

04.1995

VCP faces internal ideological rebellion
PARTY LEADERSHIP AND HO UNDER ATTACK
Growing number of members call for abandoning of Leninism
Maintaining Ho Chi Minh's Thoughts "only a fervent wish"

By Ton That Thien

In the present state of the world Marxism-Leninism and socialism should be abandoned because they have become obviously utopian and anti-scientific, regressive, and inapplicable; for Vietnam, Marxism-Leninism is a luxury; the word "socialist" in Socialist Republic of Vietnam should be scrapped; all the road signs pointing in the direction of socialism should be reversed; Ho Chi Minh made a disastrous error in choosing the Leninist road as the road for Vietnam's salvation.

The views cited above have been expressed in recent years, not by Vietnamese unconditional anti-communists living in exile in the United States, but by Vietnamese communists with impeccable credentials still living in Vietnam. They are people like Ho Hieu, Nguyen Ho, Duong Thu Huong, Ha Sy Phu, Lu Phuong, Nguyen Thanh Giang, to mention only a few, who had been members of the VCP for 30-40 years, had distinguished war records, observed party discipline scrupulously and kept silent for years. But now, they explain, reason as well as conscience have compelled them to speak out.

Those views constitute the common main thrust of the numerous criticisms levelled openly by rebel party members at the party leaders and the regime. The list of grievance aired by such members, whose number has been growing, has been getting longer and longer. They are directed primarily at the party leaders for their ignorance, arrogance and conservatism, and at socialism for the glaring economic, social and moral ills it has brought upon the country and on the party itself. Inevitably, they will be directed also at Ho Chi Minh, for he is the recognised founder, educator, leader, chief strategist and tactician of the party.

The party members who braved the thunder from the present party leadership say that they feel a terrible sense of shame to be members of a party which was once highly respected and admired, but is thoroughly discredited and despised today. They say they rebelled after their pleas for reforms and change done out of goodwill, in a constructive spirit, and according to normal party rules – through the proper channels, quietly, and with due respect – were rejected unceremoniously by the party leadership, their views totally suppressed, and harsh punitive measures taken against them – immediate dismissal from their jobs, expulsion from the party, economic blockade and harassments, and also jail and torture--.

The ranks of the rebels have become larger, and their voices have also become louder as at one meeting after another of the Central Committee, the party leaders continued to adopt the orthodox Leninist hard line, and contrary to expectations, chose to

harden, instead of softening, their position following the collapse of communism in Europe. In contrast, that collapse shook the faith of a large number of party members and cadres, and encouraged the rebels to speak out, in the belief that their position is strongly supported by facts and by history – always a very important consideration for communists -- and also by the knowledge that many other members share their views and their feelings. The VCP has ceased to be monolithic, certainly ideology wise.

The arguments of the rebels are difficult to refute since they are backed by hard facts. This led the party leadership to resort to tactics which serve it well, but which does great harm to Ho Chi Minh, for it drags him into a debate in which he is bound to get smeared.

The debate is about the basic issue: should Vietnam continue to adopt “building socialism”, Leninist model, as its national aim?

To this question, the conservatives, among whom the most reactionary are Dao Duy Tung, Nguyen Duc Binh, (General) Doan Khue, who hold actual power at present through control of the army and police, resolutely answer yes. But considering the undisputedly dismal performance of socialism since 1975 and the uncertainties beclouding its future, it is difficult for them to defend such a position against the attacks of their detractors. So, fully aware of the power of the Ho Chi Minh mystique, they use Ho Chi Minh as a shield.

In Vietnam, and still more so, in the party, Ho Chi Minh is accepted unquestionably as a great political and military genius, an infallible master and leader, a perfect man to be revered. He is untouchable. Expressing doubt about his wisdom, and especially criticising him, would be breaking the greatest of all taboos, willfully committing a crime of lese majesty. By claiming that pursuing the socialist road is the correct way to implement “Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts” and prove one’s true loyalty to “Uncle” the VCP leaders therefore make any challenge to their position difficult, if not suicidal, certainly so politically, as such a challenge would mean an assault on Ho himself.

The VCP leaders’ position is well grounded, for it is a historical fact that it is Ho who introduced Leninism to Vietnam and that he repeatedly enjoined party members always to fully trust and follow Lenin, just as he himself had done since he discovered this “beacon” in 1920.

According to former Premier Pham Van Dong, a very close disciple of Ho, and to Do Muoi, the incumbent general secretary, “Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts” are based essentially on Leninism. But the bolshevik features of this doctrine disturb a number of party members, especially after the dramatic rejection of that brand of socialism by the East European communists. These members are however reluctant to renege on Ho and on the party. So, they advance a fanciful interpretation to rationalise their attitude.

They argue that if Uncle Ho were still alive in 1975 he would not have adopted the course followed by the present party leadership, for he was first and foremost a patriot who used Marxism-Leninism only as a means; today he would surely advocate a policy of true national reconciliation, a multiparty democratic system after the French and American

models, neutrality in foreign policy, and a market economy. This is sheer speculation, and wild wishful thinking, but it is a view held by many party members who have become thoroughly disillusioned with socialism, but, out of sentimental attachment to Ho, have refrained from outright opposition to the regime. This is also the attitude of many outside the party, especially among the older people.

A number of other members also hide behind Ho, but for a different reason. Convinced that the course being pursued by the present leaders is wrong and hurts the country's development as well as the party's popularity, they advocate radical changes: full recognition of property right, full acceptance of capitalism as "the road along which all mankind has to travel", a democratic multiparty system, the rule of law, to name but a few. These are all anathemas to the leaders.

To avoid being branded as "weakhearted", "deviationist", "antiparty", the advocates of the above radical reforms argue that such reforms would conform with "Ho Chi Minh's thoughts". "Uncle" was primarily a patriot interested in actually achieving his ideals – national independence, the freedom and welfare of the people --. He would care essentially about the aims and be pragmatic about the means. To him, Marxism-Leninism was just a means. He would not hesitate to discard it now if he finds it harmful. This is twisting history and doing violence to Ho's deep convictions, but invoking Ho's authority gives these bold members a friendly or neutral audience, and surely, good protections.

A last group of party members advocates dumping Leninism, lock, stock, and barrel. They view Leninism as an unqualified calamity for the country because it is utopian, "unworkable", capable of producing only political and cultural slavery, not freedom and economic development. They decide to direct their critique at Ho Chi Minh himself because the conservatives, who defend Leninism steadfastly, invoke "loyalty to Uncle Ho" as their motivation.

The most prominent member of this group, the first Vietnamese communist ever to have dared commit such an unthinkable and unpardonable act, is Lu Phuong, a former vice-minister in the South Vietnam Liberation Government between 1968 and 1975. He charges that Ho has done great harm to the country in making the party and the people put absolute faith in Lenin and the Comintern although, by his own admission in his auto-biography under the pen name of Tran Dan Tien, he did not know anything about socialism in 1920, and he chose Leninism simply because Lenin and his followers supported anti-colonialism.

Ho has bound the Vietnamese people tightly to international communism for so long that today the Vietnamese people have become totally crippled while the world is moving ahead at high speed, says Phuong. Can we accept the view that Ho, the founder of the present Vietnamese socialist state, has no responsibility in it at all? "Can we accept to remain loyal for ever and ever to the Leninism which The Venerable Ho has chosen... considering that the reasons for his choice were all too simplistic", Phuong has written in a daring paper entitled "On Marxist socialism" (1993) in which he thoroughly knocked down Marxism-Leninism as utopian and unworkable. In any case, Phuong concludes, the Vietnamese people should abandon the road to disaster chosen by Ho and try to find a form of "workable" socialism to pull the country out of its present plight.

It is thus clear that there is growing alienation inside the VCP. But what is more significant is the widespread alienation outside the party, among the young. This casts a dark shadow on the future of the party and of socialism. Pham Van Dong has admitted candidly in a book on Ho Chi Minh that “the young do not like joining the party” (Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi, 1993). And Tap Chi Cong San, the official organ of the party, has deplored that the post 1975 generation is “far inferior” to its elders in regard to love and understanding of Uncle Ho, and if this trend continues, keeping Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts alive will be “only a fervent wish” (TCCS, 3/1992 issue).

For the time being, however, the VCP leaders believe that having the army and the police firmly behind them, and being skilful in maintaining tactical flexibility – letting off the right amount of steam at critical moments – they can hang on to power comfortably, and therefore, no radical reform is needed. The last meeting of the Central Committee in January decided to maintain the present course – building socialism according to orthodox Leninism --.

The VCP leaders believe that there is no risk of an explosive situation at present. Considering the growing internal rebellion described above, that may be an ostrich view of the situation. The sudden collapse of the communist states of Eastern Europe in 1989 is a reminder that the situation may unexpectedly get out of hand very easily just because of a very small incident.

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It is worth noting that, so far, Lu Phuong, as well as the other rebels, have not been subjected to harsher punitive measures than those mentioned earlier. Worth noting also is that the party leadership has played up the “Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts” line more and more. Taken together, these two facts suggest that preparing for a fall-back position comprising a jettisoning of Marxism-Leninism is a scenario envisaged by the VCP leaders.

These leaders are fully aware that for socialism and for the party future is not promising. Pham Van Dong has admitted candidly in a book on Ho Chi Minh that “the young do not like joining the party” (Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi, 1993). And Tap Chi Cong San, the official organ of the party, has deplored that the post 1975 generation is “far inferior” to its elders in regard to love and understanding of Uncle Ho, and if this trend continues, keeping Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts alive will be “only a fervent wish” (TCCS, 3/1992 issue).

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