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Tuong Vu

**The Persistence of Single-Party Dictatorships:
The Case of Vietnam**

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Professor Mark R. Thompson

Southeast Asia Research Centre

The City University of Hong Kong
83 Tat Chee Avenue
Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong SAR
Tel: (852) 3442 6106
Fax: (852) 3442 0103
<http://www.cityu.edu.hk/searc>

The Persistence of Single-Party Dictatorships: The Case of Vietnam

Tuong Vu
University of Oregon
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Introduction

Theories of single-party dictatorships, including communist regimes, have not received much attention since the early 1970s.¹ At the time, analysts of those regimes were preoccupied with the question of how they had successfully evolved and adapted after seizing power.² Strongly influenced by modernization theories, this scholarship assumed that, as vanguard forces of modernization, communist parties were born to last. By the late 1970s, as the “third wave of democratization” rolled from Southern Europe to Latin America, much interest shifted to the politics of transition out of authoritarianism. Even so, few scholars, including those in communist studies, anticipated the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s.³ *Post hoc* theoretical attempts have since shed much insight into the causes of collapse.⁴ At the same time, less effort has been made to study the evolution of the surviving communist parties in China, Vietnam, Laos, North Korea, and Cuba. These parties still dominate their countries, and, for China and Vietnam, have overseen highly successful economic reforms. In China, a sharp debate exists between “optimists,” who view the communist dictatorship as viable, and “pessimists,” who emphasize decay and possible collapse.⁵ There is no such well-positioned debate in Vietnam, although similar questions have certainly been raised.⁶

This paper hopes to fill part of this gap by offering a historical analysis of how the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) has evolved and what are the causes of its persistence.

¹ Stathis Kalyvas, “The Decay and Breakdown of Communist One-Party Systems,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999), 336-340.

² Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); Huntington and Clement Henry Moore, *Authoritarian Politics in Modern Society; The Dynamics of Established One-Party Systems* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

³ Timur Kuran, “Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989,” *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (1991): 7-48.

⁴ Kalyvas, “The Decay and Breakdown of Communist One-Party Systems.” See also, Grzegorz Ekiert, *The state against society: political crises and their aftermath in East Central Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Steven Solnick, *Stealing the state: control and collapse in Soviet institutions* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998); Valerie Bunce, *Subversive institutions: the design and the destruction of socialism and the state*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jeff Goodwin, *No other way out: states and revolutionary movements, 1945-1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁵ For an optimistic view, see David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: atrophy and adaptation* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008) and Andrew Nathan, “Authoritarian Resilience,” *Journal of Democracy* 14 (1) (2003): 6-17 (Nathan has since revised his view to be less certain about the future prospects of China’s authoritarian system. See Nathan, “Authoritarian Impermanence,” *Journal of Democracy* 20 (3) (2009): 37-40). For a pessimistic view, see Minxin Pei, *China's trapped transition: the limits of developmental autocracy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁶ For example, see Vu Quang Viet, “Chuyen bien trong lanh dao va he thong lanh dao Dang va Nha nuoc Viet Nam tu sau 1945: Kha nang cai cach the che quyen luc de chong tham nhung,” *Thoi Dai Moi* 9 (November 2006), 1-51; Martin Gainsborough, *Vietnam: Rethinking the State* (London: Zed Books), chapter 1; and Carlyle Thayer, “Vietnam and the Challenge of Political Civil Society,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 31: 1 (2009), 1-27.

The VCP occupies the center in Vietnam's political system, which boasts one of the longest standing and most stable political regimes in Asia. Yet there have been relatively few studies of the VCP, not only its current situation but also its historical evolution.⁷ Early scholarship is generally descriptive and woefully dated. More recent scholarship on this party's history, including my own, has taken advantage of newly released archival documents from Vietnam and the former Soviet bloc.⁸

A major goal of this paper is to place Vietnam in comparative perspective and to draw out implications for theories on the persistence of single-party dictatorships. Most scholarship on Vietnam does not engage the comparative literature. On the other hand, comparativists often mention Vietnam only in passing and do not even get the facts right, perhaps due to their reliance on outdated scholarship produced in the heat of the antiwar movement in US academia.⁹ In this paper, I use concepts developed by Huntington, but examine both the institutionalization of the VCP in the 1950s *and* its decay in recent decades. I reject the teleology in much scholarship on authoritarian regimes that assume their eventual transition to democracy. Mindful of the abrupt breakdown of the Soviet bloc, neither do I assume the eternal persistence of communist regimes as Huntington did. In particular, I will show that the VCP has evolved through three phases: expansion and institutionalization (1945-1960),

⁷ Douglas Pike, *History of Vietnamese communism, 1925-1976* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978); Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism 1925-1940* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982); Carl Thayer, "The Regularization of Politics: Continuity and Change in the Party's Central Committee, 1951-1986," in *Postwar Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development*, ed. David Marr and Christine White (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1988); Lewis Stern, *Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party: Nguyen Van Linh and the Programme for Organizational Reform, 1987-1991* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993); Thaveeporn Vassavakul, "Sectoral Politics and Strategies for State and Party Building from the VII to the VIII Congresses of the Vietnamese Communist Party (1991-1996), in *Doi Moi: Ten Years after the 1986 Party Congress*, ed. Adam Fforde (Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change, Australian National University, 1997), 81-135; Martin Gainsborough, "From Patronage to Outcomes: Vietnam's Communist Party Congresses Reconsidered," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2: 1 (Winter 2007), 3-26; David Koh, "Leadership Changes at the 10th Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party," *Asian Survey* 48 (4) (2008): 650-672.

⁸ For example, Sophie Quinn-Judge, "Rethinking the History of the Vietnamese Communist Party," in *Rethinking Vietnam*, ed. Duncan McCargo (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005); Tuong Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁹ For example, Smith writes, "In Cuba, the road to power followed a path much like that taken by the Vietcong, in which long-term guerrilla warfare was combined with coalition building in the countryside, but which, unlike in North Vietnam, had no ready source of external revenue from foreign supporters." Benjamin Smith, "Life of the Party: The Origins of Regime Breakdown and Persistence under Single-Party Rule," *World Politics* 57 (April 2005), 450. The situation was actually the reverse: the "Vietcong" was under direct supervision of the VCP in North Vietnam and received arms from North Vietnam and the Soviet bloc smuggled in through Cambodian ports and Laotian jungles. In contrast, the government which was set up in Hanoi by Ho Chi Minh in 1945 and which fought a subsequent war with France received no foreign support until 1950 (see below). For the serious biases antiwar politics in the US created for Vietnamese studies, see Tuong Vu, "Vietnamese Political Studies and Debates on Vietnamese Nationalism," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2 (2) (2007), 175-230.

ossification and decay (1970-1986), and reform and continuing decay (1986-present). It is facing a combination of threats and opportunities, and its future is uncertain.

The Vietnamese case contributes to theories of single-party dictatorships by illustrating the role of elite politics, violence, war, and rents in the evolution of these systems. Huntington's observation that revolutionary violence is crucial for the durability of communist systems is borne out in the Vietnamese case.¹⁰ While Benjamin Smith views the wars led by the VCP as catalytic of a durable single-party dictatorship,¹¹ wars show up playing an ambiguous role here.¹² Wars compelled the VCP to develop an effective military. For decades, the military helped the party not only win wars but also provide upward mobility to youth. The military also buttressed the VCP's domestic hegemony. But protracted wars caused the party to lose its complexity and adaptability, while allowing a faction to monopolize power. Factional conflict reached an unprecedented level during the war years. Despite its victories, the VCP emerged from its wars as a less cohesive and dynamic organization.

Smith also argues that "rents" (external assistance) may have adverse effects on regime persistence. In particular, the lack of rents forces groups to work hard on both coalitional and organization building with the outcome being strong and durable parties. In the Vietnamese case, however, rents were found to have mixed effects similar to war. The scarcity of rents at the inception of regime forced the VCP to focus on building a broad coalition rather than a cohesive party.¹³ This strategy helped the VCP to expand rapidly, but its revolutionary qualities were seriously compromised. Massive Chinese aid since 1950 offered the VCP crucial resources to win wars and secure its domination, but even more important than material assistance were the Maoist techniques of organizational building and mass mobilization for class warfare that VCP leaders implemented under close Chinese supervision. Those techniques were critical to creating a cohesive communist party and its long-term domination over society.¹⁴

Finally, an important source of persistence for Vietnamese dictatorship, as for other communist dictatorships, was its near-total grip on society. While the VCP never had

¹⁰ By "revolutionary violence" I mean systematic violence guided by ideologies and tactics aimed at restructuring the social order. Huntington's term is "class warfare."

¹¹ Benjamin Smith, "Life of the Party," 449.

¹² The argument here excludes the anti-French war, the first war the VCP led.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 430.

¹⁴ For an account of how these techniques helped the Chinese Communist Party, see David Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary discourse in Mao's Republic* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994).

complete control over society as the totalitarian model suggests, its power extended beyond the realm of politics to encompass the economy, culture, and social sphere. Studies that lump communist with other single-party dictatorships naturally overlook this factor.

The Evolution of the Vietnamese Communist Party¹⁵

Huntington defines party institutionalization as “the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability,” and which involves four aspects, namely, adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence.¹⁶ Adaptability refers to a party’s ability to adjust over time as its founders pass away from the scene and as the political environment change. Complexity refers to the development of subunits and the differentiation of functions within a party. Autonomy means a party has the capacity to make decisions independent from the pressure and control of social groups, while coherence refers to members’ substantial consensus on the party’s goals and procedures.

Since seizing power in 1945, the VCP has evolved through four phases. It experienced rapid growth in the first few years and became institutionalized during 1948-1960. In the next phase (1970-1986), it became ossified at the top and decayed at the bottom. Since 1986, the party has continued to experience decay even while its leaders have sought to reform and rejuvenate it.

Expansion and Institutionalization (1945-1960)

The VCP was founded in 1930 in Kowloon with guidance from the Comintern in Moscow.¹⁷ First leaders of the party were trained in Moscow and sought to organize it in the Leninist mold. In their views, the tasks of their revolution involved two interlocking steps: the overthrowing of colonial rule and the construction of socialism. The party’s strategy was to build an alliance of workers and peasants, but tactically other groups such as intellectuals and landlords were to be mobilized if necessary for short-term collaboration.

The party operated in secret from both inside and outside Vietnam. It led two failed rebellions (1931-1932 and 1940) and suffered brutal repression by the colonial regime. Its first five General Secretaries died young, either in prison or from execution. In 1941, a small

¹⁵ For simplicity, I am using the name VCP for the entire existence of this party. The VCP had other names in some periods, such as Indochinese Communist Party (1931-1945), Association for the Study of Marxism (1945-1951), and Vietnamese Workers’ Party (1951-1976).

¹⁶ Huntington, *Political Order*, 18-24.

¹⁷ The best account of the party in its early years is Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism 1925-1940*.

group of surviving leaders set up the Viet Minh, a front to unite all Vietnamese, regardless of their social class, to fight for independence. The Viet Minh operated out of the jungle near the border of Vietnam and China. At the time, the party had a small following of a few thousands and little formal structure. In fact, in early 1945 most members were still locked up somewhere in colonial prisons, where many had spent a decade or more.

When the Japanese surrendered to the Allies in August 1945, VCP cadres, groups of Viet Minh sympathizers, and other political groups led riots and demonstrations and took power.¹⁸ Failing to obtain Soviet support but forced to confront anticommunist groups and their foreign backers, the VCP sought to build as broad a coalition as possible. The new government reflected this effort and was composed of an amalgam of political groups. The VCP had control over the major ministries and its own militia but not the entire state apparatus. Territorially, government authority was established only in larger towns but not over the entire country.

This amalgam also was reflected in party membership. Over the next few years, the VCP attracted many new members. It grew from a few thousands in late 1945 to 20,000 in late 1946. By late 1949, membership stood at 430,000.¹⁹ The rapid growth in membership indicated party policy during this period not to be strict about the class background or ideological loyalty of new members. Central leaders also had little effective control over local party branches. This resulted in fast but unfocused growth as the party sought to broaden membership without much emphasis on quality. Most new members came from more privileged social groups, such as educated urban elites, landlords, and rich and middle peasants. The absolute majority of members came from north and north central Vietnam with comparatively few from southern Vietnam, where the French had taken effective control.

In 1948, VCP leaders were anticipating the victory of Chinese communists on mainland China and the opportunity of joining forces with the Chinese to fight the French. Radical leaders led by General Secretary Truong Chinh feared the “contamination” of the party by the admission of upper-class members and called for tightening the criteria for membership and for other measures to strengthen central control. The party thus began the

¹⁸ See Stein Tonnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945* (London: SAGE Publications, 1991); David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Vu, *Paths to Development*, ch. 5.

¹⁹ See Vu, *Paths to Development*, ch. 6.

policy to restrict the growth of membership, to expel members who came from privileged backgrounds, and to intensify ideological indoctrination for all members.

The new policy ended the period of expansion and launched the institutionalization of the party. This coincided with the Viet Minh government's formally joining the Soviet camp and the arrival of massive Chinese aid and advisers.²⁰ These advisers were embedded in most party organizations from district level up, and trained Vietnamese cadres in the Maoist methods of thought reform, land reform, and mass mobilization in general. While Chinese military aid helped the VCP lead the anti-French resistance to its successful outcome, Chinese guidance on mass mobilization was critical for building the VCP into a Maoist party.

By about 1960, the VCP had become more or less institutionalized if we use Huntington's four criteria of adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence. First, by then the VCP could show that it had overcome numerous challenges and successfully adapted its functions to great changes in its operational environment. The party began as a revolutionary group on the fringe of the colonial society, acquired leadership of the nationalist movement, led the struggle against France for independence until winning control over North Vietnam, and successfully established its rule there. Measured by generational age, however, it is less clear that the party was fully adaptable.²¹ While by 1960 the party had adapted to successive leadership changes from Ho Chi Minh (1941-1950) to Truong Chinh (1950-1956) to Le Duan (since 1958),²² Le Duan and Truong Chinh were of the same generation, and both Ho Chi Minh and Truong Chinh remained influential in the Politburo after relinquishing formal leadership.

Second, through successful adaptation to changing roles the VCP had become a complex organization by 1960. The VCP now formed the core of the state and its cadres held most public offices with differentiated roles in administration and in economic and cultural

²⁰ Chen Jian, "China and the First Indo-china War, 1950-1954," *China Quarterly* 133 (March 1993), 85-110.

²¹ As Huntington explains, "So long as an organization still has its first set of leaders, ... its adaptability is still in doubt." See Huntington, *Political Order*, 14.

²² Ho Chi Minh's role in the party weakened in the late 1940s because he failed to obtain diplomatic recognition not only from the United States, but also from the Soviet Union. He was criticized by some party leaders for his decision to dissolve the VCP in 1945; this decision led Stalin not to trust the VCP. See Christopher Goscha, "Courting Diplomatic Disaster? The Difficult Integration of Vietnam into the Internationalist Communist Movement (1945-1950)," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1: 1-2 (Fall 2006), 59-103; and Quinn-Judge, "Rethinking the History of the Vietnamese Communist Party," 33. Truong Chinh resigned from the position of General Secretary in 1956 after the party rectification campaign and the land reform went awry under his direction (see Vu, *Paths to Development*, ch. 5). He remained powerful in the Politburo, just as Ho Chi Minh remained influential even after he was gradually removed from the daily management of the state in the early 1950s.

management. The party controlled a powerful military which had earlier defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu. It had nationalized most private property, including land and factories; had taken over the markets of key products; and had brought most social means of communication (newspapers and publishing houses) under state ownership. The party now had branches in most villages and urban neighborhoods in North Vietnam. The land reform (1953-1956), during which about 15,000 landlords or 0.1 percent of the population were executed, had allowed the party to overthrow old power structure in the village and to promote loyal party cadres to positions of leadership.²³ Party control now encompassed most aspects of social life in North Vietnam, as one would expect in a communist totalitarian system.

Third, Marxism-Leninism allowed the party to claim a vanguard position above and autonomous from society. In particular, the VCP claimed to fight against feudalism and imperialism. Even before firmly established in power, communist leaders had challenged powerful social forces such as landlords, first with laws to limit land rent and later with the land reform campaign. Yet the VCP was not beholden to peasants for very long: land reform was only a tactic to mobilize them. As soon as the party felt secure, it took away all land, draught animals and tools from peasants in the collectivization campaign (1958-1960). Besides ideology, material support from the Soviet bloc also enabled the VCP to be autonomous from society. In a society threatened by famine and exhausted after a long war, foreign aid gave the party a crucial leverage against social forces.

Finally, the “organizational rectification” campaign (1952-1956) which was implemented in most party organizations from provincial level down helped strengthened the coherence of the party, the fourth criterion according to Huntington. During this campaign, which was essentially a brutal purge, most members who came from “bad” class backgrounds were expelled to be replaced by poor peasants. Previously, party members who came from upper and middle classes and who made up as much as two-thirds of membership did not wholly support the party’s goal of building socialism. They had rallied to the party only as far as national independence was concerned. After the purge, the poor peasants who owed the party for their lands, houses, and positions could be trusted to follow the party to their deaths if necessary. The cohesion of the VCP was also aided by its leaders’ tireless efforts at carrying out a cultural revolution, including the systematic propagation of Marxist-Leninist-

²³ Vo Nhan Tri, *Vietnam's economic policy since 1975* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), 3; Vu, *Paths to Development*, 103.

Stalinist-Maoist thoughts, values, and methods throughout the ranks of the party and in the broader society.²⁴

Ossification and Decay (1970-1986)

By Huntington's four criteria, the VCP seemed well-institutionalized by 1960. Yet in the following decade the party became ossified under the leadership of Le Duan (1960-1986). Duan was from central Vietnam and had spent his career mostly in the Mekong delta until he replaced Truong Chinh in 1958 (officially in 1960). Duan advocated the use of violence to unify Vietnam early on, but the party adopted his views only after he rose to the top. Under his leadership, the VCP led a protracted war to defeat the government of South Vietnam backed by the United States. The war ended in victory for North Vietnam, but the VCP emerged from victory a less cohesive and dynamic organization. Evidence is still somewhat sketchy, but the general trend is clear.

First, the VCP under Le Duan (1960-1986) adapted successfully to changing circumstances in the first half of this period but later became ossified. Measured by chronological age, not only did the party survive but it also won the civil war and emerged as the unchallenged ruler over all of Vietnam by 1975. Measured by generational age, the score is mixed. The size of the Central Committee elected in 1976 tripled, allowing new blood in the top leadership.²⁵ At the very top, however, not until 1986 when Le Duan died was the party able to arrange for a new leadership to succeed first-generation leaders. From 1960 to 1976, the same 11 Politburo members of the first generation ran the party.²⁶ All the surviving members of the previous Politburo were retained except one.²⁷ New faces made up less than half of the new Politburo. Among these new members, all had been of high ranks in 1960—in other words, no surprises.²⁸ First-generation leaders who were in their seventies continued to dominate the Politburo in the 1970s. Several of them would die one by one while in office,²⁹

²⁴ See Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Tuong Vu, "Dreams of Paradise: The Making of a Soviet Outpost in Vietnam," *Ab Imperio* 2/2008 (August 2008), 255-85; Idem, "To Be Patriotic Is to Build Socialism: Communist Ideology in Vietnam's Civil War," in Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat, eds. *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009).

²⁵ The Central Committee had 44 full members and 31 alternate members in 1960 and 133 full members with no alternate members in 1976. Most full and alternate members in 1960 were retained in 1976 and new members accounted for more than half of the Central Committee in 1976.

²⁶ Two died in office: Nguyen Chi Thanh died in 1968 and Ho Chi Minh in 1969.

²⁷ This was Hoang Van Hoan.

²⁸ These were Tran Quoc Hoan, Van Tien Dung, Le Van Luong, Nguyen Van Linh, Vo Chi Cong, and Chu Huy Man. Le Van Luong was an alternate member of the Politburo since 1951 but lost this position in 1956.

²⁹ These included Le Duan, Nguyen Duy Trinh, Pham Hung, Le Thanh Nghi, and Tran Quoc Hoan.

and the other Politburo members of this cohort would retire by the mid-1980s but most still wielded tremendous influence even after they had formally retired.³⁰

Measured by functional adaptability, the record is also mixed. On the one hand, the party was able to adapt to new challenges as the war against the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and the United States escalated in the 1960s. This war required the total mobilization of North Vietnamese population and the enlistment of full support from the Soviet bloc. The VCP performed these tasks brilliantly over 15 years that led to its victory. On the other hand, this war was not the first war led by the party, which had accumulated nearly a decade of war-making just a few years earlier fighting the French. Peace but not war was the real litmus test of the party's functional adaptability, and here the VCP failed miserably. There was little new thinking in the policy agenda of socialist construction between the 1950s and the 1970s. Despite the failure of collectivization in North Vietnam prior to unification, the party sought to replicate it in South Vietnam in the late 1970s—to the detriment of the economy.³¹ The VCP also failed to notice changes in the international environment. Proud of their victory, party leaders expected world powers to bid for their favors.³² Subsequent decisions to invade Cambodia and ally with the Soviet Union against China (1978-88) indicated that the party had been addicted to making war and failed to realize the need for peace after three decades of nearly continuous warfare.

On complexity, the VCP had a similarly mixed performance as with adaptability. The party underwent tremendous expansion during the war years. Between 1960 and 1976, party membership tripled from 0.5 to 1.5 million.³³ The number of party cells also tripled, and the number of party committees doubled in the same period.³⁴ At the same time, party organizations became less differentiated. As the entire society of North Vietnam was mobilized for war, economic, social, and cultural spheres of activity shrank tremendously. Most party and state organizations were geared toward wartime demands. Cadres acquired

³⁰ These were Truong Chinh, Le Duc Tho, Pham Van Dong, Vo Nguyen Giap, Le Van Luong, and Van Tien Dung. Vo Nguyen Giap is still alive but has lost influence since the late 1960s.

³¹ For the failure of collectivization in North Vietnam, see Benedict Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). For the failure of socialist construction in North Vietnam in general, see Adam Fforde and Suzanne Paine, *The Limits of National Liberation* (London: Croom Helm, 1987).

³² For an astute analysis of the mindset of party leaders at this time, see David Marr, "Where is Vietnam Coming from," in *Doi Moi: Vietnam's Renovation Policy and Performance*, ed. Dean Forbes et al. (Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change, Australian National University, 1991), 12-20.

³³ Dang Cong San Viet Nam (The Vietnamese Communist Party), *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* (The Complete Collection of Party Documents), v. 21, 491 and v. 37, 705.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, v. 37, 764.

substantial experiences in military affairs but little else. Tens of thousands of young men and women were conscripted and sent to the battlefield every year, including fresh college graduates and boys in their teens.³⁵ The slogan of the time “All for the front, all for victory” indicated that uniformity but not differentiation was favored as an organizational goal.³⁶ Uniformity helped the VCP lead the war to a successful outcome but sacrificed its complexity in the process.

After the war, the party expanded its organization to all of Vietnam and made economic development its top priority—so its complexity increased somewhat. However, war would resume shortly and last for another decade, meaning that any gains in complexity were limited. By 1986—eleven years after unification—the VCP still maintained a large army of more than one million soldiers even though the percentage of military leaders in the Central Committee had reduced and some units were assigned to economic development tasks.³⁷ Nearly two-thirds of new party members recruited between 1976 and 1982 came from the army.³⁸ Seventy-six percent of party members were still from North Vietnam, indicating the party’s failure to expand its territorial base to the south after unification.³⁹

Turning to autonomy, the VCP continued to dominate and be autonomous from society throughout this period. Yet there were many cracks in the edifice after 1975. First, the Marxist-Leninist ideology sounded increasingly hollow in the face of a severe economic crisis that began soon after victory in the civil war. Second, a remarkable trend has occurred since 1976, namely the expansion of the Central Committee to include representatives from state organs and provincial party branches.⁴⁰ This expansion reflected the party leadership’s desire to adapt to new circumstances, but the change opened up the potential that the Central Committee could be made to serve the interests of sectoral and local groups rather than those of the central party leadership.⁴¹ As will be seen below, this potential has realized after the dominant figures of the first generation passed away from the scene and their successors in the Politburo could not command the same level of prestige and power.

³⁵ The DRV lost about 1.1 million troops in the war out of a population of about 20 million.

³⁶ In Vietnamese, “tat ca cho tien tuyen, tat ca de chien thang.”

³⁷ William Turley, “The Military Construction of Socialism: Postwar Roles of the People’s Army of Vietnam,” in *Postwar Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development*, ed. David Marr and Christine White (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1988), 195-212.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 200.

³⁹ Carl Thayer, “Renovation and Vietnamese Society: The Changing Roles of Government and Administration,” in *Doi Moi: Vietnam’s Renovation Policy and Performance*, 21.

⁴⁰ Carlyle Thayer, “The Regularization of Politics: Continuity and Change in the Party’s Central Committee, 1951-1986,” in *Postwar Vietnam*, 177-193.

⁴¹ The Central Committee in theory is above the Politburo, but in reality this was not the case until recently.

The coherence of the VCP also declined under Le Duan. Duan formed a powerful alliance with Le Duc Tho, who was the Head of the Central Organizational Commission with the power to groom and appoint party members to provincial and central leadership positions, including the Central Committee and the Politburo. While Duan and Tho were never powerful enough to remove the other senior leaders,⁴² they monopolized power to an unprecedented extent. Duan and Tho worked closely together in the late 1940s in the Mekong Delta. Both were long-term Politburo members but became close after Duan assumed the position of General Secretary in 1958. Their ascendancy in the mid-1960s was helped by the split in the Soviet bloc that had tremendous repercussions for all communist parties worldwide. The split pitted the Soviet Union against China, resulting in intense debates in the VCP about which side it should take in the split.⁴³ Duan and Tho placed their bet with Mao, with the support or acquiescence of most Central Committee members. Based on this support, Duan and Tho carried out arrests of many high-ranking party and military leaders who did not agree with them. The arrests reportedly targeted Vo Nguyen Giap, the Minister of Defense, and even though the general emerged unharmed, his power was severely curbed. Although factionalism in Vietnam never approached the scale of Maoist China, it was significant under Le Duan and made a dent in the coherence of the VCP. As Duan's faction consolidated its grip, fear more than consensus governed intra-party relations.

While factional struggles played out secretly at the top, the base of the party showed signs of decay by the early 1970s. Two trends joined to create this situation. First, party leaders launched two main drives during the civil war to recruit new members—one in the early 1960s and the other in the early 1970s.⁴⁴ These two drives primarily accounted for the tripling of membership mentioned above, but similar to many campaigns in communist Vietnam, quantity ended up trumping quality in this field. An internal report written in 1966 raised many concerns about the quality of about 300,000 new members who had entered the VCP since 1960. In 1971, an examination of 74 factories discovered that nearly 15 percent of

⁴² The only exception was Hoang Van Hoan, who lost his position in the Politburo in 1976 and defected to China in 1978.

⁴³ Accounts of these events can be found in Martin Grossheim, "Revisionism in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: New Evidence from the East German Archives," *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (November 2005): 451-77; Sophie Quinn-Judge, "The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967-68," *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (November 2005): 479-500; and Bui Tin, *Following Ho Chi Minh*, trans. by Judy Stowe and Đỗ Văn (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995).

⁴⁴ Party documents referred to members recruited in the first campaign as "the January 6 Cohort" (the campaign was launched on January 6, 1960, the 30th birthday of the VCP), and those recruited in the early 1970s as "the Ho Chi Minh Cohort" (the campaign was launched in September 1970 to commemorate the first anniversary of Ho's death).

new members admitted since 1970 were “below the standards” set out in the Party Code, and another 19 percent were clearly “of poor quality.”⁴⁵ Party leaders subsequently launched several measures to improve the situation but found that expelling “low-quality” party members difficult (as it was for any state bureaucrats).⁴⁶

The second trend responsible for the decay was the emergence of a massive informal economy in the late 1960s. As Soviet and Chinese aid streamed into North Vietnam just when living standards sharply deteriorated due to war and poor economic management, an increasing number of party members engaged in corruption by selling rationed imported goods and materials on the thriving black market.⁴⁷ The rapid expansion of the party, the poor quality of many new recruits, and the spread of corruption eroded the coherence of the party as war protracted. A significant number of party members by the early 1970s was perhaps more interested in war profiteering or in social and political status than in making sacrifices for the revolution championed by the top leadership.

Reform and Continuing Decay (1986-present)

After Duan died in 1986 and Tho retired in the same year, new VCP leaders sought to reform and rejuvenate the party. This process has continued for the last two decades and brought many achievements. Yet the decay that began under Le Duan continued at a much faster rate and on many dimensions. Party reform has made the most progress in the criterion of adaptability. The party survived the collapse of the Soviet bloc and has achieved impressive results in economic reform. In the Politburo, the first generation and the transition generation have passed the baton to the second generation.⁴⁸ Succession has taken place rather smoothly in now regularly held national party congresses. About one-third of Politburo and Central Committee members were replaced in each of the last six congresses. A mechanism perhaps designed to smooth out the process of succession is to allow key leaders who have retired to maintain some influence as “Advisors” to the Politburo. On rejuvenating, Central Committee members have become younger and more educated, enabling the party to

⁴⁵ Dang Cong San Viet Nam, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap*, v. 32, 303. These sources did not reveal the criteria used to rank cadres.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 443.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, v. 34, 265 and v. 35, 1, 102, 106, 112. See also Tuong Vu, “Workers and the Socialist State: North Vietnam’s State-Labor Relations, 1945-1970,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 38 (September 2005), 329-356.

⁴⁸ Transition generation include such leaders as Nguyen Van Linh, Do Muoi, Vo Van Kiet. Those of the second generation are Le Duc Anh, Nong Duc Manh, Phan Van Khai, Le Kha Phieu, Tran Duc Luong, and Nguyen Tan Dung. For an account of early years of party reform, see Stern, *Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party*.

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lead economic development more effectively. Perhaps in response to a more complex society, greater balance of representation among various sectors, gender, age groups, party, military, economic, state, and mass mobilization organizations have been sought in the composition of the Central Committee.⁴⁹

Adaptability can also be observed in ideological orientations. Party Congresses have dropped Marxist-Leninist principles one by one, such as the dictatorship of the proletariat and the alliance of workers and peasants.⁵⁰ Since 1991 “Ho Chi Minh Thought” has appeared besides Marxism-Leninism as part of an official ideology. After two decades promoting a market economy, the party has recently allowed its members to engage in private businesses, which were once deemed exploitative. From organizational to ideological matters, the VCP has veered far away from the rigidity of Le Duan’s era. Still, the fundamental disposition of adaptability has been gradualism by which changes were incremental and lacked clear direction.

It is precisely this incremental adaptability that has not (yet) helped to create a more complex VCP. While the party has recovered from a membership fall in the late 1980s, most new recruits still come from state employees and military personnel.⁵¹ Despite many efforts, the party has failed to penetrate new urban areas and private enterprises.⁵² Party members can own businesses now, but owners of private businesses who want to join the party are still rarely admitted.⁵³ Not development but involution seems to be the trend, as the party can grow only by sucking from the state sector and the military already under its control but not by expanding its roots into a rapidly changing society. Party leaders have launched numerous programs to rationalize the party structure so that the VCP remains relevant and effective.

⁴⁹ Vassavakul, “Sectoral Politics and Strategies for State and Party Building.”

⁵⁰ Tuong Lai, “Hanh trinh tu ‘chuyen chinh vo san’ den ‘lam chu tap the’ va ‘Nha nuoc phap quyen Viet nam.’” *Nguoi Dai Bieu Nhan Dan*, September 12, 2006.

⁵¹ From 1987 to 1991, the annual number of new recruits fell from about 100,000 to 36,000; see Le Phuoc Tho, “Most so nhien vu doi moi va chinh don Dang,” *Tap chi Xay Dung Dang*, Special Issue (1982), 24. By 1998, the number for the first time in a decade rebounded to 100,000; see Nguyen Duc Ha, “Cong tac phat trien Dang nam 1998,” *Tap chi Xay Dung Dang* (3/1999), 44. By 2007, the number was about 170,000; see Phuc Son, “Kho khan va giai phap trong viec nang cao chat luong to chuc co so Dang va Dang vien,” *Tap chi Xay Dung Dang* no. 11/2007, available at http://www.xaydungdang.org.vn/details.asp?Object=4&news_ID=51178442. Total number of VCP members in 1986 was 1.8 million or 3 percent of the population (see Thayer, “Renovation and Vietnamese Society,” 21). By 2007, there were 3.2 million members who made up 3.7 percent of the population (*Tap chi Xay Dung Dang* no. 12/2007).

⁵² In 2007, 0.55 percent of 20,000 private enterprises in Hanoi had a party cell; see “Day manh phat trien Dang trong khoi kinh te tu nhan, *Tien phong*, January 11, 2007. In Ho Chi Minh City, the rate was much lower, at about 0.06 percent. See “Nang cao chat luong doi ngu can bo trong cac doanh nghiep tu nhan o thanh pho Ho chi Minh,” *Tap chi Xay Dung Dang* no. 4/2008, available at http://www.xaydungdang.org.vn/details.asp?Object=4&news_ID=7461228.

⁵³ Interview with Nong Duc Manh, General Secretary of the VCP. *Tuoi Tre*, April 26, 2006.

Current initiatives include the formation of huge blocks of party organizations based on similar functions, and a pilot project to have party secretaries doubling as government executives at the local level. We know few specifics about the outcome of these recent institutional reforms, but available party reports suggest that they have brought only limited results.⁵⁴

Incremental adaptability is also insufficient to stem the erosion of the VCP's autonomy as it became increasingly vulnerable to corrupting social influences. We have seen above how corruption tied to a thriving black market became widespread among cadres in North Vietnam in the last years of the civil war. Corruption did not abate when that black market was legalized in the late 1980s. New forms of corruption have since emerged, and one particularly serious form involves the selling of office. With state agencies generating lucrative rents, party secretaries can now make fortunes by selling state positions to the highest bidders. Recently the party secretary of Ca Mau province was sacked after it was reported that he accepted money in return for appointments to top positions in the provincial government. His case was never made public, but he turned in 100 million dong (\$6,000) that someone tried to bribe him. The said party secretary also claimed that he could have collected 1 billion dong (\$60,000) for several appointments if he had wanted.⁵⁵

This is not an isolated case. Le Kha Phieu, a former General Secretary, revealed that people had tried to bribe him many times with thousands of dollars, perhaps to receive favorable appointments in return.⁵⁶ The power of appointment has turned party congresses into occasions for patronage networks to compete intensively for positions in the Central Committee, as Gainsborough describes,

For Vietnamese officials, the key question at a congress is whether someone you are connected to personally or through your workplace moves up or out as a result of the circulation of positions, and what this means for you, your institutions, or your family in terms of the provision or loss of protection and access to patronage. In Vietnam, holding public office gives you access to patronage which can range from access to the state budget and the ability to make decisions about how to spend public money,

⁵⁴ See *Tap chi Xay Dung Dang* 1-2/2008.

⁵⁵ *Ha Noi Moi*, April 22, 2008. See also *Nguoi Lao Dong*, April 28, 2008.

⁵⁶ Interview with Le Kha Phieu, *Tuoi Tre*, May 26, 2005. He returned the money, but tellingly did not authorize any investigation of those who tried to bribe him even though the law allowed the persecution of bribe-givers.

to the authority to issue licenses or other forms of permissions, to carry out inspections, or to levy fines.⁵⁷

I have mentioned above that sectoral and provincial interests have gained greater representation in the Central Committee since 1976. In the last two decades, those interests have gained substantial power at the expense of the Politburo. Provincial leaders now form the largest bloc in the Central Committee (every province is entitled to at least one seat and each of the two largest cities send at least two). Provincial officials also enjoy many informal channels of influence through dense patronage networks based on places of origin, family relations, or other informal ties. It is not uncommon that local governments interpret central policies any way they like, ignore central policy with impunity, or comply only when subsidies are provided. After provinces were recently authorized to approve foreign investment projects up to a certain limit, they have scrambled for those projects on top of the regular contests for a share of the central budget.⁵⁸ The central party leadership may be more responsive to local demands than previously, but the autonomy of the party as an organization has declined.

VCP leaders see corruption as a major threat to the regime but evidence suggests corruption now involves the highest level, often through family links and crony networks.⁵⁹ Patronage and corruption are eroding the party's coherence. The occasional dismissal of a Politburo member (Nguyen Ha Phan), the premature end to the term of a General Secretary (Le Kha Phieu), the sudden publicity of numerous corruption charges targeted at certain candidates for the Central Committee before a party congress (e.g. Nguyen Viet Tien)—these cases are clear evidence of patronage rivalries at work.⁶⁰ As a retired high-ranking official in the Central Commission on Party Organization who must be well-informed about the party's

⁵⁷ Gainsborough, "From Patronage to Outcomes." See also Koh, "Leadership Changes at the 10th Party Congress."

⁵⁸ At least half of provincial governments have been found to violate national investment laws to attract more foreign investment to their provinces. See Pham Duy Nghia, "Luat phap truoc suc ep," *Thoi Bao Kinh Te Sai Gon*, February 12, 2007.

⁵⁹ No corruption cases involving VCP Politburo members have been reported, although their children, spouses, and relatives are widely believed to use family influence for financial gains; see Bill Hayton, *Vietnam: Rising Dragon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 20-25. Among Ministers and Vice Ministers reportedly disciplined, fired, or jailed for corruption are Vu Ngoc Hai (Energy), Bui Thien Ngo (Public Security), Mai Van Dau (Trade), (Nguyen Huu Chi and Truong Chi Trung (Finance), Nguyen Viet Tien (Transportation), Nguyen Thien Luan and Nguyen Quang Ha (Agriculture and Rural Development). Other high-ranking officials who have been suspected or accused are Le Duc Thuy (Governor of Central Bank), Le Thanh Hai (Politburo member and Ho Chi Minh City Party Secretary), and Nguyen Ba Thanh (Da Nang Party Secretary). Numerous provincial leaders are disciplined and dismissed for corruption every year but details have rarely been made public; see for example, "Nhiều bí thư, phó bí thư tỉnh bị xem xét kỷ luật," *VietnamNet*, November 3, 2009.

⁶⁰ Gainsborough, "From Patronage to Outcomes."

internal problems recently lamented, “The [party] bureaucracy has increased greatly in size, while quality and effectiveness of policy decline. Red tape and corruption have not lessened but in fact become more serious. The danger is increasingly apparent that [emerging] special interest groups collude with each other to accumulate power, influence policy, and expropriate public property.”⁶¹

In sum, Huntington’s concept of party institutionalization has been helpful to understanding the evolution of the VCP since 1945. The party has undergone expansion and institutionalization (1945-1960), and ossification and decay (1970-1986). Since 1986, VCP leaders have launched numerous initiatives to reform the party, but the results have been limited. The party displays an extraordinary ability to adapt, but has tended to react to challenges when they came. This reactive mentality has not helped the party to stem corruption and decay, which now reach the top level.

Origins of Persistence

Studies of single-party dictatorships have shown that the origins of their persistence can be traced back to regime-founding moments. If rulers who come to power face a strong and well-organized opposition, and if no external assistance (“rents”) is available, they are likely to build strong party organizations to maintain alliances with powerful social groups.⁶² The struggle against a strong opposition often entails civil wars or the mobilization of large-scale revolutionary violence, which eliminate potential enemies and create a durable foundation for dictatorship.⁶³

The case of the VCP confirms some of the above hypotheses but disconfirms others. First, it is clear that the party faced strong opposition when it seized power in 1945. As mentioned above, the VCP was not able to seize power on its own or to monopolize power when it set up the Viet Minh government in late 1945. This government relied heavily on the colonial elites and bureaucracy in its first years.⁶⁴ In southern Vietnam, various religious and political groups challenged the Viet Minh, and the returning French quickly retook control of government. In northern Vietnam, anticommunist groups such as the Vietnam Nationalist Party (VNP) and the Vietnam Revolutionary League (VRL) had some popular following and

⁶¹ Bui Duc Lai, “Dang lanh dao trong che do dan chu nhan dan,” September 22, 2010 at <<http://vietnamnet.vn/chinhtri/201009/dang-lanh-dao-trong-che-do-dan-chu-nhan-dan-936926/>>

⁶² Smith, “Life of the Party,” 430.

⁶³ Ibid., 449-450; Huntington and Moore.

⁶⁴ See Vu, *Paths to Development*, ch. 5.

the backing of Guomindang occupying forces. These groups attacked Viet Minh governments in many provinces, and posed a real threat to the survival of Ho Chi Minh's government. The communists defeated the VNP and VRL by negotiating for French forces to replace Guomindang troops in mid-1946, only to start a war with the French six months later. On the one hand, their strong and well-organized enemies forced the communists to build a broad coalition, as Smith correctly argues.⁶⁵ On the other hand, it is not this broad coalition that helped the communist regime to persist. While the VCP grew a hundred times in size in just a few years, it lacked centralized control and internal cohesion, and fought the war with the French from a precarious position.⁶⁶

What solidified the communist dictatorship came from the campaigns of land reform and organizational rectification in the early 1950s. As discussed above, these campaigns were implemented under Chinese supervision and unleashed massive and systematic revolutionary violence. This violence not only reconstructed the party in the Maoist mold but also eliminated the economic and social basis of any potential opposition. It not only destroyed the landlord class, but also drove away nearly a million northern Catholics, who sought refuge in South Vietnam in 1954.⁶⁷ Unlike what Smith argues for other cases, "rents" contributed significantly to the lasting domination of the VCP since 1950. While communist China's material assistance was crucial for Ho's forces to defeat the French (and later the Americans and the Republic of Vietnam), Maoist techniques of thought reform and class warfare were key to uprooting social opposition and establishing a communist dictatorship penetrating deeply into village society.

While revolutionary violence contributed decisively to the durability of Vietnam's communist system, the war against the Republic of Vietnam and the US during 1960-1975 had mixed effects. This war necessitated the total mobilization of northern population. As the economy stagnated, the war helped the VCP channel popular participation through total mobilization. Millions of young soldiers were sent to fight in the South or deployed to defend the North. Participation rate was extremely high: about seventy percent of youth in their early 20s were conscripted to serve in the military until the end of the war.⁶⁸ US bombing

⁶⁵ Smith, "Life of the Party."

⁶⁶ Tuong Vu, "It's Time for the Indochinese Revolution to Show Its True Colours: The Radical Turn of Vietnamese Politics in 1948," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40 (3) (2009).

⁶⁷ See Peter Hansen, "Bac Di Cu: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954-1959," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4: 3 (Fall 2009), 173-211.

⁶⁸ Bussarawan Teerawichitchainan, "Trends in Military Service in Northern Vietnam, 1950-1995: A Sociodemographic Approach," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4: 3 (Fall 2009), 74.

campaigns that created extreme hardship and suffering for ordinary North Vietnamese helped increase regime legitimacy. US crude intervention (compared to discreet Soviet and Chinese support for communist Vietnam) aroused nationalist anger among many Vietnamese which the regime worked hard to mobilize.

Yet wars were as harmful to the communist dictatorship as they were helpful. I have discussed above how the civil war eroded the VCP's organizational complexity with its preoccupation with war. Furthermore, the Politburo dominated by Le Duan's faction used war as an excuse to delay holding a national party congress for more than 10 years. In the meantime, the top party leadership aged and party organizations above the middle level ossified.

While the civil war had both positive and negative impacts on the communist dictatorship, the wars with Cambodia and China during 1978-1989 came close to unraveling it. These conflicts did not provide upward mobility for youth because they never reached the level of casualties nor required total mobilization as the earlier war did. Military careers were far more limited now that most mobilized soldiers would be released from service in a few years. Vietnam also failed to attract as much foreign aid for these wars as in the previous war, which led to a severe economic crisis in the 1980s.

An important factor that has been overlooked in the comparative literature but contributed significantly to the VCP's ability to persist was its near-total grip of public life. This is a feature that Vietnam shared with countries in the former Soviet bloc. Organizations created by the VCP for mass mobilization purposes, such as the Women's Association, Writers' Association, and Trade Union, maintained branches in most economic, social, and cultural activities. Managers of collective farms were an integrated part of local governments, involving not only in production but also in social surveillance and control. The Communist Youth League and Pioneer Children's Union monitored youth and kept them busy. These organizations lengthened the party's arms to reach most individuals in society, distributing exclusive benefits of the planned economy to their members, offering upward mobility to motivated individuals, and generating a sense of symbolic participation.⁶⁹ At the same time,

⁶⁹ For the importance of rituals of participation in dictatorships, see Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

they could be mobilized to completely isolate political dissidents from society and effectively deny them any alternative means of livelihood.⁷⁰

Implications for the Party's Future

This paper has analyzed the evolution of the VCP, using the concepts developed by Huntington while exploiting newly available archival sources and recently published studies. The VCP has undergone three phases in its history since assuming power: expansion and institutionalization (1945-1960), ossification and decay (1970-1986), reform and continuing decay (1986-present). The Vietnamese case offers a useful test for hypotheses about the persistence of single-party dictatorships. In particular, revolutionary violence was found to contribute decisively to the strength of the system, while war had ambiguous impact. Fighting war successfully necessitated military effectiveness, which in turn contributed to regime durability. Total war provided an important venue of political participation and upward social mobility. At the same time, (protracted) war facilitated the personal or factional monopoly of power, weakening the cohesion of the revolutionary party and causing it to ossify.

Contrary to theoretical expectations, rents had positive effects in the Vietnamese case. Existing literature does not distinguish between building broad political coalitions and constructing cohesive organizations. The lack of rents during 1945-1950 forced the VCP to build a broad but loose coalition instead of a cohesive organization. Chinese material aid since 1950 was crucial to help the VCP to defeat the French, but perhaps had only marginal effects on organizational building. It was the Maoist techniques of mass mobilization and class warfare imported and implemented under the close supervision of Chinese advisers that transformed the fragile communist party and regime into a cohesive organization and durable dictatorship. Another factor overlooked in the comparative literature is the state's near-total control over social life, a common characteristic of communist systems that is critical for their persistence.

Today the evolutionary path of Vietnam's ruling party is marked by continuing decay, even though decay does not mean immediate or eventual breakdown. Yet understanding the origins of the party's persistence offers some clues about current challenges and opportunities. First, revolutionary violence built a strong base for the party in the countryside,

⁷⁰ See memoir by Nguyen Manh Tuong, a French-trained lawyer and scholar who was involved in the *Nhan Van-Giai Pham* Affairs. *Ke bi mat phep thong cong, Hanoi 1954-1991: Ban an cho mot tri thuc* (translated from French by Nguyen Quoc Vy), available at <http://viet-studies.info/NMTuong/NMTuong_HoiKy.htm>.

but market reform is destroying it. In the early years of reform, decollectivization was a popular policy that boosted agricultural production and peasants' income. But the regime soon turned its attention to the cities, which have attracted billions of dollars of foreign investment, and neglected agriculture.⁷¹ While village governments charge peasants hefty fees for public services, provincial governments rush to turn farmland into golf courses and industrial parks to serve foreign investors.⁷² The peasantry used to be the bedrock of support for the VCP but open rural protests now break out frequently.⁷³

As part of the old totalitarian system established through revolutionary violence, the mass organizations led by the VCP have not been able to adjust to the market economy. The official Trade Union has struggled to remain relevant as the government restricts workers' right to strike and keeps the minimum wage low to attract foreign capital. The number of strikes (mostly against foreign employers) has increased tenfold since 2000, and all strikes have occurred spontaneously without the involvement or approval of local unions.⁷⁴ The official Farmers' Association has been criticized for taking the side of polluting foreign companies in disputes involving farmers who wanted to sue those companies for compensation.⁷⁵ The Communist Youth League is saddled with problems of recruitment and aging leadership as young people lack interest in participating in its programs.⁷⁶

Market reform also shrinks the VCP's monopoly of the cultural sphere. The liberalization of foreign trade and intense pressure from Western countries have forced the party to relax control over religions, which leads to the recent revival of religious activities and a surge of religious protests.⁷⁷ At the same time, rising living standards and freedom of

⁷¹ "So phan cua nong nghiep co phai la dang chet?" [Does the agricultural sector deserve to die?], September 17, 2009, at <http://www.tuanvietnam.net/news/InTin.aspx?alias=thongtindachieu&msgid=5841>

⁷² "Can bo dia phuong ban dat cong bua bai nhu ban mo rau, con ca," *Tuoi Tre*, July 8, 2006; "Sai pham dat dai chu yeu lien quan den can bo," *Tuoi Tre*, June 20, 2006. There were 138 projects to build golf courses in 38 provinces in Vietnam as of May 2008. See "Siet chat cac du an san golf," *Dat Viet*, June 2, 2008, p. 5.

⁷³ An example of these protests was those that occurred in Thai Binh in 1997. A woman who lived in a neighboring village of the protests called this event "a coup d'état" [dao chinh] because the protesting farmers seized a commune chief and held him before marching to the district with their claims against local taxes and corruption. Interview, Dong Hung district, Thai Binh, July 25, 2003.

⁷⁴ "Xu huong lao dong va xa hoi Vietnam 2009/2010" (Hanoi: Bo Lao Dong Thuong Binh Xa Hoi, 2010), 24-25; Simon Clarke and Tim Pringle, "Can party-led trade unions represent their members?" *Postcommunist Economies* 21 (1) (2009), 85-101.

⁷⁵ "Mot nong dan Dong Nai kien Vedan," *Tuoi Tre*, July 13, 2010.

⁷⁶ "Tam su cua Bi thu Doan xa tuoi 44," *Tuoi Tre*, September 11, 2006; "Len chuc ong ngoai van lam bi thu Doan xa," *Tien Phong*, July 3, 2006.

⁷⁷ For state efforts to co-opt religions, see Mathieu Bouquet, "Vietnamese Party-State and Religious Pluralism since 1986: Building the Fatherland?" *Sojourn* 25 (1) (April 2010), 90-108. Recent protests involved the Hmongs in Son La and Catholics in Hanoi, Vinh, and Da Nang.

travel now allow many families to send their children abroad to study.⁷⁸ These children are being exposed to ideas different from the indoctrination they receive at home. The recent cases of Le Cong Dinh, who came from a solid “revolutionary family,” and Nguyen Tien Trung, whose father is a Party member and official, attest to the danger of a Western education even for children of the elites.⁷⁹ A key challenge to the party’s control over culture is the internet, which is not only an indispensable tool of the market but also an effective tool of communication for regime opponents like Dinh and Trung. The internet has provided access to information usually suppressed by the party and a virtual gathering place for these dissidents to organize and publicize their anti-government views.

Paradoxically, the current situation also presents opportunities for the VCP to persist. First, rents are now perhaps the strongest glue binding the elites together and keeping the emerging middle class loyal.⁸⁰ Rents create massive corruption which is gnawing at the regime’s legitimacy, but they give the regime resources to sustain economic growth and maintain its coercive apparatus. This apparatus is estimated to employ every one out of six working Vietnamese.⁸¹ As long as economic growth continues, the dictatorship should be safe. Second, the mobilization of nationalism in past wars has contributed the recent surge of nationalist sentiments against China.⁸² If war breaks out, or if the level of threats from China keeps rising, the VCP may be able to rally popular support while suppressing demands for political liberalization. Unlike the war against the US in the 1960s, a war with China today may split and destroy the party because the dominant faction in the VCP leadership still views China as a strategic ally and ideological comrade.⁸³ Opportunities thus exist, but they are not risk-free.

⁷⁸ According to a British Council’s report titled “Vietnam Market Information,” the estimated number of Vietnamese students studying abroad in 2008 was 25,000 and rising.

See www.britishcouncil.org/eumd_information_background-vietnam.htm

⁷⁹ Dinh is a lawyer trained in France and the US, and Trung received his graduate degree in France. Both were recently tried and sentenced to 5 and 7 years in prison, respectively, for conspiring against the state. For a discussion of their trials, see the Forum in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5 (3) (Fall 2010), 192-243.

⁸⁰ Since the 1990s, Vietnam has become increasingly dependent on Western foreign aid, investment and markets. Public external debt (mostly official development assistance) is currently estimated to be 25 percent of GDP (31.5 percent if including the private sector); see The World Bank, “Taking Stock: An Update on Vietnam’s Recent Economic Development” (Hanoi, 2008). Annual remittances from abroad are equal to about 10 percent of GDP. In 2008, for example, remittances, official assistance, and foreign direct investment amounted to nearly 34 percent of GDP; see The World Bank, “Vietnam Development Report 2008” (Hanoi, 2008).

⁸¹ Hayton, *Vietnam: Rising Dragon*, 73.

⁸² Tuong Vu, “The Resurgence of Nationalism in Southeast Asia: Causes, Missions, and Significance,” Paper presented at the Conference on Redefining the Pacific at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, April 2011.

⁸³ Alexander Vuving, “Vietnam: A Tale of Four Players,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2010, 367-391.

