

SOCIAL CHANGE

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The historic mission of the *Political Project: Rally for Democracy and Pluralism* sent to us, was a succinct and comprehensive summary about the issues of social change.

We all agree on the need “to review values and customs in their entirety and to completely change the way of thinking and the organization of the society.” I have had a chance to contribute my opinions on this issue and I will try to make further contributions because this is a very large, complicated problem, requiring a lot of thinking. Today, I am only making a few limited observations. When we have agreed on the need for change, we have to provide answers to the following other fundamental questions:

1. What to change? How much? And to what extent?
2. How to change?
3. Who is going to do this task?
4. What are the possible difficulties and obstacles?
5. How to overcome those obstacles?

The foregoing questions seem simple, but in fact they are very difficult, complicated and they address large and profound issues. They depend on many factors. Providing a clear answer to those questions requires a lot of thinking, a lot of balancing so that the proposed solutions are acceptable to many people. This is a very difficult task because of the heavy influence of cultural heritage. People who oppose or resist change are not limited only to the mass of the population, who usually have a tendency to be conservative because of their limited knowledge, their prejudices, and lack of contact with the outside world. The people who oppose or resist changes also include people with a high level of education, who have had a lot of contact with the outside world, but are adamant in their resistance to change due to many reasons: they fear that the Vietnamese people will “lose its root”, wish “to conserve and protect the traditional cultures”, or they simply want to continue a life free from mental and physical stress.

A right solution requires a right analysis. About this point, today I would like to make a few remarks concerning the three observations commonly found in many writings about Vietnam. These observations have been repeated in the first part of the “*Political Project: Rally for Democracy and Pluralism, Success for the 21st Century*” (page 5) quoted above: “*With a large population consisting of hard-working people and a favorable geography, Vietnam has the potential to become a great and wealthy nation, with a very important position in the world and a good reputation for the Vietnamese people, and also to be of benefit to mankind. In spite of that, nowadays, we are merely one of the poor and most backward countries in the world. [...]. The gaps in the level of development and the standard of living of the people are a consequence of the geographical conditions, natural resources and social organization. Among those factors,*

social organization is the most important.” In short, the reason why Vietnam is still a poor and backward country is that the social organization of Vietnam is still very weak.

The above-mentioned observation, as well as similar observations that we have heard in different ways - such as “the people of Vietnam are intelligent, hardworking, love education... Vietnam is rich in natural resources, etc.” reflect the people’s national pride spirit. But, these arguments are not correct and, even worse, they act to slow down progress because they have created a sense of complacency and prevent us from striving to move forward.

Having a large population is not necessarily a favorable factor. It depends on whether there are favorable geographical conditions. There are two facets to geography:

1. Economic: location, natural resources and climate;
2. Political, security.

In the case of Vietnam, with these two aspects of geography, a large population is actually a factor impeding development. In fact, a large population is a favorable factor only if it is accompanied by a large surface area, with a lot of rivers providing water for cultivation and a good climate. That is to say, with regular days of rain and sunshine, not too hot and not too cold. Concerning natural resources, there must be a lot of mineral resources of good quality with high production capacity. In addition, a large population must have a high level of culture, especially in technology, a strong civic sense, a good understanding of the importance of organization and, in particular, compliance to organizational rules.

Until now, Vietnam has not met those conditions. The cultivable areas in Vietnam are not large. The river delta in the north is too small. There is not enough cultivable land, people live in crowded areas and living conditions are getting worse and worse. The plains in central Vietnam consist of a series of narrow valleys, squeezed between the Pacific Ocean and the Truong Son mountain range to the west. The soil is poor and arid. Local products are insignificant. In that poor and narrow strip of land, people live in crowded areas and in poverty, which is many times worse than even in North Vietnam. Only the South has plenty of fertile land together with rivers and canals, but hard work is still required because there are areas which are alkalized, requiring frequent treatment. The main source of fresh water is the Mekong River, but this river is now facing a major threat from the irresponsible construction of dams by China and Thailand for the purpose of providing water for their own irrigation. This is a serious threat for South Vietnam – without water, the land will be alkalized. Recently, it was discovered that there are oil reserves in the offshore area of Vietnam. This is an important source of revenue, but the oil reserves are not large enough to make Vietnam a major oil-producing country in the world, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Venezuela and Nigeria.

In the area of culture, the Vietnamese people are known to be intelligent, education-loving, and industrious. Many people have achieved high levels of education comparable to people of the West. But the majority have not broken free from the impact of the traditional cultural heritage, such as the habit of rote learning, the lack of inquisitiveness, the absence of questioning, the lack of invention and innovation. Even though they are industrious, they are more concerned with advancing themselves rather than improving the fate of the collectivity.

As it has been emphasized in the document: Vietnam is still poor and backward because “the social organization of Vietnam is weak.” There are countries with geographical conditions not as favorable as Vietnam, such as Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore ... that are more prosperous than Vietnam because their people have a high level of culture and their social organizations are conducive to development.

Concerning political geography and security - that is, geopolitics - the situation is not necessarily more favorable. Compared to neighboring China, Vietnam is a small country. The surface area of Vietnam is only 3.4% that of China (329,560 km² vs. 9,596,960 km²). The population is only 6.5% of China's – 80 million vs. 1.2 billion. In addition, Vietnam has over 1150km of common border with China, and so there is constant pressure from China affecting territorial security. Because of that, a greater part of Vietnam's history is the history of confronting the dangers of invasion and occupation by this northern neighbor. If Vietnam had been an island such as Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia or a peninsula far from China, such as Malaysia, then the Vietnamese people would not have had to devote a large amount of their time, thinking and resources to strengthen this unfavorable geo-political situation.

We have to frankly recognize these unfavorable conditions related to the population and geography in order to be aware of the difficulties that we will have to overcome in the course of the development of the country. We have to be more modest and exercise extraordinary efforts to overcome these obstacles. Neither an inferiority complex nor a superiority complex will help us move further or overcome the immediate difficulties. But if we want to carry out these extraordinary efforts, we have to agree amongst ourselves about an appropriate social organization. The *Rally for Democracy and Pluralism* has correctly stated the problem when they recognize and highlight the fundamental problems of the country. That is to review thoroughly and frankly the past and the present of Vietnam while studying and learning from the experience of countries that have succeeded in their modernization and, in particular, highlighting the utmost importance of social organization in the process of development.

“The social organization, whether good or bad, skillful or not, can entirely affect the destiny of a nation. Social organization clearly is a key to progress. It is the factor that determines the stature and the prestige of all nations. However, social organization cannot be carried out by mechanically applying a model. It has to be developed after a process of exchange of views, a confluence of ideas based on the historical, geographical, cultural and ethical reality of its people. To effect social change, first and foremost the fundamental values of society have to be changed.”

That is a reality that today people who are still concerned about the survival of Vietnam have to draw a lesson from to absolutely renounce impatience and impulsiveness, to renounce the authoritarian monopoly of truth and to constrain personal passion to carry out a dialogue with each other accept compromises in a spirit of mutual respect. This honest goodwill and constructive attitude comes from the realization that all Vietnamese everywhere are bound together in a common destiny – that is, the destiny of Vietnam.

Tôn Thất Thiện - Ottawa, September 2006