leadership to a significant degree, and modify monopolies and regional policy cliques in at least small ways, by 1988 his ability to dominate the process of central party decision-making had slipped. In 1988 the schedule for plenary sessions reverted to the irregular calendar for meetings that was typical of Le Duan's stewardship over the VNCP. The decreased number of plenary meetings in 1988 suggested that the party required additional time to discuss sensitive issues before public statements representing consensus could be presented, and in some instances could not come to agreement on the pressing issues, all of which points to Linh's diminished ability to maintain strong control over the organization and its policy processes in the second year of his rule.

This book traces the evolution of the reforms of the party organization under Nguyen Van Linh.