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Ideological rebellion in communist Vietnam

Prominent Vietnamese intellectual raised by Communist Party denounces Marxism as unscientific and utopian

By Ton That Thien

On December 5 last year, the police arrested a biologist named Ha Si Phu. The arrest occurred in Hanoi while Phu was on a family visit from Dalat. It was expected, as, for many years, Phu had been a big thorn in the sides of the Party, especially of the conservatives. He was a dissident, more particularly a very strong critic of Marxism-Leninism, and, by Party standards, an ungrateful and dangerous man.

Normally, Phu had no reason to turn against socialism. He was born in 1940 in North Vietnam to a lower middle peasant family which had been given land in the infamous land reform of 1953; he grew up under the wing of the Vietnamese Communist Party, was bestowed the privilege of going to Czechoslovakia for higher studies. He came home with a Master's Degree in biology, and was appointed a professor and a researcher in that domain, first in Hanoi, then in Dalat.

Yet, somehow, Phu did not toe the Party line. His temperament, and surely his training in biology led him to look at social development from the angle of evolution and view the mind as the key factor in the process of social development. He applied this approach to the analysis of socialism. The conclusions he arrived at were set down in a short paper entitled "Dắt tay nhau đi dưới những tấm biển chỉ đường của Trí tuệ" (Leading each other by the hand and walking under the road signs of Intelligence), in which he called for "the reversal of all the current road signs".

What Phu meant is "the road signs pointing in the direction of socialism". This caused his downfall, as the paper was written in September 1988, before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, when in the Vietnamese Communist Party, the conviction that socialism is invincible, superior to capitalism, and represents the future of mankind was the ideological rock on which the Party was built. To challenge this view was inadmissible, an act of rebellion deserving severe punishment.

The collapse of the communist empire made Phu's views very dangerous because these views would provide rationalisation for the wavering of many cadres and for the calls for changes of the Party line. So Phu's article was suppressed while the Party was looking for a way to deal effectively with the views put forth by him. These views therefore remained unknown except to a handful of Party theorists assigned to counter them, which they did only obliquely, without even mentioning his name or producing his article. Meantime, naturally, Phu was dismissed from his job, and subjected to economic blockaded and political surveillance.

This was a lucky stroke for him and for others, non-communists and communists alike, for prevented from doing researches in biology, Phu turned his strong will, sharp mind, and good Czech training to a thorough analysis of Marxism-Leninism.

Marxism is unscientific and utopian

The results of Phu's intellectual endeavor are laid out in a 35-page monograph (of 8/12-11 format) written in May 1993, and bearing the title: Doi Dieu suy nghi cua mot cong dan (Some reflections of a citizen), which has been reprinted by all Vietnamese papers abroad. It had naturally to

be smuggled out of the country to get printed. Its main thrust was a thorough and pitiless criticism of Marxism, considered unscientific and utopian, like the socialisms which Marx had denounced previously using the same terms. Phu points out the basic flaws in Marx' theory.

First, contrarily to Marx's assertion, the motor of human history is not class struggle, but intelligence. Mankind progresses as a result of the displacement of one group of rulers/leaders by another more intelligent group.

Second, centrality to Marxist doctrine, society is not divided into classes, but is bi-polarised into rulers and ruled, and power shifted from one group to another as a result of the struggle of people grouped around the poles. The outcome depends on the alignment of the floating group in the middle.

Third, Marx insists on the collective aspect of man as the determining one at the expense of the individual aspect. This leads to a distorted view of society, with disastrous consequences, the most important of which is the belief in the absolute necessity of collectivism and class dictatorship.

Fourth, Marx considers private property as the source of all the evils of capitalism. Hence the belief that the total suppression of private property and all that goes with it – private means of production, goods, market, etc... -- would bring about an era of justice and plenty. Reality has proved that such a view is wrong; worse than that, the blind adoption and application of this view has led to the instauration of a system which has led to dictatorship with all its horrors, and which has blocked all economic development.

Why, asks Phu. Because, he says, intelligence, and hence the full development of the individual and his need of freedom and private property, together with his unhampered pursuit of his private interests are the basic condition for the improvement of the living conditions of the workers.

Following communism is a crime

The above views led Phu to proclaim that the Party has made a fundamental mistake in clinging to socialism, and he advocates the abandonment of all the "absurdities" stemming from utopian and extremist Marxism.

Phu's call could be construed as an act of provocation of the Party leadership, who had proclaimed that strict adherence to Marxism-Leninism was the official line of the Party, but Phu says that he felt compelled to speak up out of a "sense of guilt" for having gone along on a road leading the nation to disaster. This is the first time in communist Vietnam that anyone has openly admitted that following communism is a crime.

Doi dieu suy nghi cua mot cong dan (Some reflections of a citizen) is a rather dense study, very abstract and technical, difficult to read. Fortunately, in recent weeks, Phu has given a summary of his views in simple language making them accessible to all. This summary was published under the title of "Chia tay y thuc he" (Ideological Goodbye, or Goodbye Marxism) in the Ky 21, of Garden Grove, CA, (numbers 79 and 80 of November and December 1995 respectively). Phu also gave a long interview to the VCNR radio station in Garden Grove, CA, (which was reproduced in The Ky 21, number 81, January 1996).

From the article and interview we learn that the views expressed by Phu in the last few years are the result of a long process of thinking going back to 1960. This is a very important fact, because, together with the growing movement spearheaded by a veteran communist. Hoang Minh Chinh, demanding the revision of "anti-party" cases against a number of high cadres in the 1960s, it tells us

that, contrarily to a misleading view spread wide by western journalists and scholars, the Communist Party of Vietnam was not a monolithic party, always tightly united, but instead, it had experienced serious internal dissensions, dissent, and bloody liquidations throughout these years. The only thing the VCP was really good at was preventing the western journalists and scholars from learning the truth, and using these media as convenient instrument of VCP disinformatsia.

We know that, somehow, a number of people, including party members, were able to retain their sanity and their conscience, and the Party was not able to suppress the doubts arising in their minds concerning the validity of applying Marxism-Leninism to Vietnam. In recent years, the number of such people has grown considerably, just as their willingness to face punishment in speaking out. Phu is one of these.

Phu's greatest contribution to this movement is to provide a rationalisation for doubting members, enabling them to feel that it is justifiable for them, not only under the dictates of conscience, but also of reason, to break discipline and leave the Party, or demand fundamental reforms. As mentioned above, Phu's *Doi dieu suy nghi cua moi cong dan* (Some reflections of a citizen) is difficult to read, but his "Chia tay y thuc he" (Goodbye Ideology / Goodbye Marxism) is very accessible. Lack space precludes giving a full translation of the article here, but the main points of it will be mentioned, those which Vietnamese opposing communism, and Vietnamese communists wondering whether to abandon the Party, should know to have and intelligent explanation of their decision.

Marxism will self-disintegrate

Phu is convinced of the decline and end of Marxist-Leninism. There is "no need for anyone to attack it because it will disintegrate by itself.", he says. And with implacable logic and undisputable facts, he explains why that is so. His main arguments are:

- "The more Marxism develops, the more it becomes removed from reality and entangled in increasing self-contradictions because it is built on subjective and one-sided premises and methods"

- "Basically, Marxist-Leninist thought is restored feudalism plus illusion... Marxism-Leninism is not something very lofty that has remained unattainable, but something longed for that has already been passed by... it is not a guiding magic bag full of mysterious formulas which no one can fully understand even centuries later, but only fleeting predictions that can never materialise in real life".

- "Declining Marxism-Leninism... has lost its capacity to serve as flag under which people would march to war against dying Capitalism, but has come to be used as an instrument to rule over the people... It has ceased to be an end to become a means... Not only a means for ruling over the people, but worse, it has become a means for transporting the "Proletariate" wielding power on to the realm of Capitalism, thus betraying its inherent original aim."

The above is sufficient to prompt the present VCP leadership to send Phu to jail. But he goes further.

- "Our ideology will surely have to go, and it is already on its way out. The only problem remaining is whether it will leave "in the respect of human dignity... showing maturity", or, on the contrary, "in deep resentment, withdrawing surreptitiously from history without uttering a word like some artful or very crafty fellow, without making a sound."

- “Communist ideology is erroneous in its very foundations. We must abandon this ideology if we seriously want to build our country.”

One special feature of Phu’s struggle is that he has repeatedly insisted that he harbours no political ambitions, that he does not advocate changing the present Vietnamese communist government by violence, or even its overthrow, but only wants basic reforms, in particular, the abandonment of an ideology which has been proved to be unscientific, utopian, and extremely harmful to the Vietnamese people, and the use of intelligence to understand the world around us so as to adopt the right policies opening of the way to democracy and development.

Keeps hopes alive

Phu occupies a very important place in Vietnam’s current development because he is the living proof that in spite of its systematic use of extreme violence to repress all dissent and of privileges to encourage submission, and in spite of its long hold on power the VCP has not been able to destroy everything good in the Vietnamese people. Phu is a living example of a conscience refusing to bend or be bought, of a spirit refusing to submit or capitulate to threats and victimisation. He keeps alive the hopes of the Vietnamese for a free, democratic, and morally decent Vietnam. And he has served as a shining example of courage and honesty. After him, other heads and voices have been raised inside Vietnam, and especially inside the VCP. Their ranks are growing.

Phu stresses that he is fundamentally optimistic. He believes that “before long” the views like his, considered “reactionary” and subject to special report to higher authorities in “internal bulletins”, will become the views of the Party. But the Party will not admit it. It will move in roundabout ways. First it will declare that what is “advanced” should be adopted, then it will declare that views like his “advanced”, without attribution, then it will officially declare that those views come from the Party itself. In chapter V of his *Doi dieu... (Some views...)* Phu sarcastically tells the story of a column marching in the forest in search of a dream orchard. When it was realised that it had gone in the wrong direction, instead of ordering “reverse, march”, the leaders performed a 180 degree turn by making surreptitiously a very long detour in a circle, although by their serious error they have forfeited the right to lead, and although such a detour would cause loss of precious time.

However, Phu stresses that freedom and democracy can be won by peaceful means only primarily by those inside the Party who are awakened, and are prepared to stand up and fight as citizens for the minimum of freedom and democracy required for the exercise of their citizens’ rights. On the other hand, Phu and other dissidents like him have got word out to their friends and supporters abroad that they have been able to keep up the fight because they believe they can count on the support of all those who care about freedom, democracy and moral decency. The more support they get, the stronger they will fight, and the quicker the results. Those who, for whatever reason – trade, international law, realism, desire not to see their country getting entangled – advocate a policy of “hands off” from Vietnam in regard to the persecution and jailing of people like Phu, undermine the chances for the Vietnamese people of moving rapidly to freedom and democracy and have a decent life through peaceful change, sparing the country the scourge of more violence and chaos.

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