

The party congress may put Vietnam on ice

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The Vietnamese Communist Party's Eighth National Congress, which opens in Hanoi this weekend, will surely be an extraordinary event. The tumultuous debate leading up to it has already engendered uniquely open dissent and other features contrary to the tenets of Leninism. The congress itself is likely to expose ideological and regional fissures that can only be neutralized by paralysis, freezing Vietnam into an uneasy calm before the storm.

Among the many "firsts" for the congress is the fact that for the only time in its history, the Politburo cannot be certain that the official platform and other documents outlining policy for the next five years will be rubber-stamped by the delegates. Until the last minute, the congress was also set to open with key leadership positions undecided, including the 160 members of the Central Committee, 15 members of the Politburo, and even the party secretary general and prime minister.

It now appears that there will be no major shifts at the top, but that doesn't mean peace within the party. On the contrary, the core issues dividing the cadres are practically insoluble because they revolve around a fierce struggle between the two equally stubborn and strong factions – one lined up behind northern ideologue Dao Duy Tung and the other behind southern reformer Vo Van Kiet.

Politburo member Dao Duy Tung is head of the Central Committee's secretariat. He is considered a tough hardliner. On a pilgrimage to Beijing last year, he pledged to hold Vietnam to the "Chinese mode," which to his mind means some economic loosening while allowing no deviance on the political side from communist principles and practice. Prime minister Vo Van Kiet, by contrast, is viewed as a liberal who wants to broaden both economic and political freedoms in Vietnam. Because he opposes orthodox communist "democratic centralism" and doesn't seem to hate capitalism, his adversaries accuse him of being "an agent of the U.S."

In the run-up to the congress, Messrs. Tung and Kiet turned and tattled on each other fiercely, and not only in open debate inside the Politburo. The two camps also resorted to "black" methods, resulting in such unprecedented phenomena as the leaking of Politburo secret documents and appeals to public opinion outside the party. Interestingly, a major vehicle for this has been the Vietnamese exile media, to which the secret documents are smuggled out in the full expectation that their publication – and re-import into Vietnam – will provide ammunition for factional combatants within the CP.

Until last December, the hardline Dao Duy Tung faction (which includes current Secretary General Do Muoi and President Le Duc Anh) had the upper hand. Thus Mr. Tung and a close associate, Nguyen Ha Phan, were able to control the drafting of the political report and Congress platform-setting direction for the party and country into the next country.

The course they chose is little different from the VII Congress one: It emphasizes maintaining “pure” Marxism-Leninism, absolute rejection of a pluralist and multiparty system, and support for the state enterprise sector, which gets some 60% of the economy. Then there are the pledges to fight vigorously against “peaceful evolution” – meaning against the Vietnamese who are demanding democracy, and against the United States, the “enemy of Vietnamese socialism.”

To top it all off, the stage was set for Mr. Phan to take over as prime minister, pushing the reformist Vo Van Kiet out of his job and the picture. But Mr. Kiet fought back fiercely, aided by his fellow southerners and all those in favour of more reforms and democracy in Vietnam. They gave their prime minister all the evidence he needed – of corruption and old betrayals against comrades – to engineer the downfall of the man trying to take his job. After the April plenum, Mr. Phan was expelled from the party and arrested on charges of corruption and treason.

As his patron, Dao Duy Tung was also splashed. He fell seriously ill with a stomach ulcer (bad tongues say out of grief for seeing his plan go up in smoke), and is not expected to attend the congress. A headless hardline faction could thus be considerably weakened. Moreover, since his and Mr. Tran’s plans for the future were leaked, opposition to their hardline vision has swelled. If the congress does not throw out the documents entirely, delegates are almost certain to demand substantial revisions.

But the battle won’t be over. Mr. Kiet still has powerful enemies, and he’s under attack now from Nguyen Van Linh, a former secretary general and current party counsellor. Mr. Nguyen is said to have vowed “to get” Mr. Kiet by charging him with corruption – zeroing in on his more vulnerable wife – and, worse, with treason, for being “the Gorbachev of Vietnam, and conspiring with anti-party people to destroy the party.

What all this means is that for the foreseeable future, neither side will be strong enough to crush the other. Instead, to avoid bringing down the whole house in a collapse that would bury them all, they will probably be compelled to seek a compromise. The most obvious course is to leave things as they are until the next special congress in mid-1999. Of course, this will only postpone the inevitable showdown or breakdown – and could

make it worse. As one high Vietnamese official visiting Paris recently pointed out, according to Vietnamese popular belief, the number nine is a portent of a cyclical upheaval, and here there are as many as three nines!

At any rate, compromise would solve nothing even in the short term, and would have very serious implications for people hoping to move their business out of the present rut. For anyone anywhere who needs to plan, an awesome list of questions may go unanswered: What will be relations between the party and the State? Where will ultimate power lie? Who will, who can, make the necessary – and especially, binding – decisions? What will be the relationship between state and private enterprises? What about the banking sector?

Vietnam could well be in a state of flux for the next three years. But its people may make good use of the time. The fact that the cadres have been courting public opinion shows that after decades, “the people” have begun to count. That means the prospects for democracy can only grow brighter. Whoever wins or loses in the current power struggle, the party is going to be further splintered and weaker. This, and time, will give the democratic forces a chance to grow stronger, and become an increasingly significant factor in Vietnam’s political life.

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