

Shadows and Wind in Vietnam

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In November the Vietnamese people and the whole world witnessed a historic event: the first visit of an American president to a unified Vietnam. As the culmination of President Clinton's five year long diplomatic opening to Communist-ruled Vietnam, it has already generated considerable comment and analysis in the Western media, just as Vietnam-U.S. relations always have. Interpretations of the extent of the impact on Vietnam have been varied, but none have really captured the perspective from the Vietnamese side.

First, this was an official visit of an incumbent chief of state of the United States of America, which not long ago was seen as the number one imperialist enemy of Vietnam. The visit was initiated by an official invitation from the President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Tran Duc Luong. Although the reception given to Mr. Clinton by the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) leaders was not from the heart, it was outwardly warm, and in any case a solemn occasion.

Second, this visit can be looked at from two diametrically opposite viewpoints: that of the Americans and that of the Vietnam Communist Party.

On the American side, President Clinton, his high-powered advisers, and especially the large contingent of journalists accompanying him were overcome by euphoria at the history-making significance of his presence in Hanoi. Because they had been so used to vilification at the hands of Hanoi and subjected to unpleasant constraints, to be finally treated with consideration by the country they believe they had victimized rendered them giddy, almost to the point of losing their clear sight. I will not add "losing their hearing" because they did not know Vietnamese and neither would be able to understand the implications of the "shadows and wind" (*bong* and *gio* – oblique speech and body language) exhibited by their Vietnamese hosts, which only those fluent in the language can well interpret.

The prevailing conclusions of President Clinton and the Western media were that "Vietnam" and "the Vietnamese people" were prepared to accept the Americans on the basis that "bygones are bygones". But their "Vietnam" is in reality a country subjected to the totalitarian rule of the current hard line Communist leadership. They cannot understand, because they cannot feel it, that although Vietnam today is "unified", it is "unified" only in appearance. In reality, more than twenty-five years after the end of the war, Vietnam is still composed of two distinct entities whose fates, aspirations, and viewpoints are not only dissimilar but antagonistic; southern Vietnam, occupied and repressed since 1975, and northern Vietnam self-assured of its right to "colonize" the southern half in pursuit of its own interests.

As regards “the Vietnamese”, a similar dichotomy applies: on one side is the Communist Party, whose power wielding leaders and grasping *nomenklatura* indulge in self-serving arbitrariness. On the other side are the Vietnamese people: trampled upon, their potential held back, their labor exploited.

Who are “The Vietnamese people”?

Thus, when Mr. Clinton expressed his pain about what the United States had done to “Vietnam” and expressed his commendable desire to help “the Vietnamese people”, he was applauded by his entourage and the leaders of the VCP because he did not specify what he meant by “Vietnam” and “the Vietnamese people”. Was he pained by the fact that an ally of the United States, South Vietnam, had been abandoned by the United States and ever since suffered from domination, discrimination and oppression? When he expressed the desire to help “the Vietnamese people” repair the war damage, soothe the pains which war had caused, and rebuild their lives, did he include in those people the non-communist Vietnamese who were living under continued oppression in Vietnam, or in the perpetual sorrow of exile?

On the side of the VCP, although they were not very eager in the matter of inviting and receiving solemnly the President of the United States - the supreme representative of the ex-enemy - their action openly raised the matter of reconciliation. The slogan “let bygones be bygones”, the declarations about forgetting past enmity, the public clasping hands to look to the future are very fine and should be supported by everyone. *But*, unfortunately, the attitude of reconciliation put forward by the VCP leaders, or rather, a faction among the leaders, applied only to the President and the people of the United States who are, after all, foreigners. A similar attitude of reconciliation was resolutely refused to the people of southern Vietnam, including its former leaders, their fellow-countrymen. In Vietnamese culture, it is a matter of “the Buddha at home is not powerful enough to offer prayers to”.

VCP reconciliation is insincere

For the above reasons, to the southern Vietnamese the posture and policy of Washington-Hanoi reconciliation has no value. It arouses no emotion nor incites any hope. (I use the term “the southern Vietnamese” to designate all those living south of the 17th parallel before 1975. This includes those born in the north who did not accept to live under communism and chose to emigrate and adopt the South as their new home after the division of the country in July 1954).

For the people of the south to forget the past and realize a credible reconciliation with the CPV in Hanoi, the leaders of the CPV would have to take bold and decisive action:

1/ The Central Committee of the Party could issue a formal statement, and the National Assembly could pass a law to the effect that from day X all Vietnamese, no matter where they were born (South or North of the 17th parallel), no matter what position they occupied in any government, no matter which religion or social group (class) they belonged to, are equal and enjoy all the rights of Vietnamese citizenship;

2/ The Central Committee and the Government could invite former leaders of South Vietnam such as Duong Van Minh, Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky to return on a visit to Vietnam where they would be received with due consideration.

If these steps were taken, it would be a great blessing to Vietnam. For it would demonstrate to the Vietnamese people that a true reconciliation had been achieved, that Vietnamese of north and south could together look to the future, and strive hard to build up the country to the fullest of its potential.

From what the Vietnamese people saw during President Clinton's visit to Vietnam, however, all the above is just dreaming. If we read the declaration issued by VCP General Secretary Le Kha Phieu to Mr. Clinton, we see that his views are completely contrary to the pleasant and friendly words stressing "let bygones be bygones" pronounced by other Vietnamese leaders including President Tran Duc Luong and Prime Minister Phan Van Khai. General Secretary Le Kha Phieu could not have been more blunt with Mr. Clinton: "we will not forget the past; you were imperialists committing aggression against us; we were forced to wage war; we shall continue to build socialism...."

The VCP is not the people of Vietnam

It is clear that so long as the VCP holds power in Vietnam, and the Le Kha Phieu faction holds power in the VCP, all the aspirations for true reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam will be just illusions. And any prospect of reconciliation between north and south will remain a dream.

However, Mr. Clinton's visit did have a significant positive effect: it highlighted unmistakably the wide gap separating the leadership of the VCP from the Vietnamese people. The Party is walking backwards towards the past whereas the people are surging forward toward the future. While the leadership of the Party feels lost in the post-Cold War world and dares not step forward fearing a loss of influence and power, the people took their own initiative to give President Clinton a warm reception. His presence in Vietnam at least demonstrated reconciliation between the Vietnamese people and the United States. In his address to students at the Hanoi University, broadcast on Vietnamese television, Mr. Clinton described the freedom and affluence of the American people, including those of Vietnamese origin, and the reasons for this affluence. He planted the seeds of a movement aspiring to further freedoms to allow the Vietnamese, especially the younger

generation, to finally move forward. This will undoubtedly be a great headache for the VCP leaders. But at the same time it carries hope for a new liberation leading to true national reconciliation and the development of a Vietnam unified not only geographically but in spirit.

Ottawa, 23 November, 2000

Written for *Ngay Nay*, Houston, 1 December 2000

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