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Ton That Thien
223 Britannia Road
Ottawa, K2B 5X1
Tel: 613-596.8181. Fax: 613-596.9044

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Dear Ms de Wolf Smith,

A number of very important developments have occurred in recent weeks, and I wonder whether you are interested in them enough to want me to write something about them.

1/ The prominent (ex-communist, expelled) critic of Marxism, Ha Sy Phu, was arrested in Hanoi on December 5 during a family visit. The official charge is "stealing of State secrets". (details about this below). Phu has just published a devastating criticism of Marxism entitled: "Goodbye Marxism".

2/ A very prominent southern-born party member has thrown a can of scorpions on the VCP's desk by bringing into the open the North-South conflict. This time it is a North-South conflict **within the VCP itself**.

Although antagonism between northerners and southerners, even inside the VCP is known to have existed, this is the first time that a prominent member of the Party has dared bring it into the open and used very strong language with it.

The man responsible for this is Nguyen Van Tran, 81, a veteran of the Party, founder of the "National Self-Defense Agency" in South Vietnam in 1945, and a founding member of the Lao Dong Party (Vietnam Workers' Party) in 1951. He has occupied important military and political positions in the past.

In a book of 544 pages published in Saigon, Tran accuses the communists from the North, whom he calls scornfully "the fellows from the North", of treating the South like a conquered country, engaging in carpet bagging, combining ignorance and arrogance, driving away (as boat people) the human capital crucial to its development. Most ominously, he demanded a distinct political system and a distinct government for the South, total freedom of the press, and freedom for the South Vietnamese to move ahead since they are more advanced than the Northerners.

Tran has certainly expressed the feelings which his fellow-southerners, whether in or outside the CPV, are known to have been harbouring for a long time.

The big question about this affair is: how could such a book be published openly in Saigon? There must be widespread connivance, including at the highest level of the Party apparatus, for such a thing to be possible. This is surely the most significant aspect of the matter. And, naturally enough, the most alarming one in the eyes of the leadership in Hanoi.

So, Dao Duy Tung, the senior most member of the Party secretariat, and an eager candidate for the position of secretary general at the coming national party congress in June, has ordered a special investigation.

The Special Group set up for the purpose reported that Tran's book is bound to have a very big impact on the people, and is therefore "highly obnoxious". It recommended the blocking of its diffusions, and the expulsion of Tran from the Party, but only after the congress, and this, to avoid generating waves before then. Just as in the case of Nguyen Ho, another big fish can get away with what is considered an unpardonable crime calling for harsh punishment. Only smaller fry like Ha Sy Phu can be pushed around unceremoniously.

3/ The third development, also full of ominous implications for the unity of the Party is the dissemination of a report of Vo Van Kiet, the prime minister, to the Politburo. The 22 pages long report, stamped "very secret", has been leaked, and, like the report of the Special Group above, has found its way into many unauthorised hands, including those of this author, via the Internet and the Fax machines. Ha Sy Phu was found with one on him also, which was the cause, at least the official one, of his arrest.

But the big question is: who did it, and why?

Two explanations have been offered. 1/ Vo Van Kiet himself, to pose as a reformer in the big battle shaping between reformers and conservatives at the coming congress; and 2/ By Dao Duy Tung, a hard-liner, who wants to use it as ammunition against Kiet.

Both explanations are based on the fact that Kiet's report deals with matters over which there was no full agreement among members at the last meeting of the Politburo called to prepare the Political Report to the Central Committee at the congress.

Among the views put out by Kiet three stand out: 1/ adopt a full free market, downsize the state enterprises and remove the state officials – including the military – from management of those enterprises and return them to their normal occupations; 2/ abolish democratic centralism and adopt full democracy inside the Party; 3/ there is no more confrontational contradiction between socialism and imperialism, and in Vietnam-China relations the national aspect overrides the socialist aspect.

All the three above views collide head on with those held by the conservatives. It is indeed not surprising that, parallel with the leaking of the Kiet report, whose publication was forbidden, another document, unsigned, was widely circulated as a Party study document. It bears the name: "U.S. strategy towards Vietnam after normalisation". In substance, it tells of the U.S. vicious intent to control Vietnam in various ways and warns Vietnamese leaders against swallowing US baits. This is a veiled denunciation of Kiet for "selling out" to the Americans. On the other hand, significantly, the document refers to two Chinese as its sources, one of these "having connections with Chinese leaders". So, the Vietnamese risk fighting an American-Chinese proxy-war again, but this time the warring parties will be both communists.

I should add that another southerner, General Tran Do, a respected figure in the Party and in the South, joined the battle recently by sending an open letter to the Central

Committee and the Politburo. In it, he disputes the right of the VCP to claim exclusive, or even major, merit in the winning of independence, calls for true democracy and full equality of rights for everyone, including non-communists, or former anti-communists.

Thus, from now until June, one should expect the political situation in Vietnam to be a boiling cauldron worth careful watching.

Sincerely yours,
Ton That Thien

Ms N. de Wolf Smith
The Asian Wall Street Journal
Hong Kong