

## **HUMAN RIGHTS UNDER VIETNAMESE COMMUNISM**

### **A Politically Incorrect Approach**

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#### **American anti-war writers and Vietnam**

For decades, the literature on Vietnam was strongly dominated by a coterie of Western - predominantly American – journalists and academics who claimed to be experts on Vietnam. These “experts” were fiercely anti-war revolutionaries determined to bring down South Vietnam for internal American reasons.

South Vietnam provided the most convenient focus for the anti-war denunciations and demonstrations. As David Horowitz, one of the most radical leaders of the American anti-war movement wrote in his reflections after the war: “My speech illustrated the real importance of Vietnam to the radical cause, which was not ultimately about Vietnam but about our antagonism to America in our desire for revolution. Vietnam served to justify the desire; we needed the war and its violent images to vindicate our destructive intentions”.<sup>1</sup>

Typical of the above attitude is the “Indo-China Peace Campaign” organized by the famed actress Jane Fonda, which “worked tirelessly to ensure the victory of the North Vietnamese Communists...Fonda travelled first to Hanoi and then to the liberated zones of South Vietnam to make a propaganda film... it attempted to persuade viewers that the Communists were going to create a new society in the south. Equality and justice awaited its inhabitants if only America would cut off support for the Saigon regime...”<sup>2</sup> Another illustration is that of Frances Fitzgerald, author of the best seller and Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Fire in the Lake*. The book ends with the following words: “the moment has arrived for the narrow flame of revolution to cleanse the lake of Vietnamese society from the corruption and disorder the Vietnamese have undertaken, but it will have to come, for it is the only way the Vietnamese of the south can restore their country and their history to themselves”.<sup>3</sup>

The kind of equality and justice, clean and corruption-free Vietnam which Jane Fonda, Frances Fitzgerald and other “friends” of the Vietnamese like them

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<sup>1</sup> David Horowitz., *Radical Son: A Generational Odyssey*, New York, 1998, Simon and Schuster Trade, p.202.

<sup>2</sup> - *ibid.* - , p.303

<sup>3</sup> Frances Fitzgerald. *Fire in the Lake*, New York, Vintage Book, 1973, p.590.

considered wholesome for the people of South Vietnam, and predicted as inevitable, simply did not materialize after the communists won and extended their totalitarian rule to all Vietnam in 1975. Instead, since then, Vietnam has been living under the most oppressive, corrupt, incompetent, backward regime it has ever known in its history. But the anti-war writers, who had vociferously professed their love and concern for the Vietnamese people, have remained eloquently silent. Understandably: for people who insisted on political correctness, to admit that one has erred on Vietnam is not easy; writing truthfully requires a great deal of courage and honesty.

### **A politically incorrect approach to Vietnam**

Truthfulness and honesty come easily only to those who reject political correctness as a guiding principle, like Robert Templer, author of *Shadows and Wind: A View of Modern Vietnam*.<sup>4</sup> Thus, although the literature on Vietnam is already voluminous, Templer's book should be a welcomed addition to it, for it is a refreshing break from a trend which has prevailed in this area for so long. The author makes it very clear that he does not belong to the school of politically correct writers mentioned above. He points out that the most widespread shortcoming of these writers is that most of the books written by them existed mostly "to celebrate a world of journalism in which young heroes challenge powerful government with the Pulitzer Prize-winning articles".

However, in the post-war period, the young heroes took on a very different attitude "as they struggle against evidence to put the most positive spin on the country and its government". Reporters even "of considerable heft" rarely wandered into areas that the Vietnamese government saw as off-limits. They tended to offer only the gentle criticism of the government. "Journalists who were known for deftly challenging the assumptions and statements of their own leaders lost their edge when faced with Vietnamese officials. Instead of addressing contemporary issues and tensions, many of these journalists produced naive accounts of the policies and personnel of the Vietnamese government".

According to Templer, few journalists realized that they all witnessed identical performances and heard the same speeches...So much written by journalists who parachuted into Vietnam was wide of the mark and often a product of desperate wishful thinking. The Vietnamese government "ensured that journalists and writers spent more time examining a past over which the government could exercise some control rather than a present that is slipping away from them".

Templer did not hesitate to point his finger at the most prominent members of the American "considerable heft": Frances Fitzgerald, Peter Arnett, Neil Sheehan,

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<sup>4</sup> . Robert Templer. *Shadows and Wind: A View of Modern Vietnam*, Penguin Books, 1999.

David Halberstam, William Prochnau, Morley Safer, Dan Rather, Stanley Karnow, Susan Sontag, Oliver Stone, Mary McCarthy...Henceforward, readers, and especially researchers on Vietnam, would have to approach these “great experts on Vietnam” with reservation, especially after having read chapter 2 of Templer’s book, “Imagining Vietnam”, which tells them what is wrong with the “expertise” of those authors.

As a result of the above situation much of the writings about Vietnam during and especially since the end of the war are of very little value to the reader who seeks to know what is really happening in that country. Almost nothing was known about North Vietnam during the war, and even less is known today about a unified communist Vietnam.

But, Templer contends, and rightly, that there is no justification for the superficial coverage, the unquestioning approach to government, and the thinly researched history. He himself practiced what he preached. His book is the product of clearly extensive and thorough researches, the most detailed, the most informative, the most accurate, and the most truthful report on Vietnam to have appeared for a long time.

One great novelty, which makes this book unique and a model in its genre, is that, unlike most, if not all, the writers who either would not, or could not, delve into such linguistically and culturally intricate areas as fiction and poetry, Templer has obtained very revealing and meaningful information from these two singular sources, as well as from a wide range of other sources neglected by other writers. He was able to do so obviously thanks to a deep knowledge of the Vietnamese language, and a great capacity to win the trust of many Vietnamese willing to help him read the “shadows and wind” (title of the book) – the oblique way in which the Vietnamese express their true thoughts and feelings amidst the omnipresent secret police.

### **Vietnam under socialism**

The book is packed with solid up-to-date information about the post-1975 period, i.e. about socialist Vietnam. After three years spent in the country looking mostly under the surface, Templer found that “under the glinting surface of the new Vietnam was the old darker country, a place of poverty and repression....the optimism of the early 1990s proved short-lived and indeed it had evaporated... reforms had become bogged down in the incessant debate over how much Vietnam should open up. Expectations, raised by a decade of economic growth, had soared beyond what the government was willing to allow. Investors had soured on the country, put off by corruption, bureaucracy and the myopic view of officials. Many aspects of cultural openness that appeared after 1986 had been reversed, creating a climate of disappointment and impatience”.

Templer witnessed many incidents of Vietnamese mistreated by government security agents, and “when these incidents piled up they leave a dull aching sense of the problems in Vietnam that cannot be ignored. It was no longer possible to brush over the failure to deal with many enduring economic, political, and cultural constraints in a country where the relationship between the state and the individual was still so unbalanced.” He concluded that, unlike the nations of Eastern Europe, Vietnam remains “an often intolerant one-party state.”

Templer devotes a substantial part of the book - 6 chapters out of a total of 13 - to the problems of democratic freedoms and human rights in their various aspects: Chapters 6 and 8 -- “Empty Box” and “Industrial Chickens” -- deal with the political system and the bureaucracy; chapter 7 -- “Excommunications” -- examines the legal system and the administration of justice, in particular, the way the CPV leadership treats senior cadres who call for reforms; chapters 9 and 10 -- “Pendulum” and “Cymbals and Litany” --, discuss the way in which the Party leadership stifles press freedom and criticisms; chapter 13 -- “Faith” -- examines the problems of religion, in particular the way the communist authorities treat Catholicism and Buddhism.

On the political system, Templer speaks of “the sepulchral world” of the Communist Party of Vietnam, and calls it an “unedifying sight”. Looking at the latest congress of the Party, the eighth, held in 1996, he said that the defining theme is more control, and it “ended the illusion that Vietnam’s transformation from Marxism-Leninism was going to be a smooth evolution to democracy and openness”. The Party had become “a sclerotic beast”, led by men whose response to social change was “to fall back on their coercive powers”, who met legitimate grievances “with stony silence or vengeful punishment”, and who indulged in “massive abuses of power”.

Templer points out that the “gaping moral and legal holes” in the fabric of society benefit officials “who use them for personal profit”. Talk of the rule of law has become “a mantra” among the officials, but the emphasis of legal reforms is on creating order, not establishing due process or protecting individual rights. “Rights accrue to the government officials and not to individuals”. Vietnamese officials are “generally more interested in their own enrichment and self-aggrandizement than they are in any broader national interest”. The near absence of institutions that limit or check government power has created a “monster”, and most efforts to tame this monster have had only limited impact. Hence the massive abuses of power mentioned earlier.

These massive abuses of power were clearly displayed in the grisly way they treated cadres who had unblemished war records and were once senior Party officials -- with incredible meanness, cruelty, and mercilessness -- just because they dared challenge the legitimacy of the Party. This is described with many lurid details in chapter 7, titled “Excommunication”, which explains the communist legal process, and the administration of justice in present day communist Vietnam.

The communist Vietnamese legal system is really “an excuse”, says Templer, for doing injustices in the name of ideology. These are “perhaps even more sharply felt now that the ideologies have diminished in importance”. Templer cites the cases of prominent cadres who had been subjected to such “excommunication” by the Party: Hoang Minh Chinh, a war hero, former rector of the Marxism-Leninism Institute”; Vu Dinh Huynh, former personal secretary of Ho Chi Minh; Phung Van My, a former professor at the Marxism-Leninism Institute; Nguyen Manh Tuong, a famous lawyer; and the most important of all, Nguyen Trung Thanh, former head of the Central Committee’s Security and Protection Department. It is Thanh who, out of repentance, disclosed that the accusations against Chinh and others like him had been based on “forced confessions and distorted reports”. Thanh’s switch from enforcer to campaigner provided the perspective of “turning a powerful light back on a system that rested on fear”.

### **Like the French before**

An axiom of Vietnamese Communism has been “to incorporate or destroy any organization that might speed up the development of a civil society outside Party control”. The legal system offers no hope, and “the iron manacles of the Vietnam Communist Party....are no different from the iron manacles of imperialism....Those who are tried are accused of being common criminals and are denied special treatment in jail, a privilege that even the French gave its political prisoners in Vietnam”. Indeed, the wife of Colonel Bui Tin, the deputy editor of *Nhan Dan* who defected in 1990, complained that the security agents who harassed her behaved “like the French before independence”.

The problems of press freedom, or lack of it, and stifled criticisms are dealt with in the next two chapters, 9 and 10 (“Pendulum” and “Cymbals and Litany”). In this respect, as in others, the preference of the Party is for repression. “The pendulum weighted with fear” has one again swung back on its path between liberalism and repression. Confronted with an inevitable ideological deflation, the Party “has become even more reluctant to cede control over the media for fear it would aid in the development of the civil society that could undermine its rule”. The government forces journalists into the completely passive role as distributors of propaganda. All editors must be Party members and must justify their actions to the Party. Vietnam has become “a land of robots”. As regard the people, there are no libel laws, no right to reply and no avenues if one is wronged by the media.

In the field of literature Templer found that “the best writers have been held in check with restrictions and threats; the rest are cushioned and suffocated by their dependent relationship with the cultural authorities that publish their books and reward their obedience with sinecures and perks”. This has forced much of the

criticism to go underground or to resort to “talking in shadows and wind”, i.e. in oblique metaphors that could be decoded only by those in the know.

Lastly, chapter 13, “Faith”, deals with the way the communist government impedes the free exercise of religions, in particular with Catholicism and Buddhism. The Vietnamese constitution supposedly protects the right to freedom of religion, but, says Templer, “this strange document offers much but delivers little. The reality is that the Communist Party has only permitted degrees of freedom of religious activities when it has suited them”. With regard to the Catholic Church, the Party is determined to limit the power of the church hierarchy and its capacity to organize its followers. Party policy is to disconnect priests from their parishioners and to prevent the church from acting as an organized force outside the control of the Fatherland Front. According to a protesting priest, Father Nguyen Van Ly, the government was only interested in turning the church into “a flexible instrument, a loyal servant, and an obedient subordinate”.

With regard to Buddhism, represented by the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), the government has created a rival Buddhist Church of Vietnam (BCVN), and has tried to bring the former into the latter. It exercises strict control and is determined to “transform Vietnamese Buddhism into a puppet of the CPV”. Abuses by the local and central government persist in the current lawless environment. “All faiths are under constant threat from corrupt officials and the security forces that are unrestrained by law. Where religions compete with local officials for resources or the allegiance of people, the state uses its Draconian regulations to crush their faith”.

### **First but not last**

Templer’s book is the first really truthful account to have been published on Vietnam for quite a long time. It is obviously politically incorrect. Before 1975, and even before 1990, it would have been a risky enterprise, for finding a publisher for such a book would be difficult. But things have changed. Truth cannot be hidden or ignored for long, and the truth about Vietnam is coming out, more and more. Surely, and fortunately, Templer’s book will not be the last of its kind, for some fiercely anti-war activists have begun to recognize the Vietnamese communist regime for what it is.

Among those honest enough to admit their errors is David Horowitz, mentioned earlier. He now recognizes that the Left had been proved wrong, and the only possible conclusion today is that the Left was ultimately motivated “not by altruism and love but nihilism and hate”.<sup>5</sup> Another remarkable case is that of Gabriel Kolko, a Canadian professor, well known for his fierce opposition to the Vietnam War, and strong support of the Vietnamese communist’s regime. He made this quite clear in

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<sup>5</sup> . Horowitz, *op.cit.*, pp.304 and 380.

*Anatomy of a War*, published in 1985. But in the 1994 edition of the book, he added a “Postscript” in which he had very harsh words for his former heroes. He describes the CPV as “an organization that is decaying and imposing mounting hardships on the people”<sup>6</sup>, and “the Politburo has turned the perpetuation of its own hegemony...into the crucial objective of the political system”.<sup>7</sup> He stresses that “a Party which has confessed it erred in most of its history has lost its legitimacy and its aptitude to rule, and to retain power it can only do so with force”.<sup>8</sup> He speaks of “a new class”, of “elite domination”, of rulers who “oppressed, maltreated the masses”, “a privileged, increasingly bureaucratic stratum”, “a monolithic state based on repression”, and characterizes the CPV’s socialism as “the Party plus capitalism” (“the Party plus capitalism equals socialism”)

Templer is no longer alone today, and truthfulness and honesty are no longer politically incorrect.

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<sup>6</sup> . Gabriel Kolko *Anatomy of a War*, 1994, New York, The New Press, p. 568.

<sup>7</sup> . – *ibid* - , p.571.

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