

As the comrade fights, Ho takes a beating

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As Vietnam marks the 20th anniversary of its unification under communism, it is time to abandon the ruinous luxury of Marxism-Leninism. Events throughout the world prove that such utopianism is regressive and inapplicable. The name of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam must be changed, along with all other road signs pointing in the direction of socialism. Every day brings more proof that Ho Chi Minh made a disastrous error when he chose the Leninist route as the path for Vietnam's salvation.

As familiar as they may seem, the views above do not come from embittered Vietnamese anti-communists living in exile in the United States. Every one of these statements reflects the voiced opinion of serving members of the Vietnamese Communist Party. They have impeccable credentials. Many have been party members for 30 or 40 years, and have distinguished war records. For decades, they have scrupulously observed party discipline. But now, they say, reason and conscience compel them to speak out. And the debate they have unleashed in party circles is shaking the very foundations of the modern Vietnamese state.

As the number of party rebels grows, so does their list of grievances. Right now, the attacks are directed primarily against party leaders, for their ignorance, arrogance and conservatism, and socialism for the glaring economic, social and moral ills it has brought upon the country. Inevitably, however, they are being directed at Ho Chi Minh himself, for even in death, the founder remains the revered educator, leader, chief strategist and tactician of the party.

So far, the myth is largely intact. Few dare mount a frontal assault on the still sacrosanct name or memory of "Uncle Ho." Yet increasingly his thinking is being distorted and his legacy is being smeared as the comrades battle for control of the ideological soul of Vietnam. And without Ho, the party will do nothing. In fact, the stability Vietnam projects today is already part illusion.

The Communist Party has not been ideologically monolithic for some time. The collapse of communism in Europe shook the faith of a large number of party members and cadres. It also encouraged them to speak up in party forums, in the belief that their new perceptions were strongly supported by facts and, after 1959, history – the latter always being an important consideration for communists.

But the first wave of critics, who initially observed protocol and expressed their views through normal party channels, ran into a wall of harsh resistance. Some were purged and dismissed from their jobs. For others, the punishment was jail and torture. Even so, the ranks of the rebels continued to grow. Returning travellers with party contacts, and documents and other ,informal samizdat reports smuggled out of Vietnam paint a picture of tumultuous Central Committee meetings, where rebels spar with hardline party leaders.

On the basic question of whether Vietnam should continue to build socialism on the Leninist model, the conservatives – who wield absolute power through control of the army and police – resolutely answer yes. but given the obviously dismal performance of socialism since 1975, they must use Ho Chi Minh as a shield. And what a shield Ho is. Throughout Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh is put forward as a great political and military genius, and an infallible master to be revered. He is untouchable. Expressing doubt about his wisdom, and especially criticizing him, would be breaking the greatest of all taboos, willfully committing a crime of lese majesty. As a result when they claim that following the socialist road is the correct way to implement “Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts” and prove one’s true loyalty to “Uncle,” party leaders make any challenge to their position potentially suicidal.

But would-be reformers have found a way to assault the ideology without attacking Ho himself. They simply argue that if Ho were alive today, he undoubtedly would have evolved into a democrat and free quarter. Although it is absurd, some party members and older Vietnamese actually believe this, because it helps them reconcile their disillusionment with socialism with still strong sentimental attachment to Ho.

Yet another party faction also hides behind Ho. In this case, however , it’s not out of admiration, but sheer expediency. this is the group advocating the most radical changes: full recognition of property rights, full acceptance of capitalism as “the road along which all mankind has to travel,” a democratic multiparty system and the rule of law. To avoid being branded as “weakhearted,” “deviationist” or “anti party,” the advocates claim that such reforms would conform with “Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts.” Specifically, they say “Uncle” was primarily a patriot interested in actually achieving his ideals – national independence, and the freedom and welfare of the people. For Ho, they argue, Marxism-Leninism was just a means. He would not hesitate to discard it now if he found it harmful. This tortured reasoning twists history and does violence to Ho’s deepest convictions. but invoking Ho’s authority gives these bold party members a friendly or neutral audience, and, surely, good protection.

When party reformers speak of getting rid of socialism, they mean the Bolshevik brand of communism with its guiding rhetoric of class war, dictatorship and revolutionary violence. What most reformers say they want is “socialism with a human face, “or perhaps social democracy. To get even to that point, however, they must destroy the orthodox Leninism that is still Vietnam’s reigning ideology. This is where the most radical group reformers take the boldest plug, and mount a frontal attack on Ho himself. They believe that is the only way to fatally undermine the conservatives who rest their claim to rule, and cite as their motivation, ” loyalty to Uncle Ho.”

The most prominent member of this group, and the first Vietnamese communist ever to have dared commit such an unthinkable and unpardonable act, is Lu Phuong, a former vice minister in the South Vietnam Liberation Government. A skilled Marxist-Leninist theoretician, he first published a call for “shelving” those theories in the Phat Trien Kinh Te review of Saigon’s Centre for Applied Economics in 1991. In an explosive 1993 article smuggled abroad after Mr. Phuong’s expulsion from the party in 1992, he charged that Ho did great harm to the country by making the party and the people put absolute faith in Lenin and the Comintern. This he noted, despite Ho’s own admission that he had only a “simplistic” understanding of socialism and chose the radical model for Vietnam simply because Lenin and his followers supported anti-colonialism, Ho bound Vietnam to a system which has left the country crippled while the rest of the world moves ahead at high speed, Mr. Phuong said, so how could we not blame him?

Interestingly, Lu Phuong and other recent rebels have so far escaped the imprisonment and other harsh measures levied against an earlier crop of party critics. Moreover, and despite their continuing emphasis on “Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts,” party ideologues pay less and less lip service to Marxism-Leninism. Through informal channels, some high officials have even asserted that several thousand cadres are being trained to cope with free elections, should this become politically unavoidable.

Taken together, these developments suggest that the leadership may be preparing a fall-back position that would involve a formal renunciation of Marxism-Leninism and perhaps even some steps towards democracy. This is probably only contingency planning that reflects the party’s habit of never leaving anything to chance. For the time being, party leaders clearly believe that with the army and the police firmly behind them, and by showing some tactical flexibility, they can hang on to power comfortably, with no radical reforms necessary. At its last meeting in January, for instance, the Central Committee decided that the present course building socialism according to orthodox Leninism – will be maintained.

Yet even Vietnam's determined leaders are fully aware that the future for socialism and the party is not very promising, Pham Van Dong has admitted candidly that the young do not like joining the party And Tap Chi Cong San, the official organ of the party, has deplored the post 1975 generation that is so "far inferior" to its elders in regard to love and understanding of Uncle Ho. If these trends continue, the paper laments, keeping Ho Chi Minh's thoughts alive will be "only a fervent wish."

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