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THE VCP INTERNAL POLICY AND POSSIBLE LEGACIES OF THE VCP-CPSU RELATIONSHIP: SOME HYPOTHESES

Abstract. The paper looks at Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) internal organisational policies and supposes the influence of the legacy of the early stage of relations with the CPSU. It puts forward hypotheses that explain problems in creating adequate domestic sovereignty and concentration of legitimate power to ‘govern subjects’ in the contemporary market economy. The author refers to evidence for antipathy to such concentrations, seen as multiple office-holding, and to VCP formal requirements for structural representation in important activities. He proposes Linz’s notion of ‘limited pluralism’ as a suitable analytical framework.

Keywords: limited pluralism, CPSU, VCP, post-Soviet Communism, authoritarianism, Vietnam.

Адам Фьорд

ВНУТРЕННЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА КПВ И НАСЛЕДИЕ ОТНОШЕНИЙ КПВ С КПСС: НЕКОТОРЫЕ ГИПОТЕЗЫ

Аннотация. В статье рассмотрена внутренняя организационная политика Коммунистической партии Вьетнама (КПВ) и обоснован тезис о том, что она во многом обусловлена наследием раннего этапа отношений с КПСС. Выдвинута гипотеза о том, что эта политика затрудняет обеспечение адекватного контроля над внутренними процессами в стране и порождает проблемы в «управлении субъектами» современной рыночной экономики. На основе проведенного анализа сделан вывод об очевидной антипатии КПВ к чрезмерной концентрации власти, выражающейся в ее распределении между различными учреждениями и реализации принципа «структурного представительства» (различных групп населения в заранее заданных пропорциях) во властных коридорах и важных видах сферах деятельности. Автор опирается на концепцию Линца об «ограниченном плюрализме» в качестве подходящей аналитической основы.

Ключевые слова: ограниченный плюрализм, КПСС, КПВ, постсоветский коммунизм, авторитаризм, Вьетнам.

Introduction

This article seeks to pose questions that other scholars will think interesting.¹ Its basic motivation derives from extensive research on Vietnam and participatory observation of VCP cadres as a development consultant. Also, a 2017 Moscow Workshop and co-authoring [Fforde & Mazyrin 2018], suggested that possible legacies of the relationship between the VCP and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) needs discussion. This is particularly the case when it is not the *formal*

¹ I thank the editors of the journal for support, an anonymous referee, and Sow Keat Tok for collegial discussions and observations on the Chinese Communist Party.

institutions that are important, but the *informal*, such as political culture and learnt instincts and ‘statecraft’, accessible through suitable research methods (for example Prostiakov 1998).

We need to understand why there exists, in various ways, VCP antipathy both institutional and cultural to abuses of power. This has important implications for the VCP’s position within the wider Vietnamese political community, its tolerance of an increasingly unruly population, and its attitudes to the citizenry and their political rights. The VCP regime is authoritarian, but it is not, and it has ways of avoiding becoming, totalitarian.

It is important not to confuse different aspects of this issue. Whilst there are possibilities of authoritarian tendencies in how the country is ruled: use of force, lack of tolerance for dissident opinions, suppression of protests, etc., there is too the issue of abuse of power *within* ruling structures – within the VCP itself, and involving other parts of the ruling apparatus – state bodies, ‘blocs’ (khối) (such as the security and state business ‘blocs’) etc.² Common sense suggests these are linked for antipathy to use of violence per se is possible. Further research would unpick these issues.

Ruling not governing

Vietnamese and those abroad who follow events know the history of unrest going back to (and before) the 1996 Thai Binh ‘Troubles’ [Tuong Lai: 15.01.2020].

A lack of coherent peak political power is the main puzzle this paper addresses.³ My suggestion is, in part, that this is a legacy of the CPSU’s response to the slaughter under Stalin. Ho Chi Minh, as we know, was in Moscow during the Great Purges of the 1930s [Quinn-Judge 2002]. The CPSU sought to offset a one-party regime’s inherent centripetal political forces that had placed excessive power in his hands with centrifugal forces to keep things in check (and so save necks).

This situation is illuminated by other facts. For example, whilst corruption in Vietnam is widely reported and there is much apparent effort to reduce it, it is well-known [Vu Anh Dao 2017] that Politburo 2017 Decree # 15 stated that no state organ could investigate a Party member for corruption without the agreement of relevant Party officials. Thus, Politburo authority is *systemically* enough for, as Vu Anh Dao 2017’s interviewees report, the Decree to be obeyed. Thus, state organs do not and are not intended to function as a ‘rule of law’ – Party decisions are not laws, but they are *systemically* binding on state organs. There is no publicly available body of guiding rules to say how this Party power works such as precedents and explanations: the situation is ad hoc as far as the public is concerned (though there are surely Party formal and informal rules). Under law, what the state and citizens are meant to do could be researched through legal documentation, but because of the Decree available documentation does not say what will happen.

The political consequences of rampant corruption protected by Party decree should not be underestimated. Vu Anh Dao concludes the regime lacks accountability and transparency, leading to ineffectiveness and corruption, and asks: do the systems and processes of accountability in fact *facilitate* corruption? [Vu Anh Dao 2017: 204].

In addition, Vietnam faces a wide range of problems:

Development strategy: with an Economic Miracle based upon servicisation, the donor-supported Party slogan of ‘Modernisation and Industrialisation’ has not been vindicated [Fforde 2016]. Whilst still not slow, growth is not faster than in comparator countries such as Cambodia and Laos. Political and cultural development is unclear and the VCP isolated from popular concerns.

² Here I thank an anonymous reviewer.

³ For a discussion of Vietnam as a ‘Land without a King’ see Fforde 2013; on its ‘ungovernability’ Fforde 2004; and on the authority issue Fforde & Homutova 2017: 97.

Personnel policies. For years, positions have been bought not earned.

Constitutional problems. The Constitution defines organs such as the National Assembly and the State as possessing considerable importance, but it also enthrones the VCP's guiding role. As Decree # 15 shows, extra-legal measures exert power over state actions. With no open rule-governed legal system, 'governance of subjects' is impossible.

Problems of foreign relations, defence and security. Gathering tensions between population and security forces accompany a drumbeat of opinion that the VCP is 'far too close to China'.

These problems of their nature suggest that Vietnam is ruled but not governed, whose regime lacks the capacity and authority to govern her subjects. The VCP faces a loss of the initiative as society evolves under its own logic and a diminishing range of options to respond to events (manifest in increased use of the security forces).

Woodside 1971 argued that Vietnamese political culture historically was as much monarchical as mandarin. Thus, Vietnam's political culture would address issues of sovereignty by focussing power tightly, with an individual at the peak. The competing interests associated with the massive flows from corrupt earnings (half of all business profits – Nguyen et al. 2016) would be managed politically by power concentration at the peak, a Hobbesian Leviathan, a power 'above all' [Hinsley 1986]. But this has not happened.

Choosing tools of analysis

I have long argued, with others, that views asserting the great power of the VCP are wrong. In part this reflects my belief that in an open market economy *authority* is needed to create a Hobbesian 'power above all', yet the VCP lacks that authority [Fforde & Homutova 2017]. Much debate hinges on interpretation of the 1986 VIIth Party Congress that announced 'đổi mới'. There is clear evidence that both regarding the state sector and collective agriculture, and market development, policies *before* the Congress had long retreated before spontaneous economic commercialisation.⁴

I think that deep aversion to power concentration would make political institutions formally designed to prevent this operate in practice.⁵ In general, and currently, we do not find such outcomes in Vietnam under VCP rule; many Party members seem concerned that they could arise, and this is suggestive, given the reality of one-Party rule. As politics in Vietnam evolves these tensions are clear and popular opposition powerful.

Note within the evolving Vietnamese polity of the changing extent and political implications of 'hot spots' (điểm nóng), starting before the 1997 Thai Binh incidents, those troubles [Tuong Lai: 15.01.2020], and more recently the disturbances in Hanoi over trees [Bui Hai Thiem 2016; Vu Ngoc Anh 2017]. The trend is an escalation, an increasing VCP inability to focus its political power to secure authority and legitimacy, and an increasing ability of the population to take the political initiative.

The question of rights is also intriguing. Linguistic markers reveal incoherence. For example, the "Plan for Human Rights work in 2017" [People's Committee of Thua Thien Hue province 2017] uses two very different phrases for human rights (the Han-Viet *nhân quyền* and the demotic *quyền con người*). The former is 'bad' ('threats from hostile foreign forces') and the latter 'good' ('these

⁴ See the early 1980s PhDs by Vickerman and me on collective agriculture (published as Fforde 1989 and Vickerman 1986). For the state sector see Fforde 2007 and for the 1980s de Vylder & Fforde 1996. For discussion of the 'myth' of the VII-th Congress see Fforde 2018a and Fforde 2018b (in German). De Vylder & Fforde was translated (de Vylder & Fforde 1997).

⁵ My foundational source for this is McAuley 1977.

are your rights’) and something that the local population should know about. But where and when which term is to be used is not clear.

Recent research by Joerg Wischermann has argued that authoritarian tendencies exist in civic organisations (i.e., ‘non-civic’ behaviour amongst the leaders of Vietnamese civil society organisations - “elements of authoritarian political thinking in Civic Organizations’ leaders’ mindsets and courses of action” [Wischermann 2010: 3]). Authoritarian tendencies to abuse power are found in Vietnamese culture.

Such considerations lead me to suggest: does the CPSU legacy help explain why, because there are checks and balances in place, power within the Party is not concentrated, and so the regime finds it hard to shift from ruling to governing an increasingly open society with a market economy? It cannot focus authority upon a power ‘above all’ used to secure methods of governing subjects. Instead we see a decline in political authority. Violent stand-offs with the population cannot be resolved through use of state force or negotiated outcomes enforceable through a law-governed state. Clearly, a ‘coup’ is one imaginable way to ‘solve’ this problem. In part I ask why this has not happened. Part of the agenda here is to confirm (or not) and then explain why the VCP may be authoritarian, yet not totalitarian and has ways (inherited from the CPSU) of avoiding becoming so.

We can deploy Linz’s phrase ‘limited pluralism’ to refer to the presence of a range of political forces within the regime (Party, State and Mass Organisations). It is therefore, in a strict sense, a ‘limited internal pluralism’.⁶ To say that the Vietnamese political regime is one of ‘limited pluralism’ is not to say that the country’s politics are pluralist.

My core hypothesis here is that a part of the answer is to be found in VCP internal policy and its Khrushchevian legacy. The model entails tension between two sets of forces: *centripetal* forces that concentrate power, and *centrifugal* forces that attack concentration of power. The key research question is then - What are the centrifugal forces pushing back against the centripetal forces pushing for a concentration of power? What keeps the varying balance in existence? This in turn poses valuable questions, such as whether the rise to power of Le Duc Tho and Le Duan in the very early 1960s (and the tendencies reported by Huy Duc 2012) amount to a centralising tendency then offset by the effects of Khrushchevian reforms.

Here I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that this mechanistic metaphor (centripetal vs. centrifugal forces) can be developed. First, it points to the possibility of cyclical movement (over time) as processes push a disequilibrium back towards an equilibrium, with the possibility of ‘over-shooting’ and a cyclical pattern. Second, these two forces could manifest themselves differently in different parts of the overall system.

Thus, until the start of Ho Chi Minh’s loss of power and Le Duan’s accession to Party leadership in 1960, was the VCP relatively internally pluralistic, but this pluralism under pressure (as can be noted from the ebb and flow of the repressive Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm affair of the late 1950s)? How plausible is this assessment?

The rise of Le Duan and his ally Le Duc Tho, as we see from Huy Duc’s account (Huy Duc 2012), arguably attacked this ‘limited pluralism’, and the demise of Le Duan in 1986 and his replacement by Nguyen van Linh arguably saw its re-assertion as the internal politics of the VCP became less illiberal (as did Vietnam more generally). With the USSR’s fall in 1991 and the 1992 start of the Economic Miracle coping with the new situation was helped as Do Muoi and Vo van Kiet

⁶ Linz is widely cited – according to Google Scholar, around 40,000 citations (Harzing’s *Publish or Perish* 16/1/2020).

shared top Party and State positions and had personal authority. However, both retired in 1997 as the Thai Binh risings posed major challenges to the regime, removing their prestige from the political equation. By this time Vietnamese society and economy had already become far more open and unruly and a natural political response, to focus power upon somebody close to the security forces, saw the VCP 'explore' the Le Kha Phieu 'solution'. But fears of his use of the security forces against political opponents supported his early dismissal and replacement by the less assertive Nong Duc Manh, arguably marking enhanced internal 'limited pluralism'.

Then the political push from Premier Nguyen Tan Dung in the late 'noughties' appears as centripetal and his defeat a partial recovery of centrifugal forces. But notably in 2018 General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, who replaced Nong Duc Manh in 2011, added the Presidency. Even under Le Duan, the positions of General Secretary, President, Premier and Chair of the National Assembly had been held by separate people.

'Limited pluralism' as a core element of VCP internal policy

So I conclude that the idea of 'limited pluralism' offers a basis for analysing these issues and help answer my research question: how to explain the VCP's inability to generate a clear focus of authority and so power, and shift to a 'government of subjects' in the contemporary Vietnamese market economy.⁷

My argument is that we see a legacy of the post-Stalin CPSU, with its 'Khrushchevian' flavour, in the VCP: the fear of concentration of power (*nhất thể hóa*), and the co-called 'structural principle' (*nguyên tắc cơ cấu*) which I understand as the practice of ensuring that committees are composed of people by virtue of their positions (*ex officio*). This means that these positions are represented in relevant committees in ways that seek to ensure representation of the key institutional political forces of the regime.⁸ This supports the conclusion that the notion of a 'limited pluralism' is attractive [Linz 2000].

Let us look at these two phrases.

Nhất thể hóa

Many Vietnamese colleagues, Party members, look with distaste at proposals for the concentration of powers upon an individual, in Vietnamese 'nhất thể hóa' (such as the adoption by the Party General Secretary of the Presidency).

At local level the division of powers implies that a Party Secretary is appointed by Party procedures, and the Head of the local People's Committee by the system of managed democracy (controlled by the Party). Being separate these procedures allow for different political forces to play out. This 'playing out' relies precisely upon those different procedures (albeit both guided by the Party), but gives two different paths for advance.

Justifications for power concentration in the official media, and reports of its successes where carried out, focus upon reductions in budget costs due to reduced staff numbers but also address concerns about the risks of abuse of power [e.g. P. Thảo – H. Sâm 2018]. These discussions are readily available to public scrutiny through the press.

For example, consider the response of the first (standing) Party Secretary of Quang Ninh to a question (in an official newspaper) about concerns about 'nhất thể hóa':

⁷ Clearly, this has little *necessarily* to do with democracy, as English domestic and imperial history shows clearly.

⁸ See here Carl Thayer's early work on the changing composition of the VCP Central Committee [Thayer 1992].

Many are of the opinion that the largest problem of organizing so the Party Secretary of the commune or district is also the Chairman of the People's Committee is the danger of abuses of power and the arbitrary use of power, and the issue of being both 'player and referee' ... how has this contradiction been resolved in recent use of this model in the two districts of Tiên Yên and Cô Tô?) [P. Thảo – H. Sâm 2018].

The answer was put in terms of changes in procedures, re-defining who did what. It is clear the risks of concentrations of power are accepted openly.

Nguyên tắc cơ cấu

The 'structural principle' is not so easy to research.⁹

On the normative principles governing reports in the run-ups to Party Congresses, one can find the lists of those organs to be consulted:

Reviews will be carried out according to the regulations of the Politburo and will guarantee {that} the review report of each Party Committee will take the contributed opinions of the Party Committee at the immediately lower level, of the Party members as a body, of the Party staff liaison committee and the leaders of committees, branches, mass organisations at the same level and must have the opinion of the immediately superior Party Committee [VCP Central Committee 2016 9.2.8 Clause B¹⁰].

This shows the bodies included as of right in the VCP's internal review procedures.

It is not so easy to establish rights of representation for Mass Organisations. The Party's own Standing Committees are normatively composed of Party and State officials. For example, at provincial level, they include, under Party labels - the Party Secretary and Deputy Secretaries, heads of important Party Committees (Organization, Propaganda), Head of the Supervisory Committee, Military Control (that is, control over the Military) and Party Secretaries of immediately inferior levels. And under State labels: Deputy Chairmen of the People's Committees and Councils at the province level (depending on their importance).

Again, this shows, but somewhat unclearly, that risks of power concentration are accepted and managed *in principle* through use of Committees whose structures are pre-determined, in a 'limited pluralism'.

It is striking that when Khrushchev was still in power there is no mention of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' (*chuyên chính vô sản*) in the VCP Party Statutes approved by the 1960 III Party Congress [VCP 2019a]. But the VCP position now is:

*The dictatorship of the proletariat is one of the key pillars of Marxism. The vigour of this ideology requires that in its conception and use its scientific nature is grasped, whilst at the same time **it must develop and used creatively under new conditions** [VCP 2019b stress added]*

The Chapter on the Trade Unions demonstrates, to me powerfully, the way reforms sought to use Mass Organisations for various purposes, not least to create a check against excessive power concentration [Jo 2009]. Further research is needed.

⁹ Here I am in part guided by Vietnamese colleagues' statements of such practices' importance. This principle now seems less important than before.

¹⁰ All translations by me.

Conclusion

The question of CPSU legacies for internal VCP policy is important and requires research. I suggest two avenues of enquiry, one easier to research than the other, and in neither am I fully qualified (I do not speak or read Russian).

First, what were the *formal* changes to the organizational principles of the CPSU after Stalin, and to what extent have these been reflected in the VCP's internal policies?

Second, what were the *informal* political-cultural beliefs associated with the ways in which the CPSU ruled, the ways these changed after Stalin, and can these be found in the VCP? These are harder to access. Written documents on how the formal principles were taught and propagandized should be accessible, but clearly interviews and other ways of accessing beliefs and priorities are also needed.

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