

Direction, leadership, policy questions remain

The Vietnamese Communist Party's eighth national congress, which meets in Hanoi this weekend, will surely be remembered as a truly extraordinary one: it contains many features which can be characterized as "first time" and contrary to the fundamental tenets of Leninism.

The first "first time" is that, contrarily to practice, on the eve of the meeting, the Politbureau cannot be certain that the Political Report and the Platform of the Congress it has drafted will be rubber-stamped by the Congress. The second "first time" is that unresolved also is the question of leadership personnel: the selection of the 160 members of the Central Committee, 15 members of the Politbureau, and especially the Secretary general and the Prime Minister.

Normally, the above decisions are finalized at the 10th, or latest, at the 11th, plenum of the Central Committee. This time, the first took place of April 20, and the second on June 16, and yet no decision could be arrived at. At the time of writing this article, a special meeting is being held to try to resolve the key question of personnel before the opening of the congress, but it remains unclear what the results would be, as the issue is practically insoluble. This is because of a fierce struggle between two equally stubborn, and equally strong, factions, one identified with Dao Duy Tung (prod. dao zwee tung) and Vo Van Kiet (prod. Vo Vann Keeat).

Dao Duy Tung is a politburo member and head of the Central Committee's secretariat. He is considered a tough hardliner, and pro-Chinese. Vo Van Kiet is considered a liberal, favouring wider reforms. His adversaries accuse him of being "an agent of the U.S.". The two have been battling each other fiercely, using both open debate inside the Politbureau, and resorting to "black" methods — in particular, another "first time", the leaking of the Politbureau secret documents — , and, yet another "first time", appealing to public opinion outside the Party, including the media controlled by the Vietnamese exiles, to which the secret documents are smuggled out in priority, thus, another "first time", enabling the latter to have an input into the struggle going on inside the Party.

Until last December, and even until the 10th plenum in April this year, the Dao Duy Tung faction, which includes Do Muoi, the current Secretary general, and Le Duc Anh, the current President, had the upperhand. Thus, Tung and a close associate, Nguyen Ha Phan, secured the prerogative of drafting the Political Report and the Platform of the Congress, and, thereby, setting the direction for the Party and the country for the next five years, even until the year 2020.

The direction chosen by Tung and Phan is the same well known one decided upon by the VII Congress, with its emphasis on maintaining “pure” marxism-leninism, absolute rejection of a pluralist and multiparty system, preponderance for state enterprise — which should take up 60% of the economy — , fighting vigorously against “peaceful evolution” — meaning against the Vietnamese demanding democracy and the United States, “enemy of Vietnamese socialism”.

Regarding leadership, Nguen Ha Phan was slated as replacement of Vo Van Kiet as prime minister, while Dao Duy Tung was widely reported to seek forcefully the position of secretary general, replacing Do Muoi.

But Vo Van Kiet, who is a southerner, fiercely fought back, knowing that he was strongly supported by his fellow southerners as well as those favouring greater reforms and democracy . They provided him with the necessary damning material to engineer the downfall of Nguyen Ha Phan, who was charged with treason and corruption at the 10th plenum, expelled from the Party and put under arrest.

Since Dao Duy Tung was a promoter of Phan, he was also splashed. Besides, he fell seriously ill with stomach ulcer (bad tongues say out of grief for seeing his plan gone to smoke), and is not expected to attend the Congress. The headless hard line faction will thus be considerably weakened. Furthermore, the documents drafted by Tung and Phan have raised a great deal of opposition. Now that their authors are out, these documents will probably go the same way also. Or they will be substantially amended.

On the other hand, Kiet is himself under fierce attack by Nguyen Van Linh, a former Secretary general and now counsellor of the Party, who is reported to have vowed “to get him” by charging him with corruption, especially through his more vulnerable wife, and worse, with treason, for being “the Gorbachev of Vietnam”, conspiring with anti-Party people to destroy the Party.

And so, neither side will be strong enough to crush the the other, and will probably be obliged to accept a compromise to avoid bringing down the house and getting all buried. The most obvious compromise would be to leave things as they are until the next special congress in mid 1999. This will be only a postponement of the showdown or breakdown. Then, says one high Vietnamese official visiting Paris recently, the upheaval will be considerably greater, because, according to Vietnamese popular belief, number 9 is portent of cyclical upheaval, and here there are as many as three 9s. (The significance of the number 9 is present in Kowloon, and the Cuu Long (9 dragons)/Mekong delta).

But such a compromise would have very serious implications regarding government policy and administration, in particular for those hoping to move their businesses out of the present rut. Some of the key problems will be left hanging and decisions unmade: 1/ What will the relations be between the Party and the State? Where will ultimate power lie? Who will, can, make the necessary — and especially, binding — decisions? 2/ What will be the relations between state and private enterprises? If private enterprises expand, the power of the Party will be reduced, and a return to the state enterprise would lead to a economic decline and crisis. 3/ What about the banking sector? The “big four”: the National Bank, Export-Import bank, Bank of Commerce and Industry, Bank of Investment and Development, have become a formidable power block in themselves. Will they be left without direction and control? 4/ In foreign policy, will Vietnam incline towards China or the US? 5/ How to deal with the surfacing North-South antagonism, which risks exploding into something nasty. 6/ And there is the Army, which has become a state within a state, with some 600 business enterprises of its own. The bickerings between civilians risks giving it a pretext to take over. Although not overwhelming, this risk exists.

All told, the situation may be in a state of flux in the next three years,. But as far as the Vietnamese people are concerned, recent events show that they begin to be courted eagerly, and therefore to count, and thus, the prospects for democracy for Vietnam are brighter: whoever wins, or loses, the Party will be further splintered and weakened. This will give the democratic forces a chance to grow stronger, and become increasingly a significant factor in Vietnam’s political life.