POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN VIETNAM:
FROM THE SIXTH TO SEVENTH NATIONAL PARTY CONGRESS*

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The ‘regularization of politics’

In 1991 Vietnam held the seventh national congress of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP). This marks an important step in what I have termed ‘the regularization of politics’ in Vietnam (Thayer 1988). The VCP was founded 61 years ago. Until unification in 1975 national party congresses were infrequent events and were rarely held within the time period stipulated by party statutes. Some nine years elapsed between the 1951 second congress and the third congress held in September 1960. A further sixteen years passed before the party held its fourth national congress in 1976. Since then, however, national party congresses have been held on schedule, once every five years. The fifth congress was held in March 1982, the sixth in December 1986 and the seventh in June 1991.

For most of its existence the VCP has been led by the same generation of revolutionaries who founded the party. Up until the seventh congress, for example, only 30 individuals had served on the highest decision-making body, the Politburo (bo chinh tri). This elite leadership group is noted for its remarkable degree of unity and cohesion. (In fact it was possible to discern a unique Vietnamese leadership style or ‘operational code’ (see Thayer 1984 for a discussion of these categories). For example, Ho Chi Minh served as president of the party from 1951 to his death in 1969. Le Duan served as party first secretary/secretary-general from 1960 to his death in 1986. During the period from 1951 to 1976, with the exception of individuals dropped from the Politburo in 1956 as a result of errors committed in the course of the land reform campaign, there have been no dismissals or purges of Politburo members. Throughout the period up to 1976, the Central Committee was also dominated by veteran revolutionaries first elected to the Central Committee in 1951 or of the same generation elected in 1960.

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A national congress of the Vietnam Communist Party has three main functions. It elects the leadership — the central committee, the politburo and the secretary-general, as well as specialized bodies such as the secretariat and control committee. Secondly, the national congress considers and approves various reports, including an economic report which covers future developments up to the next party congress. Thirdly, the national congress may approve changes to the party’s statutes and rules.

Prior to 1976, the Vietnamese political process was controlled by a very small elite who were rarely held to account by the party at large for the execution of their duties or for party policy. For example, the Politburo and Central Committee elected in 1960 went for sixteen years before its stewardship came under scrutiny by the party’s rank and file.

What has changed since unification? First, the party leadership is now held accountable on a regular basis. Senior party leaders must present written reports outlining how they have acquitted their responsibilities since the last party congress. These reports are extensively discussed and critically reviewed in the lead-up to the congress and at the congress itself.

Secondly, the sectoral composition of the party Central Committee has altered (see Thayer 1988 for a discussion of these categories). In the past the Central Committee was composed overwhelmingly of very senior party officials (members of the Politburo), senior party officials who served in the central party and state bureaucracy, and to a lesser extent, by senior military officers. Since unification provincial level party officials and other secondary level officials have been brought into the Central Committee (Table 1). Military representation declined between 1960 and 1986 and rose slightly at the seventh congress in 1991.

The third development since unification has been the institutionalization of leadership change. Incompetent or corrupt officials have been dropped from the Central Committee. At the same time, the VCP has attempted to manage the process of generational transition. This process is most dramatic on the Politburo. Whereas no Politburo member was dropped or retired in 1960 and only one individual was dropped in 1976, the process since then has been unprecedented. Six individuals were retired in 1982, another six retired in 1986, and a further seven retired in 1991. In addition, one Politburo member was expelled in March 1990.

The pattern of change involving members of the Central Committee is illustrated in Table 2. These figures show that there is a regular turnover of membership on the Central Committee. Figures for the period 1960–91 indicate that approximately 45 per cent of members are retained from the previous Central Committee; another 19 per cent are promoted from alternate status (where they had no voting rights); and 35 per cent are new members who have not served at national level before.
Table 1: Sectoral composition of the VCP Central Committee, 1960-91 (%)*

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SENIOR PARTY</td>
<td>(28)</td>
<td>(17)</td>
<td>(15)</td>
<td>(11)</td>
<td>(9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Central Party/State</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Central Party/State</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>COMBINED CENTRAL</td>
<td>(46)</td>
<td>(42)</td>
<td>(42)</td>
<td>(32)</td>
<td>(40)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary Party/State</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Secondary Party/State</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>COMBINED SECONDARY</td>
<td>(11)</td>
<td>(26)</td>
<td>(30)</td>
<td>(49)</td>
<td>(43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Military</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>COMBINED MILITARY</td>
<td>(15)</td>
<td>(16)</td>
<td>(13)</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>(9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>(100)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
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*The data in this table should be taken as suggestive rather than definitive. There were problems of missing, contradictory or incomplete data on certain individuals which made classification difficult. Because of this problem, it was felt that the category combined total in the three instances above would be a more accurate guide to the sectoral composition of the Central Committee.

Table 2: Retention and promotion rates on the VCP Central Committee (full members*)

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=46)</td>
<td>(n=101)</td>
<td>(n=116)</td>
<td>(n=116)</td>
<td>(n=146)</td>
<td>(n=105)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retainedb</td>
<td>18 (39%)</td>
<td>36 (36%)</td>
<td>61 (52.5%)</td>
<td>65 (56%)</td>
<td>65 (44%)</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotedc</td>
<td>11 (24%)</td>
<td>10 (10%)</td>
<td>23 (20.0%)</td>
<td>21 (18%)</td>
<td>33 (23%)</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newd</td>
<td>17 (37%)</td>
<td>55 (54%)</td>
<td>32 (27.5%)</td>
<td>30 (26%)</td>
<td>48 (33%)</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
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Notes:
*The alternate category was dropped at the seventh congress in 1991.
b held over from the previous Central Committee as a full member.
c change of status from alternate to full member.
d not previously an alternate member.
Taken together, the processes of leadership accountability, expanded sectoral representation and institutionalization of leadership change constitute the 'regularization' of the political process in Vietnam at the elite level. This paper will now address itself to political change in Vietnam between the sixth and seventh national party congresses before turning to a discussion of the seventh national congress itself.

Doi Moi — renovation

Vietnam’s political reform process predates the landmark 1986 sixth national party congress which popularized the expression doi moi. The 1982 fifth national party congress, for example, addressed itself to ending the chaotic overlap between party and state institutions (Thayer 1991). Political (and economic) reform initiatives pursued after the fifth congress achieved limited results. It was in this context that a consensus emerged within the VCP in favour of a comprehensive reform package. Vietnam’s reformers found a potential ally in CPSU General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, who came to power in 1985 and who was pursuing his own reform program which stressed openness (glasnost) and restructuring (perestroika).

In 1986, at the sixth national VCP congress, Vietnam formally embarked on the path of doi moi or renovation. The sixth congress, in effect, ratified and adopted as national policy a reform process which had been under way for a number of years. In the political sphere, Vietnam’s policy of renovation led to limited attempts at democratization. These efforts were given much less prominence and publicity by outside observers and writers.

In reviewing the period between the fifth and sixth party congress, the VCP Central Committee came to the conclusion that ‘the errors and shortcomings in economic and social leadership originated from shortcomings in the party’s ideological and organizational activity and its cadre work. This lays at the root of all other causes’ (‘Political Report’ 1986; Vietnam News Agency, 15 December 1986). The VCP therefore decided at the sixth congress to carry out limited political reforms by renovating the party organization and the state apparatus (including the National Assembly); loosening controls over the press and media, and implementing a regime of socialist legality (rule of law). According to the ‘Political Report’ of the VCP Central Committee to the sixth congress:

...there exist in our society some abnormal phenomena, that is a lack of coherence between the party, the state and the people; bureaucracy in the leading and management bodies, and in those organizations specially entrusted with mass work. The main cause is that the mechanism which co-ordinates the activities of the party, the people and the state has not yet been concretised into institutions.
The 'Political Report' also noted:

To strengthen the effectiveness of the management by the state means, first and foremost, to uphold the role of the National Assembly and the State Council, and of the people's councils at all levels. At present, popularly elected bodies at different levels are still selected, elected and functioning in a formalist way. In many cases, party committees at various levels run the whole show, doing the work of state organs. The selection of people into elected bodies in many places is done in a forcible manner. Many people's committees do not really respect the people's councils....

It is a pressing task to rearrange ministries, state committees and general departments, and to streamline the state administrative machinery of the ministries. A ministry's administrative machinery should not get itself too involved in enterprises; production and business operations. It is necessary to reduce the number of such intermediate organs as departments, agencies, bureaux, sections, and to vigorously move to the direct expert-type work-style; to limit the number of deputies at all levels and organs. Along the guidelines of rearranging the state organs at central level, local people's committees should also be streamlined, with full powers, duties and managerial capabilities over the area under their jurisdiction.

With respect to the system of socialist legality, the 'Political Report' stated:

It is necessary to step by step amend and perfect the legal system so as to ensure that the state machinery be organised and operated in accordance with the law...

The law must be strictly observed; all citizens are equal before the law. As our party is now in power, all cadres in whatever positions must live and work in strict compliance with the law, and be exemplary in observing the law. No-one is allowed to make use of their power and influence to infringe on the law. Any violation of the law should be brought to justice. Those who violate the law must be handed over to judicial organs for trial; their cases should not be handled as 'internal affairs'..

After the sixth party congress a concerted effort was made to rejuvenate the party and party-led mass organizations and special-interest groups affiliated with the Vietnam Fatherland Front. The press was encouraged 'to speak straight, speak the truth' (noi thang, noi that). Greater freedom was given to writers and artists. Party control over the selection process of deputies to the National Assembly was loosened, and elected members were given greater scope to express critical views. The combined effects of economic and political reform led to a wide variety of activity conducted independently of party control, most notably among the press, the video and publishing media, war veterans, private entrepreneurs and to a lesser extent among students
and other groups. In all instances the party moved quickly to reassert control. The sections below will review these developments in greater detail.

Political democratization

Party reform, the press and media

In the lead up to the sixth party congress in December 1986, widespread criticism of the party and its policies emerged in the local congresses of the party organization (Fatseas 1991). This prompted one observer to conclude that:

the most significant aspect of the [sixth] congress was its formal commitment to democratization of Vietnamese politics. For the first time there was widespread refusal to accept the absolute authority of the leadership. In local and regional preparatory meetings lively discussions led to overwhelming rejection of the Political Report. It was ultimately rewritten. A movement to cleanse the party was launched and in some areas up to half or more of the cadres were expelled. In practical terms the congress became the launching pad for the current movement for political renewal. The congress called for a revolution from within. This would involve both real democratization and an overhauling of the party political machinery (Huynh 1988:2).

Vietnam’s programme of political democratization arguably made its greatest impact in the press and media. According to Ha Dang, editor-in-chief of the party newspaper Nhan Dan, ‘the sixth congress of our party stressed that the press should be not only the mouth piece of the party and leading bodies, but also a rostrum for the voices of the broad masses of the people. In short, you could put it like this: the people know, the people discuss, the people carry out and the people follow up’ [dan biet, dan ban, dan lam, dan kiem tra] (BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 21 August 1987).

On 25 May 1987 a new column, headed ‘Things Which Must Be Done Immediately’ appeared in Nhan Dan, over the initials ‘N.V.L.’ It was thought then, and later confirmed, that these were the initials of none other than the VCP secretary-general, Nguyen Van Linh. This article signalled the onset of a period of press liberalization, an increase in citizen self-expression, and accountability of government officials. According to one Indochina-watcher, Linh’s press campaign had two consequences: it led to a spate of muck-raking that left government bureaucrats and mid-level party officials uneasy and it led to the publication of a large number of new periodicals (The Bangkok Post [Alan Dawson], 27 September 1989).

In his column, Linh railed against corruption and other ills besetting Vietnamese society. He urged the press and the public at large to play a greater role in reporting on the actions of corrupt officials and other manifestations of ‘negative phenomena’ in
social life. He called for the people to submit letters to the editors of newspapers and journals and petitions to appropriate state bodies.

Linh's public call to action was paralleled by in-house efforts by the VCP 'to purify' (reform) its ranks. A party rectification campaign was carried out from 1987 to 1990 during which period 127,800 members were disciplined and 78,200 expelled.² The Central Committee's sixth plenum, meeting in March 1989, announced plans to reduce party supervision over state bodies by slashing the number of Central Committee departments from 32 to twelve (Sydney Morning Herald [Steven Erlanger], 3 April 1989). At the same time, reformers pushed for the convening of a national party conference, the highest policy-making body below the national party congress, to weed out party deadwood (ibid.; Far Eastern Economic Review [Murray Hiebert], 13 April 1989).

Elements of Vietnam's press supported Linh's initiatives and became increasingly active in investigating and reporting on cases of corruption and the misuse of office by party and state officials. In June 1988, for example, the press reported that 506 members of the Cao Bang party organization had been expelled for embezzlement of state property and another 391 dismissed for other misdemeanors (Sydney Morning Herald, 22 June 1988). In one particularly noteworthy case, an investigative journalist successfully pursued Ha Trong Hoa, the party chief in Thanh Hoa province and a member of the VCP Central Committee. After an inquiry by central authorities, Hoa was dismissed publicly from all his posts for corruption. In another case, investigative reporting by journalists forced local authorities to stop hounding a successful businessman, Nguyen Van Chan, to apologize for their heavy-handedness, to return confiscated property and to make compensation for loss of stock (Asian Wall Street Journal [Barry Wain], 10 July 1990).

In June 1988 Nguyen Van Linh, in a speech to the fifth plenum, acknowledged that, 'not a small number of party cadres and members have committed numerous negative practices, and even worse, some have taken a long slide into the muck of degeneration and degradation' (Far Eastern Economic Review [Hiebert], 13 October 1988). Linh's observations were underscored by survey results which found their way into the press. These accounts revealed that in certain localities between 16 and 36 per cent of party members had 'serious shortcomings that warrant[ed] disciplinary action'.

Another survey of nearly 4,600 party members found that 26 per cent had violated the party's economic regulations. This figure was put as high as 45 per cent in Ho Chi Minh City. To illustrate behaviour which was considered unacceptable, Nhan Dan revealed in August 1988 that 'they [party officials] directly hired workers for production work, engaged in trade or operated as money-lenders' (ibid.). The
army’s newspaper, Quan Doi Nhan Dan, reported instances where party cadres ‘misappropriate collective property, seek personal riches...build imposing houses, ride Honda Cub motorbikes, and have furnished their homes entirely with expensive imported luxuries’.

The party’s new policy of openness (cong khai) encouraged some members of the public and the press to speak out. But other factors were at work. Vietnam’s ‘open door’ policy towards the West led to an inflow of foreign ideas. This occurred at the same time as events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were impacting on Vietnam. These received coverage in the Vietnamese media. But the degree of liberal press activity should not be overestimated. According to Huynh Kim Khanh (1988:5) no more than 30 of Vietnam’s 253 newspapers and periodicals actively supported doi moi.

Possibly the most important factor in the liberalization of press activity was economic. Under doi moi the state phased out its financial subsidies to the press. In order to survive, newspapers and magazines began to explore popular topics (including violence and sex) and to accept advertising for the first time. The number of publications available for sale rose rapidly as did the number of weekend supplements and special colour editions. Many publications evaded the regulations on registration. Others published without formal approval (Hanoi Home Service, 15 April 1989).

In brief, during the period 1987–89 party controls on Vietnam’s press were considerably loosened and this led to an explosion of unsanctioned activity. In July 1989 the Ministry of Information reported that ‘papers and publishing houses at central and local levels have violated regulations on addenda and supplements to periodicals and special issues, causing a chaotic situation’.

In 1989 party conservatives sought to reimpose party control. In February Nguyen Van Linh was moved to call on the press in Ho Chi Minh City to tone down its criticism because this led to a loss of the public’s confidence in the party. The last ‘N.V.L.’ column was published in March after a four-month period of silence (Nhan Dan, 21 March 1989).

On 13 July 1989 Ministry of Information took steps to ensure that existing press rules and regulations were observed. It cancelled all temporary permits and suspended eight periodicals for failure to comply with the law. At the same time To Hoa, the editor of the party’s newspaper in the south, Saigon Giai Phong, was forced to retire. Vu Kim Hanh, editor of the popular southern youth newspaper, Tuoi Tre, came under fire for publishing a frank account of authoritarianism in North Korea.

The conservative counter-reaction was most strident at the seventh plenum of the VCP Central Committee in August 1989 which convened to discuss ‘urgent ideological issues’. This plenum, reacting to efforts by overseas Vietnamese to destabilize the Hanoi government⁴ and to events in Poland, as well as to domestic developments,
roundly rejected bourgeois liberalism and political pluralism. Immediately after the plenum the VCP initiated a crackdown. Tran Do, a supporter of press openness, was dismissed from his post as head of the VCP Central Committee Department of Culture and Arts. New censorship regulations were imposed and many of the newspapers and magazines which had appeared since 1987 were closed down (The Bangkok Post [Dawson], 27 September 1989).

Writers, poets and literary publishing houses

At the same time as Vietnam’s journalists took pen to paper, several of Vietnam’s writers began to explore the limits of freedom of expression under doi moi. Writer Nguyen Huy Thiep, for example, wrote a short story, ‘Chastity’, which hinted that eighteenth century hero Nguyen Hue lusted after young women. Was this an allegory on the life of Ho Chi Minh? In another story, Hiep depicted the downtrodden life of peasants in a remote rural village. Who was to blame for their sorry state? These stories, published in Van Nghe, the official organ of the Vietnam Writers’ Association, shocked and outraged party conservatives and led to the sacking of the journal’s editor, Nguyen Ngoc.

Female writer Duong Thu Huong raised such subjects as political repression in Vietnam and the all-pervasive corruption of province-level party officials (in Nhan Vi Tinh Le ['Big Men in Little Provinces']). In a short story, ‘The Retired General’, she likened the dashed hopes of Vietnam’s revolution to aborted foetuses being fed to the general’s dog by his wife. She was also an outspoken advocate for freedom of thought and expression. Tape recordings of her remarks were smuggled abroad and printed in the émigré press. Huong was criticized by colleagues, interrogated by public security officials, placed under detention and expelled from the party. She was detained again in 1991 for allegedly passing sensitive state documents to a visiting Vietnamese-American.

According to one correspondent, the relaxation of the party’s grip on everyday life has also led to the rebirth of Vietnam’s salon tradition (tao dan) of poetry recitals in sidewalk cafes. Barry Wain describes the opening of the Literature Cafe in the port city of Haiphong, at which other writers and poets gather to discuss their work, exchange views and gossip (Asian Wall Street Journal, 23 June 1990).

The loosening of political controls on literary expression, like the loosening of controls over the press, led to the rapid expansion of the printing and publishing industry. This too proceeded in an uncontrolled fashion. Some printing houses blatantly evaded their licences, while others started up without official sanction. This led to an outpouring of all manner of publications, ranging from sex manuals, popular novels, and pre-1975 literary and historical works, to tracts critical of socialism. The
writingsof Thiep, Huong and other authors were also published abroad in the Vietnamese-language émigré press in Europe and North America and smuggled back to Vietnam.

The activities of these independent literary publishing houses and Vietnam’s liberally inclined writers quickly brought them into conflict with party conservatives. Vietnam’s doi moi era literature was labelled ‘protest literature’ and condemned as egotism (Tap Chi Cong San, March 1989). It too suffered the heavy hand of censorship and repression during the crackdown initiated in 1989. In July, for example, disciplinary action was taken against three publishing houses in Ho Chi Minh City for publishing books whose contents were not approved or for publishing without a permit. It was also reported that two literary magazines published in central Vietnam were shut down.

In late July–early August 1990 the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sports and Tourism and the VCP Central Committee Department of Ideology and Culture jointly convened a national conference on ‘publication work’. The conference sternly criticized a number of publishing houses which... have published a number of bad, reactionary and decadent works, thus running counter to our party lines and viewpoints. They have rampantly republished many translations of books, and books that had been published in the south before 30th April 1975 (‘Voice of Vietnam’, 2 August 1990).

The party’s new hard line was codified in a VCP secretariat directive ‘on strengthening the party leadership over press and publication work’ which was issued on 2 August 1990.

**The video cassette industry**

One side effect of Vietnam’s reform programme, and the loosening of economic controls, has been the proliferation of radio-cassette players, video recorders, and television sets. This has been accompanied by the increased availability in Vietnam of foreign films on video. From the onset the government has had difficulty in controlling this development. In 1988, for example, the government suspended and then later authorized the resumption of the showing of video films from non-socialist countries. Under the terms of Directive No. 87 issued by the Ministry of Culture, the Vietnam Motion Pictures Union was placed in charge of distributing approved films and videos to authorized theatres (Hanoi Home Service, 12 November 1988).

According to government estimates made in 1989, there were 40,000 video recorders in Vietnam of which only half were registered (Far Eastern Economic Review [Hiebert], 31 August 1989). There is no estimate of the number of radio-cassette
recorders but these too are freely available on the open market. Video recorders proved to be a lucrative source of income not only for clubs, associations and private owners but also for the military, police, local government and party officials who were attempting to supplement their meagre incomes (ibid.).

In 1989 the growing private video industry, like the printing and publishing sector, was reined in by conservative party officials alarmed at what they viewed as the spread of decadent and pornographic material. There were also a few reported instances where dissident overseas Vietnamese attempted to use the medium of video tapes to spread their anti-communist political message.

In July 1989 it was decreed that only government-registered and approved cultural, cinematographic and hotel services could show videos commercially. All privately owned video recorders had to be registered with the local cultural affairs branch. New measures designed to restrict the circulation of videotapes were also imposed.

Quite plainly, given the domestic and international context in which these developments were occurring, the VCP feared the impact of foreign ideas. Do Muoi, a senior member of the VCP Politburo and chairman of the Council of Ministers, stated as much in a speech to the fourth congress of the Vietnam Writers' Association. He warned that the illegal importation of video cassettes (and books) would affect the party's efforts to control the impact of foreign ideas (Hanoi Home Service, 28 October 1989).

National Assembly deputies

Probably the second most important manifestation of the democratization process in Vietnam has been the changing role of National Assembly deputy. This has resulted from a gradual loosening of the party's tight control over the selection process as well as from official encouragement 'to look the truth in the face, to evaluate the facts correctly and to tell the whole truth' ('Political Report' 1986).

In elections for the current National Assembly, the candidate-to-seat ratio was increased. In the most recent elections, held in April 1987 and followed by by-elections in May, 826 candidates stood for 496 seats; in the previous elections, held in 1981, only 614 candidates stood for the same number of seats. The number of electoral units was also increased, from 93 to 169, thus making the elected deputy accountable to a smaller constituency.

In the past, only candidates from the Communist-dominated Vietnam Fatherland Front were allowed to compete. They were proposed by the local party secretary with little or no popular input. In 1987, reform-minded members of the party used the democratization process to put pressure on middle-level party cadres to end their
resistance to change. The rules were altered so that candidates could be proposed at public meetings. Their biographies were posted in public. According to one veteran journalist, '[t]hey have made party officials more vulnerable to public dissatisfaction' (*The Bangkok Post* [Paul Wedel], 18 April 1989). The party still retained its final right of approval, however. A Vietnamese correspondent reported these changes in this way:

Formerly candidate lists were drawn up beforehand by the party committees, the administration and the VFF committees concerned, before soliciting voters' opinions. Therefore, some voters complained that since these candidate lists had already been decided upon before hand, of what use was it to contribute their opinions? You could elect anyone you like! Thus, it is clear that voters were deprived of the right to select and nominate their own candidates and that they refused to make their views known because they felt angry and, chiefly, feared prosecution.

It is noteworthy that in preparing for these elections the people's ideas have been respected. Electoral steering committees only proposed a number of nominees; gave accounts of their knowledge, qualifications and capabilities; and affirmed the number of deputies to be elected at each electoral unit, while the voters selected their own candidates. Afterwards, two consultative conferences will be held to screen these candidates, based on recommendations made by voters in areas where these candidates live and work....

At all places we visited, we noted that some nominees selected in the first round had been deleted from the namelist of candidates because the people were not satisfied with their qualifications... Basically, namelists of candidates were made in accordance with proposals made by party committees' echelons. However, at some places three candidates were replaced on a list of four nominees after consultations with the people (Hanoi Home Service, 9 April 1987).

The nature of the electoral campaign changed as well. In the lead up to the 1987 elections, it was clear that the Vietnamese voter wanted tougher action against corrupt cadres, incentive payments for workers, a labour law to protect those laid off, and measures to attract foreign investment (*Bangkok Post* [Wedel], 18 April 1989). These demands were vocally expressed at public meetings. A Vietnamese journalist who toured the southern provinces of Tay Ninh, Tien Giang, Cuu Long, and Dong Thap reported the campaign atmosphere as 'hectic' with use of megaphones, posters, and banners (Hanoi Home Service, 9 April 1987). The local press and radio stations also aired the views of contenders. At consultative meetings held to choose candidates incumbents were criticized.

The process of limited democratization also carried over into the workings of the National Assembly. According to Nguyen Xuan Oanh, '[e]very session is now a
grilling for the Council of Ministers. It is doing its job of overseeing the Government. (Sydney Morning Herald [Cumming-Bruce], 9 August 1989). For example, in late June 1988 some of the most vocal criticism of the government's performance came from newly elected deputies. Government ministers were accused by name of mishandling a food crisis which resulted in starvation in northern Vietnam earlier in the year and of failing to slow the country's raging inflation.

In July 1988, Tuoi Tre reported that southern assembly members pointedly asked Agriculture Minister Nguyen Cong Tan why he had 'accepted false reports' late the previous year about a bumper rice crop in Thanh Hoa and other northern provinces only a few months before famine struck (Far Eastern Economic Review [Hiebert], 28 July 1988). In 1989, deputies from Ho Chi Minh City backed a petition from local voters to the chairman of the National Assembly which called for the removal of Hoang Quy, the Minister of Finance, and Tran Tieu, his deputy (Saigon Giai Phong, 21 May 1989). Proceedings of the National Assembly were filmed and excerpts were aired on state television.

The rule of law has been given priority in Vietnam's process of doi moi. National Assembly subcommittees have played an increasingly active role in vetting proposed legislation. This has led to delays and even changes in draft legislation that was once routinely rubber stamped. For example, at the sixth session of the eighth National Assembly it was reported that, 'most of the eighteen deputies who spoke... did not endorse Article 11 of the draft law on the trade unions' responsibility for social security management; they proposed instead that management of the social security funds be turned over to the Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Welfare' (Hanoi Radio, 26 December 1989). A law on the press was amended 27 times before adoption.

In a major development, National Assembly members for the first time challenged the party Central Committee's nomination for the post of chairman of the Council of Ministers, in effect, Vietnam's premier. Reformist deputies demanded that at least two candidates be allowed to run. Deputy Nguyen Thi Thi from Ho Chi Minh City told foreign journalists that the Assembly presidium pressured the city's delegation to accept the party's candidate Do Muoi. But the southerners insisted on nominating Vo Van Kiet. Both stood for election. Do Muoi won with 64 per cent of the vote to Kiet's 36. Of significance is that at least 90 per cent of National Assembly deputies are members of the VCP and at least one third 'crossed the floor' to vote for Kiet.

In the lead up to the seventh national party congress held in July 1991, it was reported that further democratic changes were being considered. According to one report, the new chairman of the Council of Ministers will be permitted to name his own ministers rather than have to accept the preferred candidates of the party's
nomenklatura. It has been suggested too that the requirement that certain ministries be headed by party Central Committee members be dropped.

War veterans

In May 1986, in the face of mounting socio-economic difficulties, former members of the communist movement in southern Vietnam came together and formed a Club of Former Resistance Fighters (*Cau Lac Bo Khang Chien Cu*). The Club was initially a mutual aid association dedicated to improving the lives of veterans. Its leadership comprised several notable high-ranking southern party and military figures such as Nguyen Ho, Tran Bach Dang, Huynh Van Tieng, Tran Van Giao and retired generals Tran Van Tra, Nam Long, Dao Duy Kham and To Ky.

After the sixth congress the activities of the Resistance Veterans quickly moved from self-help and group discussion to the more overtly political. In 1988 the veterans held a series of meetings which attracted an increasing audience. The southern veterans blamed current socio-economic ills on the hasty reunification of the country. They condemned corruption, incompetence, and party secrecy while calling for openness, intra-party democracy, personnel changes and the serious implementation of đổi mới (*Far Eastern Economic Review* [Nayan Chanda], 5 October 1989).

Speeches by Club members were tape-recorded and circulated by cassette. They were also published in a veterans' magazine and newspaper, *Truyen Thong Khang Chien* (‘Tradition of Resistance’). The security police confiscated the printing plates and copies of the first edition forcing the editors to shift from Ho Chi Minh City to an unnamed town in the Mekong Delta.

In March 1988, following the death of Premier Priam Hung (officially, chairman of the Council of Ministers), a southern party veteran, the Club of Former Resistance Fighters took its first overt political act. In April it circulated a petition calling on the Politburo to withdraw Do Muoi’s name as nominee to replace Pham Hung. The petition attracted over 100 signatures. In June the Club sent the petition to the party Central Committee and National Assembly urging those bodies to hold a free and fair election for the premiership by secret ballot.

The growing popularity of the Club in 1988 was symbolized by changes to the masthead of its publication. The first edition of *Truyen Thong Khang Chien* stated it was the ‘Voice of Ho Chi Minh City’ veterans. The second issue changed this to ‘Voice of Saigon-Gia Dinh’, the pre-unification name for Ho Chi Minh City and its environs. The third issue of *Truyen Thong Khang Chien* dropped this reference altogether and began circulating as far afield as Hanoi. This was the last issue to be published. It was subsequently replaced by a clandestine newsheet (*Far Eastern Economic Review* [Nick Malloni], 29 March 1990).
The actions by southern party and military veterans, especially their attempts to link up with counterparts in the north, took place independently of VCP guidance or control. As such the Club represented a direct threat to the party’s mono-organizational grip on society. Indeed the Club catered to a large group of party and army veterans whose basic needs were not being addressed by any other organized body. The political role of the Club became especially important in 1989 as events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union began to impact on Vietnam’s shores. In early 1990, for example, Nguyen Van Linh called in on Club members in Ho Chi Minh City to discuss the situation in Eastern Europe.

The VCP reacted to this situation by creating a regime-approved alternate organization, the Vietnam War Veterans Association (Hoi Cuu Chien Binh Viet Nam) and by co-opting individual members of the Club into its leadership. Prominent critics were either pushed aside or detained. The new War Veterans Association (WVA), while specifically organized to address the needs of the large veterans group, was also moulded along the lines of other regime mass organizations. A news report on the draft statutes of WVA noted, ‘[t]his is a mass organization affiliated to the Vietnam Fatherland Front and under the guide[ance] of the Communist Party of Vietnam’ (Hanoi International Service, 27 March 1990). This was reaffirmed by a decision of the VCP secretary-general who noted that the VWA ‘is a revolutionary mass collective under party leadership and its political and social activities must be carried out in the framework of the party’s line, objective, and policy as well as the constitution and the state law and that it is affiliated with the Vietnam Fatherland Front’ (Hanoi Home Service, 5 December 1990).

By the end of 1990, the WVA had set up chapters in 44 provinces, cities and special zones with a membership of 900,000. The views of the WVA were published in its official mouthpiece, Cuu Chien Binh Viet Nam (“Vietnamese War Veterans”).

Private entrepreneurs

The Vietnam Communist Party was never entirely successful in collectivizing the economy in the north. During the Air War period (1965–68) there was a partial reversion to the family-based economy in the countryside. The so-called ‘free (or black) market’ was never brought under government control. The ‘free market’ has always remained a feature of northern life. Communist efforts to collectivize the south were spectacularly unsuccessful. There the vestiges of the former free market economy continued to function in both spirit and practice despite the best attempts of state officials to shut it down.

Vietnam’s adoption of doi moi has led to the proliferation of economic reform measures and a marked increase in free market practices by private entrepreneurs in
both the north and south. Much of this activity is so small in scale, dispersed and widespread that it defies control. Private economic activity extends beyond the realm of petty merchants, shopkeepers and private businessmen to include the owners and operators of gambling dens and houses of prostitution as well as the organizers of illegal departures of the so-called 'boat people'.

In brief, Vietnam's private entrepreneurs have been able to carve out a space for themselves unfettered by party control. State intervention is more pronounced when economic activity is on a larger scale. But here again, recent scandals involving credit cooperatives and the exposure of a fake perfume company provide evidence that at this level the party-state lacks an effective oversight mechanism. There is mounting evidence from southern Vietnam that wholly owned private companies and business consultancies are springing up and opening contacts with foreign business representatives without government control.

**Peasant farmers**

Vietnam failed in its attempt to collectivize southern agriculture in the period after unification. The party's attempts to do so produced a bitter legacy among the owners of family-operated farms. In 1987–88 peasant discontent boiled over. State attempts to reverse the collectivization process led to the emergence of a series of complex land disputes among the peasants of the Mekong Delta area (named 'Nam Bo' in Vietnamese). At the heart of the dispute was the peasants' desire to reclaim land lost during the collectivization process and the peasants' sense of grievance and abuse at the hands of corrupt local officials (Far Eastern Economic Review [Hiebert], 19 January 1989). According to one account:

The main purpose of complaints by peasants are to reclaim those pieces of land given out by them on a mutual assistance basis during the past two land readjustment drives and to demand the return of various pieces of land, including those portions of land slashed from their farmland, when the product contract system was first put into practice, those pieces of unclaimed land formerly cultivated by them and now already taken from them without any land compensation from their places of residence, and those lands taken from them by state farms but still left uncultivated (Hanoi Home Service, 22 August 1988).

The land dispute in Nam Bo took the form of petitions and letters of denunciation as well as public demonstrations and marches in district seats and provincial towns. The peasants' anger was directed at corrupt local party cadres who allocated land to their own families. In some cases the peasants roughed up party cadres and seized back their land outright.
In September 1988 large numbers of peasants staged a demonstration in front of the building housing the Ho Chi Minh City People’s Committee. They denounced provincial officials for obstructing the new land policy adopted earlier in the year. The Nam Bo peasants received support from members of the Club of Former Resistance Fighters. In November, one public display included a march through the streets of Ho Chi Minh City by 300 peasants from the Mekong Delta, some wearing their war medals. The demonstrators carried banners demanding the return of confiscated land and the ouster of local officials (termed ‘mandarins’).

As with the case of the Resistance Fighters, the party was quick to intervene. In August 1988 a major meeting was convened by the VCP secretariat and the standing committee of the Council of Ministers in the Delta town of Can Tho (Hau Giang province) to consider the land problem in Nam Bo. Later that month the VCP Politburo adopted Directive No. 47 ‘on resolving some urgent land problems’ which called on party officials and state farms to return land illegally or arbitrarily appropriated from the peasants. Further high-level meetings were held in Ho Chi Minh City in September and in Hanoi in October after which peasant demonstrations subsided.

The Nam Bo peasant demonstrations were clearly motivated by economic considerations. The peasant farmer reacted to changes in landownership ushered in by doi moi, which now recognized individual and private production, by rejecting collectivized agriculture in favour of family-based production.

**Students**

The process of political democratization in Vietnam has led to a greater degree of intellectual freedom for students and academics. But there are limits to this freedom and they are widely understood. Students, as well as society at large, are not permitted to challenge the party’s leading role in society nor advocate political pluralism (*thuyết đa nguyên*) or multi-party democracy. These might be termed the ‘three no’s’.

Like other sections of Vietnamese society, Vietnam’s student body has not been left untouched by the process of doi moi. During 1988–89 student discontent manifested itself in a series of low-keyed protests and demonstrations in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. In September–October 1988, for example, it was reported that in an unprecedented display of defiance, students in the Economics Faculty of Ho Chi Minh City held a series of informal meetings, including one ‘teach-in’, to express their discontent with restrictive admission policies, an outdated curriculum (including too much stress on Marxist ideology), the lack of university autonomy and poor living conditions (*The Nation* [Bangkok], 2 November 1988 [David Storey]; 31 January 1989 [Storey]; 14 July 1990 [Peter Eng]).
In May 1989 students at the Transport and Communications College in Hanoi boycotted their school canteen citing the poor quality of their food. They also demanded better living conditions. Similar but lower-keyed demands were made by students in other Hanoi colleges — Architecture, Foreign Languages, Teacher Training, Geology and at the Polytechnic. Muted calls were reportedly made for increased democracy on campus (Alain Boebion, AFP, dispatch from Hanoi, 17 June 1989). The following month several hundred Vietnamese students demonstrated in front of the Ho Chi Minh City People’s Committee offices for better living conditions (Sydney Morning Herald [Cuming-Bruce], 9 August 1989).

State authorities moved quickly to diffuse these protests. Education Minister Tran Hong Quan promised the students at the Economics Institute that a person’s political background would no longer affect admission and that outdated texts would be rewritten (Far Eastern Economic Review [Hiebert], 20 July 1989). Courses on market capitalism, business management and tourism were introduced. In Hanoi, government authorities took action to improve the quality of food and living conditions. Examination fees were also lowered.

State officials responded to calls for greater democracy by permitting southern colleges to elect their own rectors. In one instance the party-endorsed nominee lost, while at the Agricultural University in Can Tho, an American-educated academic was elected rector (ibid.). Along with these reforms came party-approved experiments in educational privatization. In February 1989 Vietnam’s first post-1975 private institution of higher education, Thanh Long University, was founded in Hanoi. This was followed in August by the opening of the Saigon Private Middle School. It seems likely that other private colleges, specializing in mathematics and computer science, will also be permitted to open. Other reforms included permitting teachers to earn additional income through private tuition.

In August 1989 the Ministry of Higher Education and Vocational Middle Schools held a major conference in Do Son to review ‘performance over the past two years’. The gathering was attended by 260 delegates representing 73 educational institutions. According to Vietnamese press accounts, the meeting recognized that student living conditions were poor and that complaints in this respect were legitimate. However, while acknowledging that ‘[m]any students submitted petitions with an attitude of good will, calmness and restraint’ the press also noted that ‘a small number of extremist and fanatic students have also appeared’. In order to combat such tendencies, the meeting concluded, it would be necessary to stress ideological education in the future (Quan Doi Nhan Dan and Nhan Dan, 14 August 1989).
The seventh national party congress

The Vietnam Communist Party held its seventh national congress of party delegates in Hanoi from 24 to 27 June 1991. The congress was attended by 1,176 delegates grouped into 54 delegations representing Vietnam’s provinces, cities, and functional groups, such as the military and central-level ministry blocs.

The Vietnam Communist Party operates on the basis of democratic centralism. Both the lead up to and the proceedings of the seventh congress were a reflection of both principles. Party officials and members of the public were given scope to express their views in the round of province and district level congresses leading to the national meeting (democracy). Over 10,000 suggestions were reportedly made to alter the wording of draft congress documents. Prominent party members and intellectuals, like Dr Nguyen Khac Vien, Phan Dinh Dieu and Hoang Minh Chinh, submitted open letters critical of party policy and performance. At the same time, the party maintained its firm control over the political process (centralism). Radical critics like former party newspaper editor, Bui Tin, and writer Duong Thu Huong were expelled from the party.

The national party congress has three main duties: it must review and approve all reports submitted to it by the Central Committee; amend the party statutes; and elect the national party leadership. The seventh congress considered five separate major reports, a record number. These included the all-important ‘Political Report of the Central Committee (sixth congress)’ (Bao Cao Chinh Tricua Ban Chap Hanh Truong Uong (khoa VI)), Vietnam’s second party platform ‘The Platform for National Construction in the Period of Transition to Socialism’ (Cuong Linh Xay Xung Dat Nuoc Trong Thoi Ky Qua Do Len Chu Nghia Xa Hoi), the ‘Strategy of Socio-Economic Stabilization and Development of Our Country Until the Year 2000’ (Chien Luoc On Dinh va Phat Trien Kinh Te-Xa Hoi cua Nuoc Ta Den Nam 2000), the ‘Amended Party Statutes’ (Dieu le Dang (soi doi)), and the ‘Report on Party-Building and Amendment of Party Statutes’ (Bao Cao Xay Dung Dang va sua doi Dieu le Dang).

At the seventh congress, the Vietnam Communist Party reiterated its leading role in Vietnamese society. In doing so it rejected once again multi-party democracy and political pluralism. The party also declared that it would continue to adhere to the ideology of Marxism-Leninism and ‘the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh’ (Nhan Dan [Nguyen Van Linh], 25 June 1991). The party also recognized the need to carry out a measured program of political democratization. This entails separating some of the overlap in party-state functions, giving increasing prominence to the National Assembly and the role of law.
The seventh congress adopted a socio-economic development plan up to the year 2000. In general terms, Vietnam will continue with its programme of economic renewal or doi moi. Domestically this will mean the continued encouragement of a multi-sectoral economy, including private enterprise. This is not an endorsement of unfettered market capitalism. The seventh congress made clear that key industries would remain under central control and that the aim of economic development was socialism.

Brief mention must be made of changes in the party statutes that were adopted at the congress. Voting procedures for the election of office-bearers were altered and the secret ballot replaced the traditional public show of hands. Detailed figures were released on votes taken (Nhan Dan [Dao Duy Tung], 29 June 1991). Other rule changes included provision for a party conference to be held prior to the next national congress. In effect, the stewardship of the present leadership will come under review in mid term and not in five years’ time. This is important as the former secretary-general, Nguyen Van Linh, attempted to convene just such a conference several years ago, reportedly to remove party deadwood. He was successfully thwarted by party conservatives. It is now reported that the new secretary general, Do Muoi, might step aside at this mid-term conference in favour of a younger man.19 Taken together these rule changes indicate a loosening of voting procedures from imposition by higher ups in the past to a kind of ‘guided democracy’ with limited in-puts from below.

The seventh congress also undertook major changes in the composition of the highest leadership bodies. For the first time no alternate or candidate members were selected to the new Central Committee. The Central Committee was expanded by 22 members. Initially the party nominated 148 candidates for full membership. An additional 68 were nominated by delegates, for a total of 216 (Straits Times, 27 June 1991). The congress selected 146 and in so doing rejected several party favourite sons.

It is clear that the new Central Committee is a much younger and better educated body than its predecessors. Two thirds of its members are below 60 years of age, but only three are in their mid-40s or younger. The average age is 57. Ninety-five have completed higher education (university or equivalent).20 Women comprise 8.2 per cent of the total membership, while the figure for ethnic minorities is 8.9 per cent.

The most dramatic leadership changes came with the election of the Politburo. Seven incumbents were retired — including the former party secretary-general, Nguyen Van Linh; the cosmopolitan foreign minister, Nguyen Co Thach; and the minister of the Interior, Mai Chi Tho. The average age of the new leadership team dropped from 71 to 64. One member, Nong Duc Manh, is a member of the T’ai ethnic minority (his political views are unknown; see below).
The new thirteen-member Politburo consists of three identifiable groupings. The first and most important are the conservative party officials led by Do Muoi, the new secretary-general, and including Dao Duy Tung, Vu Oanh, Pham The Duyet and Nguyen Duc Binh. Muoi is the most prominent member of the old guard and has been likened by one Western ambassador stationed in Hanoi to a ‘Confucian referee’ (International Herald Tribune, 28 June 1991). While a supporter of Vietnam’s programme of economic reform, he is a rank conservative when it comes to political change. He has firm roots in the party apparatus in the northern provinces. Tung is a member of the VCP secretariat and former head of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism. Oanh is a member of the VCP Organization Department; Duyet heads the party apparatus in Hanoi; and Binh heads the Nguyen Ai Quoc higher party school.

The second identifiable grouping comprises the military and security complex. The importance accorded to the military is underscored by the selection of General Le Duc Anh as number 2 and General Doan Khue as number 5. The military has never been accorded such prominence before. General Anh was commander of Vietnamese field forces in Cambodia and has recently presided over the demobilization of the army. Both he and General Khue represent what is probably the largest interest group in present day Vietnam — retired army veterans. The elevation of Major General Bui Thien Ngo, deputy minister of the Interior, underscores the party’s desire to maintain internal security and social order. General Ngo was later chosen by the National Assembly to replace Mai Chi Tho as Interior minister.

The third grouping comprises supporters of reform. They are mainly from the south with connections to the party committee in Ho Chi Minh City. The foremost representative of this group is Vo Van Kiet, number 3 in the Politburo. His retention will keep the supporters of doi moi on side. Others in this group include Le Phuoc Tho, Phan Van Khai and Vo Tran Chi.

In sum, the congress reaffirmed Vietnam’s commitment to the principles of economic renewal, but was short on specifics and left it to the new Central Committee to amend and ‘perfect’ the major policy documents which had been adopted. At the time of the congress one Asian diplomatic observer commented:

Vietnam is chasing two rabbits. It is genuinely trying very hard to liberalise, economically, but at the same time the party wants to retain control. At the moment, the living standard is so low that this can work because all most people want is for their lives to improve. The demand for luxuries like multi-party democracy are confined to a handful of intellectuals (quoted in Sydney Morning Herald, 4 July 1991).

In the medium term, therefore, Vietnam’s new leaders will be judged on how effectively they can manage economic reform and bring the benefits of development to Vietnamese society at large.
Post-congress developments

Immediately after the seventh party congress, the ninth session (eighth legislature) of the National Assembly met (27 July–12 August). Two major developments may be highlighted. First, in line with leadership changes announced at the party congress, the National Assembly accepted the retirement of three vice-premiers — Vo Nguyen Giap, Dong Sy Nguyen, and Nguyen Co Thach (also foreign minister) — and three ministers — Le Duc Anh (Defence), Mai Chi Tho (Interior) and Hoang Minh Thang (State Planning Commission).

Do Muoi, the newly elected VCP secretary-general stepped down from his post as premier. He was replaced by Vo Van Kiet who received 426 votes out of a total of 444 valid votes (Vietnam News Agency, 9 August 1991). The National Assembly reduced the number of vice-premiers on the Council of Ministers from six to three and chose Phan Van Khai (new), and Nguyen Khanh and Tran Duc Luong (incumbents). Table 3 sets out the details of other changes.

Table 3: The August 1991 ministerial reshuffle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry</th>
<th>New minister</th>
<th>Replacing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>Le Van Triet</td>
<td>Hoang Minh Thang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defence</td>
<td>Doan Khue</td>
<td>Le Duc Anh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>Nguyen Manh Cam</td>
<td>Nguyen Co Thach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>Bui Thien Ngo</td>
<td>Mai Chi Tho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Planning Commission</td>
<td>Do Quoc Sam</td>
<td>Phan Van Khai</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The National Assembly also considered the second draft report of the Committee to Amend the Constitution and recommended that a third draft be prepared and submitted to the public for consideration. In light of that process, the committee was requested to draw up a fourth draft and submit it to the tenth session of the National Assembly in December 1991. In late September the Council of State extended this deadline to January 1992 after which the eleventh session of the National Assembly would convene in February or March ‘to ratify the amendments to the Constitutions and a decree on the organization of the state mechanism’ (Nhận Đạo 30 September 1991).

The Committee to Amend the Constitution (Uy Ban Sua Doi Hien Phap) was originally set up in June 1989 and comprised 28 members under the chairmanship of the head of the State Council, Vo Chi Cong. The committee held eleven plenary
sessions in the period up to July 1991. In May 1991 the State Council requested the committee to submit its first draft of amendments to the state constitution to a meeting comprising ‘National Assembly deputies, high-ranking and medium-level cadres of all ministries, sectors, committees and mass organizations at the central and provincial levels, special zones and cities directly subordinate to the central government’ (Nhan Dan, 4 May 1991). After this meeting, the committee drew up a second draft which it submitted to the ninth session (eighth legislature) of the National Assembly.

Vietnam’s present state constitution was promulgated in 1980 and is the third state constitution to be adopted (the first was in 1946 and the second in 1959). This constitution has been amended twice since its adoption. In December 1988 its preamble was modified to drop hostile references to China and the United States. In June 1989 the National Assembly amended and supplemented seven articles.22 The changes proposed in 1991 represent more than cosmetic changes. According to a report on the constitution delivered by Vo Chi Cong to the ninth session of the National Assembly:

in view of the substantial changes in the socio-economic situation and the task of socialist construction and national defence, many points of the 1980 Constitution no longer suit the new situation.

The line of renovation put forward by the 6th party congress in 1986 requires that the 1980 Constitution be amended in order to create a necessary legal groundwork for accelerating the comprehensive renovation undertaking and to lead our country steadily along the socialist path (Nhan Dan, 30 July 1991).

A total of ‘104 of the 147 articles have been revised’, according to Vo Chi Cong’s report (ibid.).

Two of the most important of the proposed amendments concern the powers, duties and selection of the head of state and the chairman (premier) of the Council of Ministers. There are presently two proposals regarding the head of state. Under option 1, the head of state will be directly elected by the National Assembly, and the existing Council of State and structure of National Assembly standing committees will be abolished. Under option 2, the head of state will be the chairman of the presidium of the National Assembly and will be elected by National Assembly members. The chairman of the presidium would conduct the business of the National Assembly when it is not in session. The posts of chairman and vice-chairmen of the National Assembly would be abolished. As public accounts of the July National Assembly indicated, Committee members, as well as National Assembly deputies, were divided on this question.

An equally radical amendment is proposed regarding the present structure of the Council of Ministers. According to Vo Chi Cong’s report:
it is recommended that the Council of Ministers be abolished and that a government be set up to operate in accordance with the premiership system under which the government is led by a prime minister and... the final decisions belong to the prime minister.

Most recent reports indicate that Vietnam is considering dropping the current requirement that, with the exception of defence, foreign affairs and interior, ministers be members of the VCP Central Committee. In arrangements recently proposed by Vo Van Kiet, the new premier would be able to select non-party members as ministers.

Conclusion

Writing in 1988 Murray Hiebert noted the decline in the salience of ideology in Vietnam. He quoted one Vietnamese official as observing: "[t]eachers in party schools no longer know what to teach young people about communism. Many of them see it as an ideology no longer relevant to Vietnam". Hiebert then cited foreign observers as seeing this disillusionment as one of the reasons why more Vietnamese young people were exploring Buddhism and Christianity (Far Eastern Economic Review, 13 October 1988). Later that same year, David Marr noted that increasingly people in Vietnam are organising their lives without reference to the party (Far Eastern Economic Review, 3 November 1988). Gareth Porter, in his review of recent changes, has termed the process unfolding in Vietnam as 'creeping pluralism' (Porter 1990:80-81). Barry Wain has argued that despite the party's attempts to maintain its mono-organizational grip on society, fundamental changes are now underway:

[The party's] hard-line stance belies what is actually happening in Vietnam. Three years of doi moi, or 'renovation,' have transformed the political as well as the economic landscape. Many Vietnamese now feel free to say and do almost anything—so long as they don't question the supremacy of the Communist Party.

Newspapers expose current corruption while writers uncover the abuses of the past. Politicians openly debate controversial policies. Interest groups, some potentially powerful, are forming or being reactivated.

The government is walking a tightrope as it attempts to respond to popular demands, influenced by events in Eastern Europe, while keeping its grip on power. That grip is slipping, some Vietnamese say, not because the party is being directly challenged but because the whole system is being loosened by a multitude of developments....

In this heady atmosphere, officially sponsored mass organizations, such as those grouping peasants, youth or women, are beginning to question the policies of the party they have always passively obeyed. Other bodies are being registered or
revived, outside party control: Although their objectives are largely innocuous — helping the disabled, restoring temples, assisting the poor — they are nascent pressure groups that didn’t exist before (Asian Wall Street Journal, 13 June 1990).

It may be argued that what is emerging in Vietnam is a nascent form of ‘civil society’. According to Robert F. Miller, civil society may be defined as:

a realm of free social and cultural space to be carved out of the all-encompassing matrix of the totalitarian communist party-state by conscious intellectual and social action. It was to be a sphere of autonomous, ostensibly non-political social activity, which did not seek to challenge the state’s control over the main levers of power and, indeed, obtained its status through a tacit social contract with the authorities of the ruling party-state (Miller 1992:5-6).

T. H. Rigby defines civil society ‘as consisting of those structures and processes through which individuals and groups interact autonomously of the command structures of the state in pursuit of their particular concerns’ (Rigby 1991:111–112). Rigby also notes that the term ‘civil society’ has two dimensions, contractual and traditional (which he labels Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft), and emphasizes the former in his analysis of developments in the Soviet Union. He concludes by noting:

my definition draws a line between the civil society and specifically the command structures of the state, not between the civil society and the political order generally. This reflects my view that if the civil society is to flourish it must not only be in symbiotic relationship with the political order, but must substantially colonize it and remake it in its own image. Parliamentary government is the quintessential consequence of successful colonization of the political order by the civil society (ibid.:110).

This paper has illustrated that major changes are under way in Vietnamese society. It has also attempted to document the increase in socio-political activity which has taken place as a concomitant of the process of renovation and political democratization. In several of the examples given above, ‘free social and cultural space’ and other ostensibly ‘non-political social activity’ has been created as a result of the conscious intellectual action of individuals and groups primarily in urban areas. It is also clear from this discussion that the party has not been able to anticipate let alone manage and control all facets of this process. However, the growth of such activity, which is capable of interacting independently of the command structures of society, has not yet developed a symbiotic relationship with the political order. Vietnam’s system of law and justice is weak and underdeveloped and there is thus little basis for the contractual requisites of civil society that Rigby suggest are necessary. It must be concluded that civil society in Vietnam has reached a nascent stage and must await the erosion of ‘mono-organizational socialism’ before developing further.
Notes:

1 The sections following have been taken from Thayer (1992).
2 Details provided by Tran Trong Tan, head of the VCP Central Committee's Ideological and Cultural Department to a news conference held in Hanoi (Hanoi Domestic Service, 3 May 1991). At the same time, the party recruited 303,200 new members, raising total membership to 2,155,000.

3 Vietnamese language magazines printed abroad, which called for the dissolution of the VCP, began to find their way to Vietnam at this time.

4 Ho's private life became the subject of controversy in the lead up to the 100th anniversary of his birth on 19 May 1990. A film script written by Son Tung contained passages describing Ho's relations with a woman when he was young and suggested he may have fallen in love. This was depicted in a film directed by Long Van. After review by party officials, the offending scenes were dropped (Canberra Times [Nick Cumming-Bruce], 3 January 1990).

5 The film version of 'The Retired General' was taken off the screen in Hanoi after it had played to a full house for only a few nights in January 1989.

6 Hanoi Home Service, 25 July 1989; these included Tre, Tong Hop Thanh Pho, and Van Nghe publishing houses.

7 Oanh, a Harvard-trained economist and former premier of the Republic of Vietnam, is presently an economic adviser to the Vietnamese government.

8 This term is borrowed from T. H. Rigby. According to Rigby, in the Soviet Union, 'every field of social activity... [has become] the monopoly of an officially designated organisation run by a hierarchy of command [which] culminate[s] in the party leadership, and the whole complex of organisations are welded into a single organisational structure by the command hierarchy of the party apparatus. The party did not just coordinate their policies, it now exercised on their behalf the key functions of any organisation, namely determining their goals, their structures, and their leading personnel. The system could fairly claim to be a socialist one, since all economic entities were in public hands, but it was a socialism the most distinctive feature of which was that the whole life of society was incorporated into a single organisational structure. That is why I consider the most appropriate term for it to be 'mono-organisational socialism' (Rigby 1991:111-112).

9 The most prominent example is Tran Van Tra.

10 Most notably Nguyen Ho and Ta Ba Tang, chairman and vice chairman of the Club, respectively.

11 A new organization, the Vietnam Union of Cooperatives and Privately Run Industrial Establishments, is to be formed partly to rectify this.

12 Most notably Politburo Directive No. 10, April 1988, which downgraded the role of agricultural cooperatives.


19 Harish Mehta writing in the Business Times [Kuala Lumpur] 1 July 1991; this report is based on conversations with diplomats in Hanoi and Singapore businessmen in Ho Chi Minh City.

20 However, note the cautious view of veteran observer Nayan Chanda, ‘very few intellectuals or persons with known managerial competence could be identified in the new central committee’ (Asian Wall Street Journal, 5-6 July 1991).

21 Phan Van Khai was also nominated but declined to stand. In 1988, Do Muoi fended off a challenge by Vo Van Kiet for this position.

22 Namely, Articles 57 (voting rights for citizens), 115 (powers and duties of people’s councils), 116 (term of office for people’s councils), 118 (commissions to assist people’s councils), 122 (leadership of the people’s committee), 123 (meetings of the people’s committees and people’s councils) and 125 (duties of the chairman of the people’s committee).

23 For a more extensive discussion of the term ‘civil society’ see: Kukathas and Lovell (1991) and Starr (1988).

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