

COLLECTIVE
LEADERSHIP
AND
FACTIONALISM

An Essay on Ho Chi Minh's Legacy

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COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP AND FACTIONALISM

An Essay on Ho Chi Minh's Legacy

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Preface

FOR almost half a century, a small group of men of unshakeable fidelity to their vision, of iron will and sharp political skill, have succeeded in their fight against the French, Americans, Chinese and, often simultaneously, other Vietnamese and neighbouring Laotians and Cambodians. This is a unique phenomenon in history, fascinating for some and controversial for others, but disturbing for all. It has contributed, however, more to the spreading of their legend than to an understanding of what should be termed a “permanent enigma” for decision-makers as well as scholars.

This essay is part of a broader study on the Vietnamese communist leadership reinterpreted. It intends to go beyond the legend of Ho Chi Minh and his disciples. Beyond the façade of unity, factionalism is the main feature of the Vietnamese communist movement and its leadership. But paradoxically, factionalism, contained within the framework of collective leadership, has been rather a factor of strength than evidence of weakness. Indeed, contending factions in Hanoi have functioned for years as a kind of internal dynamic, while the overbid of Moscow and Beijing towards Vietnam have rather contributed to enhance the war-system of the Vietnamese communist movement.

Ho Chi Minh was far from being a communist dictator, of Tito’s calibre, for example. However, his legacy is that his style of collective leadership contributed to the institutionalization of factionalism in Hanoi, while his policy of equidistance between Moscow and Beijing became more or less a necessity for the leadership’s unity. Predictably Ho Chi Minh did not leave behind a unified party. Indeed, the Vietnamese Communist Party was soon to witness the degeneracy of the collective leadership, as well as the renunciation of the equidistance policy between the two communist powers.

The original idea of this essay has been germinating for some time – ever since I wrote a much debated piece on the legend of Ho Chi

Minh*. But I am indebted to Ambassador David Marshall, who introduced me to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies where the academic environment and specifically the Vietnamese materials in its library have been of most benefit for my research. To Professor K. Sandhu, who has given me encouragement and support, I express my warmest thanks. I wish also to acknowledge the editorial assistance of Helen-Elysabeth West and Triena Ong. To both, I am grateful. Of course, the persons to whom I am indebted for help do not necessarily share my personal views on the subject of this book.

Paris, Spring 1985

* "Les Deux Visages de Ho Chi Minh", *L'Express*, Document, 9-15 February 1980.

Introduction

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP AND FACTIONALISM A Confusing Debate

LEGENDS die hard. Especially so the legend that surrounds the Vietnamese communist leadership. The legend of Ho Chi Minh has been so pervasive and enduring that for many Western observers it is inconceivable to imagine that his authority could ever have been contested by any of his disciples. Moreover, the fact that the Vietnamese communist movement has been involved in such disparate and protracted struggles throughout its lifetime has probably made it difficult for many people to understand how, in a state of internal disunity, its leadership could possibly have been able to confront the superpowers. This state of mind, which stems more from some hidden fascination with the image of a David-Goliath confrontation than any scientific approach, has prevailed amongst some members of the Western academic community. Even some of the most brilliant scholars in Vietnamese studies seem to subscribe to the view that the Vietnamese communist leadership is a model of unity, since it has been proven as an example of stability and continuity.

According to Douglas Pike, Hanoi's leadership was "forged of a constant forty-year association", the members of which shared "the

same common experience, the same development, the same social trauma".¹ The ruling group in effect started out as "a closed corporation" in the early 1940s and has remained virtually unchanged ever since. In the words of David Elliot, this group also had "a wealth of shared revolutionary experience, as well as a common external enemy that probably provided strong bonds of solidarity". Elliot quoted Ho, who once calculated that the thirty-one members of the pre-1960 Central Committee (which included all the current Politburo members) had been imprisoned for a cumulative total of 222 years, "an experience which impressed on them the importance of group solidarity and organizational discipline".²

Both these analysts have shared roughly the same assessment of the nature of power in Hanoi. Douglas Pike wrote: "Political power is highly concentrated. It exists almost entirely in the hands of the men of the Politburo. Probably no other society in the world has quite the concentrated political power that exists in North Vietnam."³ David Elliot observed that "the relatively small size of the political system itself surely limited the possibility for an individual or faction to create an autonomous regional or institutional base of power". In his view, "the administrative apparatus in the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] was quite modest. Hence, the top leaders had taken on a large number of diverse functions, and there was a tightly woven, highly personalized net of interrelationships between party and state institutions". Moreover, he argued that unlike China's Politburo, the ruling body in Hanoi, with only eleven members, was "compact enough to function effectively as a day-to-day decision-making group".⁴

Recently, another scholar, Carlyle Thayer, proposed the collegial model as "the best framework for determining Vietnamese perspectives on national security and foreign policies".⁵ He believed that "the collegial system, even if it allows for the identification of individual and factional disagreements, is not one of contention for power by contending rivals, but one in which there is basic agreement over the ultimate ends and disagreement over the means to achieve these ends. The system has evolved and remained stable

because the ultimate ends have remained relatively constant for so long a period of time: national reunification and national survival in the face of a more powerful adversary (France, America, China).⁶ In supporting his view, Carlyle Thayer quoted a remark made in 1973 by Hoang Tung, the editor of the Party's newspaper *Nhan Dan*:

In the inner activities of our officials some differences of views are normal. When they once deliberate each has his own view on a specific issue (but there is no disagreement on fundamental principles). If necessary, we take a vote, if necessary, we work on the basis of a majority. The leaders have been working together over 30 years already and they have carried out their liberation struggle for 40 years, they are all comrades who know each other well.⁷

However, Thayer, after a survey of the major paradigms dominating the study of Hanoi's decision-making process and based on the methodology known as Kremlinology, recognized that "the explanatory power of the collegial model is limited".⁸ Since its Fifth Congress held in March 1982, the Vietnamese Communist Party has dropped six long-serving members of the Politburo, among them General Vo Nguyen Giap, the most trusted of Ho's disciples. In fact, the myth of unity within Hanoi's leadership has been seriously shaken, as just after its final victory, the Fourth Congress in December 1976 removed from the Central Committee at least ten important officials, most prominently Politburo member Hoang Van Hoang and Central Committee member General Chu Van Tan, both close followers of Ho from the early years of the Vietminh struggle.

In contrast to the collegial model, a factional model was also developed. The proponents of the factional model viewed the decision-making process in Hanoi as involving different factions continuously engaged in a power struggle. They differentiated the various factions within the VCP Politburo along ideological dichotomy as hardliners versus moderates or along the pro-Beijing versus pro-Moscow cleavage. The most well-known analyst of this trend is undoubtedly P.J. Honey, who wrote at the time of the Third Congress in September 1960 that "rival factions exist within the Lao Dong Party and it has appeared probable that Ho Chi Minh encourages them, for he imposes his wishes upon the Party by lending his weight to the faction which happens to advocate the

policy he considers the most appropriate at any given time".⁹ Honey based the evidence of rival factions on the deep personal animosity between Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, along with that between Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, in addition to the ideological alignment which he placed along pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese lines.¹⁰ Later, he preferred to label the factions, led on the one hand by Le Duan and Vo Nguyen Giap and on the other by Truong Chinh and Le Duc Tho, as pragmatists versus ideologues.¹¹ In any case, Honey concluded that "Ho's backing ensures that the views of this faction prevail and, in this way, he continues to exercise the powers of a dictator while appearing to act in the most democratic fashion".¹²

Going further in the factional framework, Thomas Latimer has supported the thesis that, despite the apparent unity of purpose which the Lao Dong party projected, policy deliberations regarding South Vietnam were characterized by a continuing debate between two elements within its leadership:

One group tended to give greater weight to the importance of consolidating the Party's hold over North Vietnam and developing the economy of the Northern half of Vietnam. The other group urged a greater emphasis on extending the Party's control over all South Vietnam. Members of both groups shared the desire to gain control over South Vietnam and to see North Vietnam enjoy a greater level of prosperity. The difference between them was in the relative priority each placed on those two main tasks.¹³

According to Latimer, Truong Chinh was the spokesman for the North-oriented group, while Le Duan was the leader of the South-oriented faction. Le Duan was continuously disagreeing with Truong Chinh about the degree to which the situation in the South permitted greater attention being devoted to the building of socialism in the North. Latimer went further to explain: "To some extent, the differences in attitude between the North Vietnam-firsters and the South Vietnam-firsters were a product of the assigned duties of certain key party leaders."¹⁴ In other words, Hanoi's leadership could be classified as "builders versus fighters", to use the labels proposed by Donald Zagoria.¹⁵

In addition to these differences, which to a certain degree corresponded to the provincialism prevailing within the Party's

apparatus, strategic disagreements were believed to develop within the Party's leadership over how the revolution in the South should be conducted and how victory should be achieved. One group, led by Le Duan, thought South Vietnam could be taken quickly by force of arms, by placing most of their reliance on main force warfare in an effort to race ahead to an early and complete military victory. The other, conducted by Truong Chinh, saw protracted war strategy as the key for final victory and insisted on the combination of armed struggle and political proselytizing.

This basic debate was accordingly coupled with another dispute over the role and nature of the People's Army of Vietnam. General Giap, who favoured an offensive strategy with growing intervention of regular forces, insisted on the role of arms and technics, which implied larger assistance from the Soviet Union, while General Nguyen Chi Thanh, who advocated a more defensive but protracted strategy, put emphasis, like the Chinese, on the role of man and the power of the masses.¹⁶ According to Douglas Pike, those who favoured a military route were in turn divided into two groups: "the regular force strategists and the neo-revolutionary guerrilla war or protracted conflict strategist".¹⁷ These two groups were often described in the press as the big-unit war versus the fifty-year war advocates.

However, the proponents of the factional model have not up to now provided enough evidence on the classification of the Politburo members along precise cleavages. Thus a "U.S. National Security Study Memorandum", which reflected the view of the intelligence community, usually well informed about the internal debate within the Vietnamese Communist Party, was forced to conclude in 1969 with an acknowledgement of confusion: "There is general agreement that knowledge of the existence and significance of possible factions within the Hanoi leadership is imprecise. There are differences of opinion within the leadership on tactics as opposed to ultimate objectives but there are not stable 'Moscow and Peking' factions. The Hanoi leadership will form different alignments on different issues."¹⁸ Douglas Pike, who is considered an authority on the matter, reached the same conclusion:

In recent years it was fashionable among scholars to divide the Politburo

members into hard-soft factions: the dogmatists or pro-Chinese faction versus the moderate or pro-Soviet faction, with a smaller faction called the semi-opportunists or nationalists-cum-communists standing in between. In somewhat simplified terms, Hanoi was seen as a debating forum for arguing the merits of furthering communism by means of wars of liberation versus the method of peaceful coexistence. Onto this was grafted the local debate of how best to achieve the unification of North and South Vietnam. The Politburo then could be divided into the pro-Soviet or dove camp and the pro-Chinese or hawk camp.¹⁹

To add to the confusion, another analyst, Robert Rogers, had the quite original idea of applying the more quantitative than qualitative method to approach the belief-system of the four most prominent leaders in Hanoi. The result of his research is quite disconcerting: "Le Duan, who has long been identified as pro-Soviet, has a USSR to China quotient of 4.4 to 1. On the other hand, Truong Chinh, who is thought of as pro-Chinese by most Western observers, has a USSR to China quotient of 11.6 to 1, a distinctly higher pro-Soviet public stance than Le Duan's. Pham Van Dong's quotient is the most even handed and neutral in substance at 1.5 to 1, while Vo Nguyen Giap's quotient is a moderate 3.2 to 1."²⁰ Rogers found all four leaders in their public statements to be decidedly pro-Soviet and conservative doctrinally, with all manifesting a strong nationalistic tendency. However, he concluded sceptically: "The evidence revealed by quantitative references to either Russia or China is, of course, hardly conclusive and may to an unknown degree be based simply on pragmatic recognition of Hanoi's greater dependence on Moscow and fear of their powerful Chinese neighbour."²¹

Naturally, great was the temptation to elude the problem, by asserting that the Vietnamese communist leadership spoke with a single voice. The typical advocate of this tendency was W. Smyser, who wrote: "That voice, which reflected the collective policy of the Lao Dong leadership, has been used here as the basis for analysis of Hanoi's attitude."²² Furthermore he explained: "The intense and disciplined quality of Vietnamese nationalism and the sense that the Lao Dong was engaged in a life-or-death struggle, probably caused Lao Dong leaders to maintain a common public front, even if there was some internal disagreement." According to W. Smyser, a

detailed analysis of statements by Hanoi's leaders did not disclose "the kind of consistent pattern that could be used to argue that any Lao Dong leader was partial to the Soviet Union or to China". However, Smyser was careful enough to recognize that: "This does not necessarily mean there were no differences of opinion within the DRV, nor that some of the leaders may not have felt greater sympathies at one time or another, or even consistently, for the Soviets or the Chinese". He commented that "disputes were successfully contained within the structure of the Lao Dong party and were not publicly manifest to the extent that clear and defensible conclusions could be reached on the political or personal affiliations of major Lao Dong figures".

Thus, we have come full circle back to the starting point: the myth of a unified leadership in Hanoi. A survey of the problem shows sufficiently that while there was general agreement amongst Western scholars that some cleavages within the VCP Politburo did exist, they were however not in a position to provide persuasive evidence and clear classification of such divisions along the lines of personal rivalries, ideological dichotomies, or pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese factions. The major weaknesses of the proposed models is due to the confusion between image and reality. The paradox exists in that while most Western scholars understood there was in Hanoi broad recognition that any sign of disunity would be viewed by party members and the enemy as evidence of the leadership's flagging determination to pursue its basic goals of liberating South Vietnam and dominating Indochina, their tendency however was still to accept for granted the image of a unified leadership which Hanoi wanted to project inside and outside the country.

Yet could one ignore that the creation and the spreading of myths were also a fighting component of the dialectics applied by the Vietnamese Communist Party in its conquest for power? To be sure, one of the first decisive victories of this party was, in the aftermath of the so-called August Revolution, to have very soon built up the legend of Ho, the uncontested arbitrator of Vietnamese nationalism, while Ho himself still had to negotiate with his own extremist followers within the Vietminh directorate. Since that time, as the Vietnamese communist movement has developed, Ho's legend has