

Year of the Goat (Tan Mui): A Dangerous Year

(Translated from a French unpublished article ``L'année de la chèvre, une année dangereuse``)

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On February 15th, Vietnamese will celebrate the end of the Year of the Horse and welcome the New Year of the Goat. Customarily, Asians delight in seeing the end of an unpleasant year whilst welcoming the New Year with a measure of hope.

For Vietnamese, the Year of the Horse, like all the years since 1975, has not been particularly a good year, contrary to expectations. It was thought that, with what happened in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, changes would also come about in Vietnam, especially a regime change or, at least, some outward opportunity toward a wider liberalization.

There was no such occurrence at all. On the contrary, the current bosses of the Communist regime continued the policy of running away ahead whilst determined to cling onto a Stalinism as orthodox and anachronistic as ever. The proofs of that abound: intensification of repressions against «counter-revolutionaries» (i.e., South Vietnamese), but also and especially suppression of any dissident movement within the Communist Party; adoption by the Politbureau of a new Party Platform that's a reshuffled version of the 1930 Bolshevik- Stalinist Program; removal of all potential dissidents as a «purge of bad elements» to get rid of any risk of demand for pluralism at the Party's Seventh National Congress in May.

From every indication, it was apparent that far from having a more breathable year than in the Year of the Horse, the Vietnamese population is going to face a tougher Year of the Goat, in as much from the economic as well as the political plane.

The economic deterioration will be an unavoidable consequence of the standstill, or even of political regression, as it is clear that if things happen according to the VCP Politbureau scripted scenario, the economy will stumble further from its already very low level, and this due to three major aspects:

Firstly, there is continuing economic isolation of the country. If the current Communist leaders persist in enforcing a “tough” policy, countries from which they expect substantially increased concrete investments—not mere research missions or signed letters of intent—will not change their current “wait and see” attitude. This evidently is linked to the attitude of the US. More on this later.

Further, Soviet leaders have notified their Vietnamese “brothers” that from 1991, the Soviet Union will no longer be able to carry the Vietnamese “brother” on its back. Military assistance will practically end, and economic and financial support radically cut back. Henceforth, relations between both countries will be normal bilateral commercial relations: We sell where the best prices are obtainable and demand payment in convertible, hard foreign currencies. In solid hard numbers, this amounts to three billion dollars annually—a giant gaping hole to fill!

Where to get that money?

China was mentioned. But will the Chinese leaders help a country they still consider as hostile, especially with Teng Hsiao-Pin still around? The latter, according to Thai diplomats returning from Peking, shows visible signs of malaise every time he hears the word Vietnam uttered; he has no hesitation to spit in his spittoon in front of his distinguished guests. Otherwise, where will they themselves obtain the money as they now must also extend their hands out to others?

Even if they agree to belt-tightening, they will demand draconian conditions for their assistance: A total subordination of Vietnam to China. After ten years of frenetic anti-Chinese propaganda, how will the Vietnamese explain that to the people and to Party members?

The Vietnamese leaders wanted the public to believe, especially after the secret/public visit by Nguyen Van Linh, Do Muoi and Pham Van Dong to China last September, that normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations were forthcoming. But that was farther from being the case. The Chinese leadership received the three Vietnamese leaders at Cheng Do, not at Peking, like the Chinese emperor had received the first British envoy a century ago. This significantly emphasizes that the foreigner is an applicant. And Teng Hsiao-Pin has not seen fit to honor the Vietnamese visitors of his lofty presence. Moreover, between China and Vietnam, there are several outstanding issues, among them the very thorny problem of Cambodia, and no less a thorny demand by China for Vietnam to choose between the US and the Soviet Union on the one hand, and China on the other hand.

In exchange, how much technical and financial help and, importantly, humanitarian assistance, will China offer to a Vietnam in need of substantial, sustained aid for twenty to thirty years—on a massive scale that only the US and the EEC are capable of providing?

Thence, obviously the US, besides the restoration of peace in Cambodia and total disengagement from Vietnam, will also demand that Vietnam be committed to the path of democratization, within the new order that Washington intends to set up across the world in the coming decades. The Americans ensured that this was clearly conveyed to and understood by Nguyen Co Thach. Unfortunately, although the latter is quite intelligent and has fully understood the message, he failed to win a supportive understanding of it from his Politbureau colleagues. Worse, he himself is under pressure, there are more and more talks within the Communist and left-leaning communities in Vietnam and in Paris of his “disembarking” when the broom sweeping of personnel is expected at the convening of the Seventh Congress. Reason: Too pro-American, and the Chinese demand his removal from the Politbureau as one of the conditions for normalizing Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Evidently, the Americans will consider the purging of Thach as a hostile act and, consequently, will drag their feet in the American-Vietnamese normalization process, i.e., the “huge” aid to Vietnam, including lifting of embargo restricting foreign investments. In this situation, Vietnam's economic deterioration will heighten, and popular dissatisfaction along with it.

But, the main concern of the current Politbureau, which is dominated by Conservative members, is to maintain itself in power and, to that end, to proclaim that the country needs no political

change and it is not the moment to play the democracy or pluralism game. On the contrary, it is a time for strengthening discipline, ensuring political stability, and consolidating the Party's and especially its top's leadership. A wider economic liberalization will be permissible as it is necessary to increase productivity. But no political breather. Obviously, that is asking the horse to leap ahead while pulling back on the bridle. The experience of Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union proves that it is not workable.

By playing this game—launching the country forward economically whilst holding it back politically—the results will be a worsening state of affairs, economically and politically. Thence, three scenarios are possible.

First: Reformists as represented by Col. Bui Tinh—who has been mentioned often in Paris since the end of November--will somehow obtain a majority at the upcoming Party National Congress. In that event, they will liberalize politics, leading to a wider and wider liberalization. Pressures therefore will continue; the country will continue on that path until its logical outcome, which is the emergence of a truly democratic regime in Vietnam, with a totally transformed Communist Party, or replaced by a democratic Socialist regime. This is not impossible, but likely doubtful.

Second: Conservatives will keep power. To further strengthen it, they will have harsher repressive measures against opponents considered as most dangerous, including those within the Party itself. It's a known fact that Communists hate “traitors” and treat them worse than other people. Those threatened will obviously have to adopt optional defensive measures, including open and armed rebellion.

Meanwhile, the economic situation will further deteriorate on a wider scale; this will incite the populace to back those who rebel at the propitious time. Outlook: Blood will be shed and chaos will reign. This will last more or less a long time, and more or less widespread, depending on whether the army and the police will side with the Politbureau or with the rebels and the population. There is a strong likelihood that soldiers and policemen, whose fate is not different from that of the population, will choose the latter and remain neutral, or will immediately join the rebels, or after several days of shootings wreaking victims among their children and parents.

The coming Year of the Goat will be a year full of danger for Vietnam. But it will also bring hope since regardless of the outcome of the Seventh Congress, the situation from a short or long term will not be, cannot be the same.