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## **SHADOW OF MAO WILL LOOM LARGE OVER VCP EIGHTH NATIONAL CONGRESS**

By Ton That Thien

The eighth National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party, which is expected to take place in the second half of 1996, is on the mind of every Vietnamese. And for a very good reason: at this congress, the VCP party line is going to be laid down for the following five years. Since under the present constitution the VCP is the supreme authority of the land, its decision will bind both the Vietnamese National Assembly and the Vietnamese Government, and where the country will be heading for during that period, and beyond, will depend on what will be decided at this congress. In particular, whether the Vietnamese people will enjoy more freedom and democracy, or whether they will have to bear the status quo, or worse, see their liberties curtailed, will depend on the outcome of the struggle between the ultra-conservatives and the reformists at that meeting.

In the last few years, especially in the last two years, the reformists have made a determined effort to sway the Party away from the Stalinist-Maoist line which, under deceptively different names, especially under the name of "doi moi", has been applied actually by the present power holders of the Party. But the calls for reforms have been ignored.

The jailing of the advocates of pluralism Doan Viet Hoat and Nguyen Dan Que, followed by the arrests and condemnations of the Buddhist leaders Thich Quang Do and Thich Huyen Quang, and well known veteran communists who have pleaded for democracy and justice like Hoang Minh Chinh and Do Trung Hieu, Le Hong Ha, Ha Sy Phu, are reminiscent of communist practices widely applied in Stalin's time. It should be pointed out here that these arrests, condemnations, and jailings occurred very shortly after the much publicised visits of Messrs. Robert McNamara, Warren Christopher and George Bush, as if to imply that these prominent American representatives of a nation considered a leading world democracy had let it be known to the VCP leaders that they either approve those blatant trappings on democracy or are absolutely not concerned about them.

Not only the present Party leaders have demonstrated spectacularly that they have not abandoned the Stalinist line, but they have also made it clear that Maoism still guides their thoughts. Thus, in November, the CPV's General Secretary Do Muoi led a large delegation to Beijing, which is replacing Moscow as the VCP's ideological Mecca, where the VCP now holds the ritual of seeking Big Brother's approval for its current policy and for the draft of the Politburo's political report to the next party congress. It paid respects to two general secretaries of the Chinese Communist Party: one – Mao Ze Dong – is dead but still the great ideological mentor of the VCP leadership, and the other – Jiang Ze Ming – still living whose views and support are being sought by the VCP leaders. So, the shadow of Mao Ze Dong will loom large over the VIIIth National Congress of the VCP.

Maoism here should be read in the broader sense and include elements of Mao's successors' thoughts, in particular those relating to the fight against "peaceful evolution" and "Tien An Mens". Indeed, the VCP leadership has adopted the Chinese view that "US imperialists and forces hostile to socialism" are seeking to overthrow them through "peaceful evolution" and prescribed the study of a manual used by the CCP to train its cadres in the fight against this danger. On the other hand, Deng Xiaoping's "socialism with Chinese characteristics", reworded as "socialism with Vietnamese characteristics", has made its appearance in speeches by VCP high cadres. Of these "characteristics" the most important one is surely the firm suppression of all "Tien An Mens".

If the present group of VCP leaders' dominance continues, the influence of Mao thought will undoubtedly increase. There is a very strong possibility that at the coming congress the leaders considered too old, among them the present Party chief and President Le Duc Anh, and the present General Secretary Do Muoi, will be forced to step down. Their successors will likely include Dao Duy Tung, a senior member of the Party's Secretariat and chief theoretician of the Party, who is known to want Do Muoi's job, and to have pledged "to follow strictly the path of the CCP in ideological matters and in international policy" during a visit to Beijing in September; and Nguyen Duc Binh, a member of the Party's Secretariat, head of the Party School, who has been denounced by a comrade in the Politburo for "leftist deviation". These two men belong to the Politburo conservative faction which advocates strict preservation of the "purity of Marxism-Leninism".

This faction holds real power at present, and it surely will ensure that their views prevail at the congress. Indeed, the draft political report to be presented by the Politburo to the Congress makes this very clear. The report says: "Our Party is carrying out renovation but we always affirm our determination to continue to move in the direction of socialism". There are also reports that, to ensure their dominance at the congress, this faction is maneuvering hard to overcome the reformists by elimination beforehand all those who can speak up in favour of pluralism and a multiparty system at the congress, and by advancing the date of the meeting so that the reformers have no time to organise.

The reformists, for their part, have also stepped up their efforts to bring about a radical change of the Party line. Those already out of the Party as a result of resignation or expulsion have been speaking more and more loudly and agitated vigorously. Others, who are still party members, have joined the fight. For example, General Tran Do, a respected veteran, has sent a very remarkable letter to the Politburo "concerning the coming VIIIth congress". In this letter, he reviews very critically past policies and performances, and suggests a number of radical reforms.

General Tran Do diagnoses the "diseases" besetting the Party in the past, among which the most serious one is "exclusiveness", the source of "monopolisation" of power which led to the elimination of all patriots who do not accept the view that "to be a patriot one must love socialism", and even of the party members who do not share all the views of the leaders of the Party. He stresses that, at present, "democracy is the greatest need of the Party as well as of all society". He advocates the ending of monopoly of power by the Party, the shedding of all ideology and making development of the country "the only overriding

national aim”, the cessation of the practice of imposing the Party’s ideology on the country, and reconciliation and full equality with “our former enemies”, i.e. former soldiers and officials of South Vietnam, so that every Vietnamese with professional competence and goodwill can take part in the reconstruction and development of the country.

There is much more in General Tran Do’s letter that need to be reflected upon by Vietnamese of all inclinations, but what is significant is that, coming from a high cadre who has been a member of the Party’s secretariat, has a very distinguished war record and is widely respected within the Party, his letter will no doubt embolden the party members who hold the same views but have been unable to articulate them, or not confident enough to dare express them openly. The ranks of these, it should be stressed, have grown considerably of late.

On the other hand, Nguyen Ho, a 54 year veteran and high cadre who quit the Party in 1990 to protest against the Party’s continuation of its conservative line, has declared in a resounding statement that joining the VCP has been “the greatest mistake” of his life, vowed to atone for past “crimes” by fighting for democracy with all his power. He affirmed that the march towards democracy is “irreversible” and, in an interview with the French Radio FRI in April this year he disclosed that at the half-term meeting of the VIIth National Congress in January there was a 50/50 split on the issue whether the Party should continue to include the pursuit of Marxism-Leninism in the platform of the VIIIth congress. All that is needed now to make the bowl of water overflow and ensure the victory of the democratic forces, he said, is “just one more drop”.

Nguyen Ho may be over-optimistic and underestimate the determination of the conservative to block change, as well as their ability to do so thanks to their possession of the reins of power and readiness to use them unscrupulously. Unless a determined effort is made by all to support and strengthen those who, inside and outside the Party, and inside and outside Vietnam, are struggling very hard to ensure that changes occur and occur peacefully, through the democratic process, the fight for democracy in Vietnam may not be won at the next VCP congress, and the Vietnamese people and the world will have to witness another bloody revolution or five more years of dictatorial and destructive rule in Vietnam. In the present state of acceleration of history, for the people of Vietnam every revolution or every year of communist rule is one too many, for it means accelerated suffering and waste which will impede the country’s recovery from long years of war and mismanagement.

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