

Vietnam: Facing the 1990s. Compiled by Richard Stubb. Asia Papers No. 1. Toronto: Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies, 1989. 79 pp.

Three of the articles in this book deal with the question: How do necessary economic reforms fit into an existing political rule? Huynh Kim Khanh's "Revolution at an Impasse: Impressions of Vietnamese Communism Circa 1990", David Wurfel's "Perestroika, Vietnamese Style: Problems and Prospects", and Paul M. Evans' "Vietnam in the Security Relations in Eastern Asia" deal with Vietnam's economic and political situation in general, the common theme in all three articles being the notion of contradictions between economic reforms and a totalitarian way of rule. The fourth article, Kim Richard Nossal's "Necessary and Sufficient Conditions: The Inertial Factor in Canadian Sanctions Against Vietnam", approaches Vietnam's political and economic problems from the point of view of Canada's foreign policy.

In totalitarian states, rule combines the twin variables of action and domination. The one who can organize the whole society to action towards a given goal also maintains power. The absolute sovereignty of the Communist Party of Vietnam has been based on its role as organizer of all social action. Huynh Kim Khanh examines how this traditional way of organizing society, formed during the anti-colonialist war, fell into crisis after the final victory in 1975. For decades, the concept *dich va ta* (the enemy and us) was an organizing principle for the entire movement. And although this friend/enemy concept was used in Vietnamese foreign policy after the fall of Saigon, a new way of structuralizing the whole society was needed.

The national economy of Vietnam, organized to the circumstances of an anti-colonialist war, could not fit into the needs of peace. The Vietnamese solution, a partial demolition of the control of a centralized economy and a transfer of economic authority to smaller units, had been tested out in several socialist countries. However, in these countries the communist parties had met the same problem of transferring economic authority to private bodies, which implied that the Communist Party had lost a part of its organizing task. This meant that there was some possibility of the Party losing its power over the whole society.

In this respect, Khanh makes an interesting comparison between the Soviet term *perestroika* (restructuring) and the Vietnamese term *doi moi* (renewal, or renovation). As the author observed, *perestroika* has a specific meaning and a programme — the restructuring of Soviet political and economic order to bring about a new way of thinking and ultimately take the USSR out of stagnation to become competitive in the world. So, despite the decentralization of economic authority, the Soviet

Communist Party is still organizing the whole society through *perestroika* and, as long as this movement is alive, the Communist Party has its sovereignty over the society. But, according to Khanh, in Vietnam

no clear definition of the present crisis, or consensus on its resolution, has emerged. The slogan, *doi moi*, is just that, a vague slogan, an appeal, and a *desideratum*, but not a programme of action and certainly not an ideological objective (page 8).

David Wurfell states in his article that “the Vietnamese have still to evolve a theory of politics to fit the new conditions” (page 30). Although it appears that this has not yet hindered economic reforms, the reforms themselves have met with growing opposition, especially from the military. And this is in spite of the fact that the political structure has not been touched and the Party and its security police have control over social activities. Paul M. Evans notes that the term *perestroika* had not yet been translated into Vietnamese as of the summer of 1988, reflecting an effort to restrain the spread of reforms outside the economic sphere. The Vietnamese have tried to create their own terminology in their reform process. But as Evans argues, it is a mere semantic twist to speak about “romantic socialism” and “subsidized socialism” with efforts to place greater emphasis on market forces. The conclusion of the authors of these articles that Vietnam’s leadership is trying to keep economic reforms separate from the political structure, has been further reinforced in view of the events in China in June 1989. This was suggested in statements by Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh during the autumn of 1989. All evidence tends to indicate that the Vietnamese have expressed strong reservations about Moscow’s *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Vietnamese caution in making major reforms has also guaranteed that this book has not lost its validity, in spite of very significant and rapid changes in many socialist countries, mainly Eastern European.

The authors have listed many causes of Vietnam’s present political and economic stagnation. Apart from the obscurity of the friend/enemy concept, Huynh Kim Khanh finds four more reasons which have hindered further economic development in Vietnam. One is the familiar phenomena, also evidenced in other revolutionary movements, of “deradicalization”. What the author means by this is that after seizing power, a totalitarian regime loses its original idealism because of careerism and the corruption of the bureaucracy. A very visible historical factor in the stagnation of Vietnamese communism was the disintegration of the international communist movement, which caused not only a reduction of aid from the socialist world but also produced the Sino-Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Kampuchean military conflicts of 1978–79. A third cause noted by the

author was the loss of ideological certainty. This, for me, is a very interesting but problematic argument. The author claims that ideological education in Vietnam has not been based on the original works of Marx, Engels and Lenin but on Stalin's and Mao Zedong's teachings. Since the Soviet Union's and China's denunciations of their former leaders, the Vietnamese have lost their ideological reliability. Without underestimating Stalin's and Mao's roles in Vietnamese ideological education, one may ask: Is there no such element in Vietnam's own ideological and cultural heritage which could cover the vacuum left by Stalin and Mao? The transferability of revolutionary ideals is the last cause which Khanh finds in the present crisis. This cause, as with the first, is also common to other revolutionary movements. The problem in Vietnam is that the same generation has been in power for forty years, without any considerable effort being made to groom a younger generation to assume the reins of power.

According to Paul Evans, the reasons for Vietnam's crisis are mostly structural, but he also sees ideological barriers which have hindered reforms. The author points out that "Vietnamese renovations seem much more the product of desperation and ad hocery than enthusiasm and integrated planning" (page 53), which are also retarded by various bureaucratic factors. But national unity should not be taken as an assumption either. Differences between the civilian leaders of the Party and the military leadership are acknowledged, but more importantly, tensions between a bureaucratic, conservative North and a more dynamic South still exist, with the North still in control and unwilling to let the South take a lead in the economy. Thirdly, Vietnam lacks the most basic knowledge of what constitutes a market economy and of international economics, and how to order state agencies to manage economic growth in a way that similar agencies have been successfully employed in newly industrializing countries (NICs) such as Thailand. Lastly, Evans questions the comparative advantage in the international division of labour as long as basic national infrastructure remains underdeveloped.

Among these three authors, Khanh is the most optimistic about Vietnam's prospects while Evans is the most cautious. But the optimism of Khanh must be put into the context of a long period because, in his words, "in short and medium terms, 15 to 20 years, the present problems will probably continue to impede Vietnamese efforts to participate fully in rapidly changing world economic and political trends" (page 18).

As mentioned earlier, Kim Richard Nossal's article differs from the three others. Although he mentions some Vietnamese perceptions of Hanoi's foreign relations, the main focus is on Canadian foreign policy vis-à-vis Vietnam. In his analysis, he examines the foundations of Canada's

international politics towards Vietnam from two dimensions: from the outlines of Canada's foreign policy environment on the one hand and as an internal policy process on the other. With these twin dimensions, he explains the continuity of Canada's sanctions against Vietnam in spite of the changes which have occurred in that country and more broadly in Indochina. As an internal factor, which maintains inertial policy, Nossal pinpoints the bureaucratic opposition of Department of External Affairs' officials, which dates back to their experiences from the early 1970s, and which have been kept alive because of Vietnam's policy in Indochina after the fall of Saigon. Similarly, an increasing number of Indochinese refugees, who are not in favour of the present rulers in Hanoi, constitute a domestic factor which must be taken into consideration in Canadian-Vietnamese relations. Nossal points out that the external foreign policy factor which determines Canada's relations with Vietnam centres on the U.S.-China-ASEAN coalition. Although this coalition is not monolithic, with the partners having conflicting interests over Indochina, Canada's relations with them are more important than its relations with Vietnam. Thus, one cannot expect changes in Canada's foreign policy until these countries change their policy towards Vietnam.

In conclusion, the essays in this book contain many good viewpoints on Vietnam's economic and political problems. Though the essays cover only a limited part of these problems, this slim volume is recommended reading for those wanting a brief acquaintance with modern-day Vietnam's political and economic landscape.

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