Political Reform and Political Change in Communist Countries: Implications for Vietnam

Brantly Womack

The years since 1989 have brought the most momentous changes in the communist world since the aftermath of the Second World War. Indeed, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought an end to the communist world in any meaningful sense. The events have been unique because in general they originated in party-sponsored political structural reform (perestroika, zhengzhi tishi gaige), and yet they manifested a degree of popular rejection of the party that in many cases has changed the form of government. No one anticipated these events. Anti-communist observers were surprised by the parties' initiatives and the general lack of violence, while pro-communist observers were amazed by the degree of popular rejection of socialist systems. Even the participants themselves were completely surprised by the rapidity of developments.1

It takes a tremendous effort to understand the events in one country, let alone all. Yet the proper understanding of the politics of any one communist country requires a serious consideration of the overall rush of events. On June 4, 1989, Solidarity won the first Polish election by a landslide; on the same day, troops in Beijing opened fire on demonstrators. So much happening in such a short time gives the impression that the same forces are at work in all countries, and that inevitably the same result will occur. But such superficial extrapolation must be avoided. Even if general trends and external forces are at work, the situation within each country must be taken seriously, because, at a minimum, the domestic political situation determines the effectiveness of the general trends and forces. A generalization which is true for five similar countries does not necessarily apply to a sixth dissimilar one.
This chapter will attempt to analyze the implications of recent political change for political structural reform in Vietnam. Other chapters in this volume have detailed Vietnamese political reform; here the focus is on how Vietnam fits into the general pattern of events in the communist world, and the implications of these developments for Vietnam. It begins with the suggestion that different chains of events have been operating in different cases, and shows why developments in Vietnam have not followed the same course as in Eastern Europe. I next provide a typology of communist regimes, with particular reference to China and Vietnam. The issues of transition from the current phase of political liberalization to democratization are then discussed, using a framework of analysis recently put forward by Adam Przeworski. The chapter concludes with speculation on alternative political futures for Vietnam in the 1990s.

A Misleading Conjuncture?

The collapse of European communism has led most Western observers to predict the end of communism in general, and some have even hailed the end of history (Fukuyama 1989). China, Vietnam, North Korea, and Cuba are seen as desperately opposing an irreversible historical current. Perhaps in some respects the current is indeed irreversible, but it must also be acknowledged that several factors combined to exaggerate the similarity of recent events. The more general significance of recent developments cannot be understood without examining these factors.

Four types of factors influenced the conjuncture of collapse in European communism. First, the frustration and suppression of earlier reform attempts; secondly, various aspects of international and regional politics; thirdly, the effect of perestroika and glasnost on communist orthodoxy, and fourthly, the resurgence of prerevolutionary political forces, especially nationalism and ethnic separatist issues. Each of these issues has affected Vietnam somewhat differently from European Communism.

The Delay of Reform

Demands for democratic reforms in European communist countries were articulated in the movement for "socialist humanism" in the 1960s and in the samizdat movement in the Soviet Union. Such demands played an important role in the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and the Czechoslovakian "Prague Spring" of 1968, and they had been frustrated and repressed until Gorbachev's glasnost. Early proposals tended to be more moderate and more positively disposed toward a leading role for the communist party. But repression and inaction by the leadership tended to radicalize reformers and citizens, making eventual political structural reform more likely to lead to anti-party results. Pent-up forces produced by decades of repression led to rapid political change and a high degree of antagonism.

In the Soviet Union, the situation of political and economic stagnation under Brezhnev was already apparent in the early 1970s. Roy Medvedev’s book On Socialist Democracy (1975) describes the stagnation and proposes essentially the same solution of democratization adopted by Gorbachev fifteen years later. One might conclude at this point that Medvedev and Gorbachev were overly optimistic, but it must be admitted that without fifteen additional years of stagnation and delay (and repression of intellectuals like Medvedev who criticized the situation), perestroika would have started with a more solid political and economic base. In Eastern Europe, the martyrs of earlier repression--Solidarity in Poland, Imre Nagy in Hungary, Dubcek in Czechoslovakia--became rallying points for an uncompromising rejection of communism.

The repression and delay of demands for reform does not play as large a role in Vietnam as it did in European communism. For one thing, there was less time for repression. Wartime solidarity dominated the politics of North Vietnam, and Saigon was more notorious for the repression of intellectuals. Vietnam was reunified only in 1976, and it took a few years for reform sentiment to emerge. As other chapters in this volume detail, reform emerged as a legitimate issue in Vietnamese politics from the late 1970s, and played a major role from 1986. On the other hand, the repression of outspoken critics since 1978, the example set by radical Europeans, and alienation from the cautious conservatism exemplified by the Seventh Party Congress in June 1991 contributes to an increased potential for radical demands.

International Factors

The pressure created by repression of reforms does not explain the simultaneity of political change in Eastern Europe in 1989-1990. The major reasons for the suddenness of developments relate to international pressures. The most important was the effect of Soviet foreign policy, but Western politics and also regional politics were important. Lastly,
the reorientation and prominence of the domestic media and the interaction with international media played a novel role in internationalizing domestic politics and domesticating international events and influences.

By ending the cold war Gorbachev weakened regimes whose legitimacy depended in part on East-West hostility. The change in Soviet policy questioned the historical legitimacy of the Czechoslovakian regime under Gustav Husak, and indeed the very reason for existence of East Germany as a separate state. It also allowed Hungary to pursue an aggressively pro-Western foreign policy. With the suspension of Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe, all of the existing regimes in the area that had been created and maintained by Soviet power lost support that was essential to their survival. It also created the context in which the Baltic states could campaign for independence, thus beginning the unravelling of the Soviet Union itself.

A second international factor has been the push and pull of Western debts and opportunities. Much of Eastern Europe became heavily indebted to the West in the 1970s, and as a result these economies had to make the earning of hard currency and the restructuring of debt--and hence further integration with Western markets--a major priority. The manifest inability of the Soviet Union to rescue its clients meant that only the West appeared able to rescue Eastern Europe from a problem that was partly Western in origin. The most obvious case of the effects of economic dependency was East Germany, where the success of the Christian Democrats in the first round of elections in 1990 was attributed partly to the hope for a fiscal rescue and a promised one-to-one parity in currency exchange. This was also clearly a part of the political thinking in Poland (see Ash 1990, 12) and Hungary.

If the push of debt was a factor tilting Eastern Europe toward the West, the attraction of Western political models and economic successes (and eventually the active involvement of Western groups in Eastern European politics) was at least as significant. To the extent that the major problem in Eastern Europe was seen as the failure of command economies, then the successful market economies of Europe were a powerful attraction.

A third international influence in Eastern Europe was the collateral influence within the region. The most obvious instance occurred when Hungary opened its border with Austria and permitted the wholesale emigration of East Germans through its territory. This produced the most serious of the crises involved in the downfall of the Honecker regime. It made the Berlin Wall useless and encouraged an increase in protest activities. Moreover, with the fall of the Honecker regime there was more pressure on the Husak regime in Czechoslovakia.

A final factor was the influence of the media. The reliance on international media for domestic news, and the internationalization of politics through the provision of news about events in neighboring countries as well as international reactions to domestic politics created a psychological context of politics which was larger than the individual country and impossible for the individual state to control. The fact that the official media in most communist countries has a low news credibility contributed to the vulnerability of crisis politics to media effects.

Clearly Vietnam has not been under the same international influences as Eastern Europe. Although the Cold War framework was important to its struggle for national liberation, Vietnam's primary international context over the past decade has been the hostility between China and the Soviet Union and isolation from the non-communist world because of the occupation of Cambodia. Its debts to the West are far smaller than its debts to the former Soviet Union. The pull of the West is quite strong, as can be seen in the influence of economic advice from the World Bank on continuing reforms, but Vietnam can now see from the experience of Eastern Europe since 1989 that market restructuring is not a painless rescue from the problems of a centralized economy; the Chinese model of central economic permissiveness seems more appropriate and more impressive in its results. The most important collateral effect on Vietnam has not been the new policies of the Eastern European regimes (although thousands of Vietnamese laborers in these countries have been affected), but rather the Soviet Union's decision to change the basis of its foreign trade to hard currency beginning in January 1991. The urgent need to substitute for Soviet inputs prompted greater effort to improve relations with both China and the West.

With the resolution of the Cambodian problem Vietnam's international context began to undergo transformation, and normalization of relations with China and the United States will create important and divergent influences on Vietnamese politics. China's political influence will likely remain a conservative one for some time, while openness to the West will strengthen the non-state sectors of the economy. Neither normalization is likely to provoke an immediate crisis, but the change in international context will certainly help shape Vietnamese politics in the 1990s.
Collapse of Orthodoxy

An important factor in the inability of Eastern European regimes to oppose the reforms or to put forward an alternative political direction was the fact that Gorbachev’s ideological reforms had undermined Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. A sign of this was the attempt of Czechoslovakia and East Germany to prohibit certain Soviet periodicals in their countries. But of course the influence could not be stopped, and the parties of Eastern Europe—and of other communist countries, for that matter—did not have a rebuttal or an articulated alternative to the political structural reform which he advocated. The Soviet Union has been the fountainhead of orthodoxy since the founding of the Comintern, and when it headed toward structural reform it changed the general ideological climate.

By the 1980s Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy had become in all communist countries primarily a negative, authoritarian force limiting debate. The Soviet glasnost encouraged a more permissive atmosphere toward ideological challenge, and in general the new thinking developed outside of Marxism-Leninism and in opposition to it, in contrast to the socialist humanism of the 1960s. It is interesting that rather extreme Western positions like "Thatcherism" have been especially popular. This cannot be due to the economic performance of Great Britain. In my opinion the appeal of Thatcherism stems from its self-confidence, its simplicity, and its radical difference to existing policies. It is a novel orthodoxy which provides the familiar presence of a self-confident dogmatism.

Vietnam has also been deeply affected by the collapse of Marxism-Leninist orthodoxy. Nguyen Van Linh was called "Vietnam’s Gorbachev" in his first few years as general secretary, and reform thinking of both Russian and Chinese varieties has been integral to Vietnam’s intellectual reorientation toward reform in the 1980s. The collapse of Eastern European communism was a major affront to the accepted verities of the regime, and while the regime might continue to defend these verities, it is hard to imagine how it could continue to believe in them. To blame such a massive political development on Western influence and to view the current crisis as a temporary deviation in the path of socialism bespeaks ideological panic, and the collapse of the party-state in the Soviet Union will increase the panic. But as long as post-communist political and economic crises continue to deepen in Europe, the leap into radical political reform will appear more risky than continuing party control while experimenting with economic reform.

Thus, despite its repugnance concerning the Tiananmen massacre, Vietnam has drawn closer to China’s combination of orthodox politics and pragmatic economics.

Emergence of Pre-Revolutionary Forces

A final characteristic of the collapse of European communist states has been the re-emergence of ideas, demands, and to a lesser extent organizations that had been politically important before communist governments were established but had not been active in the forty or seventy-five years since. The most important of these are ethno-nationalist tendencies; however, there are also groups demanding the reversal of land distribution (for instance, the Hungarian Farmers’ Party) and the return of other nationalized property to previous owners. Moreover, the memories of prerevolutionary politicians (Marshal Pilsudski in Poland, for instance) exert a noticeable influence on post-communist politics.

Ethno-nationalism is least disruptive when its appeal is restricted to an already existing sovereign unit like Hungary, or as in the case of East Germany it poses a demand for reunification. When it voices a separatist appeal it is more disruptive, and new threats are often posed to minorities within minority regions, leading to the possibility of even further fragmentation.

The re-emergence of pre-revolutionary forces with separatist tendencies is clearly a possibility in Vietnam, but it is a possibility that should be distinguished from such tendencies in Europe. Vietnam is not a relatively recent marriage of formerly separate parts, like Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, or the Soviet Union. More like China, Vietnam is a country which has at times fallen into disunity, but the underlying ethnic and cultural homogeneity legitimize national governments and reunification movements and delegitimize separatism and regional warlords. The grand claim to legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam is its leadership of the forty years of struggle for national liberation and reunification.

Nevertheless, Vietnam has been divided for most of its modern existence, and southern Vietnam was more directly exposed to French influence and then exclusively exposed to American influence while the North was more closely tied to the Soviet Union and China. The unsuccessful attempt in the late seventies and early eighties to force collectivization on the South was resented. The South is already a richer and more prosperous region than the North, and further modernization
and internationalization seems likely to increase regional disparity. Since regionalist and separatist sentiment frequently arises in relatively well-off regions to protect their resources against national redistribution (Slovenia and the Baltic states, to take two current examples), it would seem that there will be growing potential for regionalism in the 1990s. Separatism would be more risky politically, since the North would be harmed economically, and national unity is the cornerstone of legitimacy. It is hard to imagine a serious separatist movement not provoking civil war, which would be destructive to all concerned.

The Societal Foundation for Political Change

The above discussion has treated the conjunctural aspects of reform and political change in communist countries, which suggest that there are important underlying differences among communist regimes. But it is equally apparent that there are commonalities involved, some of which are more important for one country than for another, and some of which are true for non-communist countries as well as for communist ones.

The most obvious fact concerning the current reforms is that they are responding to pressures which are coming primarily from domestic, societal forces. As much as international factors may have contributed to the timing and specific events of political change in 1989, it was the popular dissatisfaction with the status quo in each country and support for change which was the engine of history. Moreover, the degree and scale of popular repudiation of the party in some countries could not be attributed to external influences, because the people were familiar with the object of their repudiation. Attention to external influences or the specific decisions of the leadership should not hide the fact that without popular support nothing would have happened, whereas other conjunctures and other leaders may have led to similar results at later times.

What were the basic reasons for societal pressures for reform? "Society" is a very amorphous and contradictory entity, and even more so in communist countries given the pervasiveness of party control and organization. As a result, society has expressed itself in various ways from lonely but symbolic dissidents to massive public demonstrations, rather than in the more familiar forms of organization based on class or interest. I would argue that the underlying societal pressures could be grouped under three headings, though they are not so distinct in reality. First, society demanded reform because of what might be called the "post-revolutionary syndrome" in communist societies. Marxist theories and Marxist parties are much more attractive and galvanizing when they are revolutionary parties fighting for a cause than as the privileged guardians of the official orthodoxies and institutions in communist countries. They no longer provide the same kind of ideological and moral leadership; if the brightest and most idealistic young people do join the youth organizations or the party, they are likely to be in tension with the leadership and the orthodoxy. Moreover, the official orthodoxy becomes complacent because it is an enforced belief which does not have to face criticism. Therefore official hypocrisy develops, which creates a profound disillusionment and alienation from the regime among people who know the real situation. The regime loses credibility.

Another characteristic of the post-revolutionary syndrome is the development of corruption. Even if the top leadership opposes corruption and tries to prevent it, officials at all levels in party-states are in situations of great personal power and discretion, especially vis-a-vis the people. Corruption is systemic in a state which is not democratically controlled from below; it is not simply a problem of individual moral failing. To put it another way, in the post-revolutionary environment, for an official not to be corrupt is often a sign of positive moral achievement against strong situational temptations. The party-state assumes that power does not corrupt. The people know that it does, and they resent the fact that they do not have power. The alienation created by hypocrisy and corruption leads the people not to identify themselves with the government; it is not "their" government, even if it does things for them.

It would be impossible to prove, but the post-revolutionary syndrome might well be stronger in a country like Vietnam with a strong party-state. Since the people had been mobilized their potential for disappointment is greater, and the strength of the party-state creates greater opportunities for hypocrisy and corruption. The fact that it is more difficult to oppose the regime might increase the potential alienation even as it reduces opportunities for action.

The second category of societal pressures comprises demands for citizenship. These demands relate to the fact that in a complex, interdependent society one needs to have confidence in the rules governing the system and in equity and equal treatment under the rules. In economic activity, one wants to feel free to pursue perceived opportunities on the basis of material interest. Therefore each individual wants a legal-political system which will be effective and yet not hostile or threatening. Citizen rights involve equal access to participation in
politics and also equal protection from the state. But the concept of citizen rights is usually weak in communist states because the regime assumes that the party is one with the people and that such rights imply that the party-state could be against the people, like a bourgeois state. The problem with this thinking is that any state is an instrument of rule, and if the people do not feel freely involved in politics or equally and adequately protected from abuses of rule, they will not consider it their state. The increasing complexity of modern society makes the absence of strong citizen rights more and more irritating and inconvenient.

In Vietnam this category of societal pressures will be weaker than in a country like Poland with strong societal forces. Moreover, the demands of economic citizenship may appear to be separable from the demands of political citizenship, and the needs for stable expectations can be met by corporatist assurances as well as by the granting of individual rights. But it would be a fundamental mistake to assume that these societal forces are not present, or that they can be suppressed indefinitely. Society cannot live in a perpetual state of emergency, and may respond, as in China in 1989, by creating an emergency of its own.

The third category of societal pressures are those which arise in response to the retreat of the authorities. As the situation begins to change, many opportunities emerge, real or imagined, and people put themselves forward as new leaders and new organizations. The element of opportunism is of course mixed with other societal pressures, but it is significant in its own right. Since it is a response to situational opportunities, it can be affected by the methods and pace of reform leadership. An unfortunate additional dimension to such opportunities can be created by external encouragement and funding of various foreign groups.

Internationalization and reform will certainly increase Vietnam's exposure to persons and groups attempting to utilize openness to their own advantage. The basic problem is that democratic politics is messy. Suppression may be a necessary tool, but it is dangerous because it could undermine the credibility of the party's commitment to reform. Clear rules formulated on the basis of obvious principles of public interest provide the most reliable structuring of reform.

**Basic Typology of Communist Regimes**

There are many important differences among communist (and former communist) states, including levels of economic development, international situation, and transitional leadership (Womack 1991b). But arguably the most important difference affecting capacity for political structural reform is the nature of the political forces which put them into power. The initial establishment of power set the relationship between the party-state and the people. If the initial relationship was weak or antagonistic, then the party-state tended to be less capable of restructuring society and more dependent on its external environment. If the initial relationship was a very strong one, then the party-state would be heavily involved in all aspects of society. A basic difference, then, between communist governments is whether external or internal forces were decisive in establishing the communist governments, and the extent of popular involvement in the revolution.

**Externally Imposed Party-States**

These countries, almost all of Eastern Europe, had regimes which depended for their claims to legitimacy on the cold war and which were established on the basis of Soviet military presence. To be sure, there was considerable domestic support for communist parties in these countries at the time, but the Soviet presence was the decisive factor in establishing communist governments in every Eastern European country except Yugoslavia and Albania. External imposition meant that these societies were revolutionized rather than being themselves revolutionary.

The regimes in each of these countries in the late 1940s established Stalinist party-states in which society was under the control of the state and the state in turn was under the control of the communist party. But non-communist societal institutions were considerably stronger in these countries than in the Soviet Union. The Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe were resented for their intrusions and were in any case less successful in forcing a restructuring of society. After the death of Stalin the regimes in general retreated somewhat from their Stalinist attempts at total control, and made various formal and informal compromises with societal forces.

The potential for political structural reform in these countries has been tied up with their relation to the Soviet Union. The first stage of reform possibilities occurred with the fall of local Stalinist regimes, which for the most part occurred simultaneously with Khrushchev's de-Stalinization efforts in 1956. Most of the reforms adopted were partial retreats from the Stalinist model, and more far-reaching reform efforts (Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968) were suppressed. The original
imposition of communist government and the suppression of earlier
reform efforts tended to locate the dynamic of reform outside the party-
state structure, and the regime’s own reforms tended to consist of
accommodating responses to societal challenges. The governmental
attitude was well captured in Janos Kadar’s slogan, “He who is not
against us is with us.” But official tolerance is not a long term substitute
for national leadership, and in the 1980s political structural reform efforts
focused on removing the communist party’s monopoly of power, and as
a result (because of popular alienation) removing the party from power.
However, the policies and personnel of the party which have earned the
respect of the people will remain important political influences, and may
grow in strength as the new regimes become entangled in the difficult
business of governing.

Revolutionary Countries

These regimes which developed directly from successful
revolutionary parties are much stronger and more self-confident than the
externally imposed regimes. The regimes themselves have provided the
leadership in political structural reform. Difference in revolutionary
background accounts for the difference between a structural reformer like
Gorbachev and a compromiser with societal forces like Kadar. The
common problem of revolutionary regimes is that the dynamic of the
revolution has faded but there has not been visible progress toward a
future historical stage of communism. Therefore the regimes must
reorient toward a post-revolutionary legitimacy based on the present
situation of managing a complex society rather than on the past or future.
The most significant difference among revolutionary regimes is the role
of rural revolution.

Regimes such as China and Vietnam that are based on large-scale,
protracted rural revolutions are exceptionally strong because
revolutionary success required the parties to develop broad popular
support. The characteristic problem of political structural reform in such
countries is that after victory the close party-mass relationship
deteriorates with the establishment of a monopoly of power (see chapter
by William Turley). Because of their assumption of broad popular
support rural revolutionary regimes are able to respond to perceived
crises with bold moves, such as the Cultural Revolution or the
decentralizing reforms of the 1980s.

Although as the two best cases of rural revolutionary regimes China
and Vietnam are more similar to each other than either is to any other
country, there are important differences between their revolutions, the
subsequent political histories, and their prospects. French colonialism
gave the revolution in Vietnam a more distinct and national focus than
in China. There was a clear, popular goal around which the united front
of the Viet Minh could be built and which was inclusive of all
Vietnamese. Moreover, the international consciousness of Vietnamese
revolutionaries was enhanced by their colonial experience, and their task
of defeating foreign forces made the international political dimension of
their task more important than it was for China. In brief, Vietnam was
both more nationalistic and more cosmopolitan than its northern
neighbor, and it is appropriate that Uncle Ho had a more inclusive,
traditional, and yet well-traveled persona than did Chairman Mao.

The international dimension of the Vietnamese revolution gave rise
to complications that China did not have to face. Whereas China was
only deprived of Taiwan by foreign intervention, Vietnam was divided
by the Geneva Convention in 1954 and endured the direct military
intervention of the United States in the 1960s. As a result, the internal
political development of Vietnam was distorted and delayed, and the
Communist Party of Vietnam became more dependent on aid from China
and the Soviet Union. Vietnam is only now emerging from the
international repercussions of its anti-colonial struggle, and it still is more
vulnerable than China to the international context.

China and Vietnam have been broadly similar in their pursuit of
limited political reforms while experimenting with economic reforms.
The popular revolutionary base of both regimes gives the leadership a
concern about such issues as corruption and bureaucracy, but it also
gives them a complacency that there are no forces outside the party-state
with whom compromises must be struck. Over the last ten years both
China and Vietnam have strengthened the role of law, elections, and
representative assemblies, but neither has yet tolerated autonomous
societal organizations.

On the economic side, both regimes made major mistakes with leftist
policies, and the correction of leftism cleared the ground for major
experimentation with decollectivization, market mechanisms, and
international openness. At first Vietnam tended to be more cautious in
economic reform. China was fully committed to decollectivization and
special economic zones by 1980, while comprehensive economic reform
in Vietnam dates from 1986. Since 1989 the two have been at roughly
the same level of policy innovation, with Vietnam slightly ahead in some
areas and China slightly ahead in others.
However, the similarities between Chinese and Vietnamese reforms in the 1980s are misleading because similar policies were applied in different circumstances. Vietnam was in a desperate crisis of food production aggravated by the war in Cambodia and international isolation, and collectivization in the South was abandoned before it was consolidated. In general the hold of the party-state in the South was weaker than in the North, and it had a dimension of external imposition because of the harsh policies of 1976-80. The reforms in China were adopted after twenty years of collectivization and thus Chinese agriculture was able to spring forward in the early 1980s. Vietnam has had greater difficulties generating a forward dynamic, and relies more strongly on its expectations for external support.

In both countries strong leadership has moved forward with economic reforms that will shape the context of future politics, and yet the leadership proclaims publicly that the old context of party hegemony and state direction of the economy must be maintained. The ideological stubbornness may be due to the blind complacency of older leaders. More likely, it is due to a serious concern that rapid structural change will plunge the countries into chaos. Given the centrality of the rural revolutionary party to the constitution of new societies in both countries, any option that repudiated the current structure would be more threatening than in a weaker party-state. The initial successes of the reform initiatives since 1986 promise to present new tasks of further reform which will be complicated by societal differences and the mistakes of the past.

Liberalization and Democratization

The transitions between strategic phases, from repressive to liberalizing (usually associated with destalinization) and liberalizing to pluralistic reform are complex and multi-faceted, and they are not easily reversed.

The phases of most direct concern to Vietnam are those of liberalization and democratic pluralism. Vietnam is currently at the stage of liberalization. It has reformed the content of policy without allowing challenges to the party's political leadership. The key question is whether or not a strategy of liberalization can be maintained indefinitely. If not, a second question is whether the party can retain its hegemony under conditions of democratic structural reform. Although these questions can only be answered by the actual march of historical developments in Vietnam, the underlying issue is that of the relationship between political reform and political change, an issue to which the general experience of communist countries is relevant.

Adam Przeworski has provided a rational choice analysis of the democratization process (Przeworski 1991, 51-99). He argues that differences within the leadership and pressures from society combine to induce an authoritarian regime to liberalize, that is, to relax the suppression of autonomous organization and to attempt to accommodate and coopt societal forces rooted outside the current leadership structure. If the cooptation strategy is successful, the result is a broader dictatorship. If societal forces continue to organize autonomously and to expand, then the regime is ultimately faced with a choice between repression and transition to democratic reform. If the repression is successful then the dictatorship becomes narrower. If it fails then the government is overthrown by insurrection. In any case the strategy of liberalization is no longer an option.

If we pause to reflect on the implications of this model for the prospects of liberalization, it is clear that lasting success depends on the regime's capacity to incorporate present and future societal forces into the existing structure. If it is only a stopgap measure, the accommodation of some groups would encourage other groups to form and to challenge the regime, producing a "slippery slope" of tactical liberalizations leading to the critical choice between repression and democratization. But is it possible for the societal forces and processes that liberalization attempts to encourage—family entrepreneurship, non-state production and marketing, and so forth—to be incorporated into the party-state structure rather than to be merely tolerated outside the doors of power? If the answer is no, then liberalization encourages the ultimate choice between repression and democratization.
Even if liberalization is only temporary, the question of how long it can last is still quite important. As the Tiananmen tragedy well demonstrated, the fate of liberalization can also turn on unpredictable and almost accidental matters, especially in times of crisis. Nevertheless, some important societal and regime factors can be mentioned. Societal factors influencing the longevity of liberalization include the growth and aggressiveness of societal forces, their perceived deprivation under the existing regime, and the perceived risks of creating a crisis. The increase of any of these societal factors will tend to reduce the window of opportunity for liberalization. Regime factors that would tend to prolong liberalization include the cohesiveness of central leadership, its credibility both as a continuing liberalizer and as a potential repressor, and its provision of a viable order for societal activities.

Returning to Przeworski's analysis, the transition from liberalization to democratization involves two stages, the first being the bargaining concerning transition with the authoritarian regime (extrication) and the second being the maneuvering among the democratic groups for the most advantageous design of new institutions (constitution). Przeworski's model of extrication involves the interaction of four actors: the Hardliners and the Reformers within the leadership, and the Moderates and the Radicals in opposition. He argues that the possibility of transition depends on the effective cooperation of the Reformers and the Moderates. Effective cooperation has two prerequisites. First, the Reformers must be able to deliver the compliance of the Hardliners, and the Moderates must be able to deliver the compliance of the Radicals. If one of these four rejects the agreement then democratic institutionalization cannot take place. Secondly, the Reformers must feel that they have a prospect of political success under democracy. If they are convinced that they would lose under democracy, then their most rational strategy is to ally with the Hardliners. The process of extrication, therefore, usually revolves around providing guarantees to protect the vital interests of current powerholders (for instance, the military) and to optimize the political chances of the Reformers in democracy. Such a negotiated transition may imbalance the playing field of politics and tie the hands of the new democratic government in important respects, but it prevents chaos and lowers the risk of coups. Of course, as Przeworski's discussion of the second stage of constitution suggests, there is more to designing democratic institutions than satisfying the current regime. The interests and strengths of the oppositional forces are diverse, and their chances of success are differentially affected by institutional arrangements. In any case, however, the essence of democracy is political uncertainty, so transitional arrangements often continue to be modified or to yield unanticipated outcomes.

Vietnam's experience with liberalization and its current choices regarding future policy can be articulated within Przeworski's analytic model, although some of the background assumptions of the model are more compatible with the situations of Latin America or even Poland than they are with China or Vietnam.

Political liberalization in Vietnam, as in China, amounted to relaxing the domination of life and especially economic activity by ideology, permitting a broader range of opinion within party-state structures concerning policy, and strengthening the constitutional, legal, electoral, parliamentary, and state aspects of the political system. Moreover, since 1986 the entire central leadership has been generally committed to reform and has differed on the pace of reform and the means to preserve order. But political liberalization has not allowed the formation of oppositional or even autonomous organizations. The most prominent example has been the harassment of the Club of Former Resistance Fighters in Ho Chi Minh City, and the creation in 1990 of a national Veteran's Association to pre-empt it. In the terminology of Gabriel Almond, liberalization has allowed greater political articulation, but still no unsponsored political aggregation.

Clearly political liberalization is intended to coopt societal forces into contributing to the political economy without challenging its current order, what Przeworski calls achieving a broader dictatorship through cooptation. Przeworski does not consider this to be a stable option, but the situation of Vietnam is quite different from his implicit referent, Poland. Indeed, as suggested in the typology discussed above, Poland and Vietnam are at opposite ends of the spectrum with regards to the domestic legitimacy and strength of communist regimes. And the various dimensions of political liberalization in Vietnam have in fact been used for more active participation of a broader spectrum of opinion and society in government. Meanwhile the arbitrariness of party rule and the salience of Marxism-Leninism in policy making have been reduced. On the other hand, the new societal forces encouraged by economic liberalization are at the periphery of the party-state structure, and while they appreciate its permissiveness, they still feel distant from the center. The sense of distance and alienation is strongest in the South. Liberalization is strongly preferred to conservatism, but what if the choice were between a liberal party-state and pluralistic democracy? How long can political liberalization last?
The duration of political liberalization is affected by both societal and leadership factors. In general, both factors would indicate a longer liberalization phase in Vietnam than in Europe. Vietnamese societal forces are less autonomous and aggressive than in Europe. Vietnam’s prerevolutionary tradition was colonialism rather than bourgeois self-government, and the economy and even demography of Vietnam have been more deeply reshaped by communism than any Eastern European country. Perceived deprivation would be lower in Vietnam because the economy has done better with liberalization and the example of economic collapse in Eastern Europe and the Confederation of Independent States makes the alternative of transformation look less attractive than it did before 1991. The risk of crisis would also appear greater for two different reasons. First, the repressive capacity of Vietnam is greater than any Eastern European communist country. Secondly, liberalization would lead to more regionalist and perhaps even separatist demands, which could produce an irreconcilable conflict between the North fighting for national unity and southern forces favoring autonomy. Such a conflict would be a disaster for Vietnam, and by raising the stakes of crisis it strengthens the will to avoid crisis and to accomodate to the existing system.

Turning to leadership factors, these are not as encouraging for continued liberalization as the societal factors but are not as negative as those of Eastern Europe. From the time of Ho Chi Minh Vietnam has prided itself on its tradition of collective leadership, especially in contrast to China, though there has been intense factional struggle behind the scenes (Thai Quang Trung 1985). Perhaps the factional struggle is no more violent now than in the past, but its effects are more public. The benchmarks of the public strife within the leadership have been the removal of Tran Xuan Bach from the Politburo in March 1990, and Bui Tin’s open letter to the Politburo broadcast to Vietnam by the BBC. Although the documents of the Seventh Party Congress appeared conciliatory and newly elected General Secretary Do Muoi has made efforts since the congress to meet with leading critics such as Nguyen Khac Vien, the congress was clearly a victory for more conservative groups within the party. Meanwhile, reform in governmental structures apparently continues to favor the strengthening of the office of the prime minister and the functions of the national assembly, and the state leadership has become more southern and less well represented in the Politburo. If the three natural cleavages of conservatives and reformers, party and state, and North and South become aligned, the tradition of public cohesiveness might be tried severely by maneuverings for factional advantage, and the liberalizing reformists might be tempted to strengthen their hand in the central leadership by evoking new political forces with a call for pluralistic democracy. Despite the regime’s adamant rejection of multi-party pluralism since March 1989, it is clear from the denunciations that pluralism continues to have support within the leadership.

Three kinds of leadership credibility will also be important for the longevity of liberalization: credibility as liberalizers, as repressors, and as national leaders. Credibility as liberalizers is necessary because otherwise democratization would be seen as necessary in order to guarantee liberalization. If liberalization were seen as a shaky step that might be withdrawn, then the further step of democratization would be preferred by all anti-conservatives. But the regime’s commitment to both economic and political liberalization since 1986 is credible. The regime has been careful to continue with reform, and its conservative rhetoric concentrates on issues of stability, order, and prudence rather than the latently anti-reform affirmations of socialist orthodoxy still heard in China. Credibility as repressor is necessary because otherwise radical forces would feel that they could challenge the regime and provoke a crisis with impunity. Here, too, the regime seems fairly solid, even if it has not been tested by a dramatic event such as Tiananmen. Credible repression must be sensed most strongly where radical opposition is most likely, and this appears to be true in the South. Of course, a sense of repressiveness tends to alienate and radicalize opposition in the long run, but it also tends to make the short run longer.

The regime is also strong in credibility as a national leadership, especially in comparison to Eastern Europe. It overthrew French colonialism, defeated the Americans, reunified the country, and fought the Chinese. Opposition could be ideological, regionalistic, or localistic, but it could not now be credibly nationalistic. However, the stature of the regime as national leader is reduced by the failure of socialist modernization, the mishandling of the South, and the vulnerability of Vietnam to international forces such as the withdrawal of Soviet aid. Moreover, prosperity in the 1990s might well be tilted toward the South and lead to attempts at regional assertion which could be interpreted by a national/northern regime as separatist. In general, however, the liberalizing regime in Vietnam has an enviable level of credibility compared to European communism.

The final leadership factor is the capacity of the regime to provide a viable social order for the mixed public and private socio-economy that emerges in response to economic liberalization. The regime can initiate
liberalization by withdrawing the state's monopoly on economic activity, but private economic activity also requires regulation. The state must provide a public order which is not merely the subordination of the private economy to the public economy, but which regulates the private economy "for its own good." Otherwise the new material forces of society remain marginalized and chaotic, and as they become a larger part of societal reality they will be more dissatisfied with the regime as an organizer of society. Evidently Vietnam has been more successful in this area than China, where the individual entrepreneurs were among the most enthusiastic supporters of the student challenge to the regime in 1989 (Unger 1991, 106-126). The initiation of economic liberalization requires only a policy change, but the management and governance of a liberalized socio-economy requires major structural adjustments.

How would the regime respond to a popular crisis demanding democratization? With repression or by making the transition from liberalization to democratization? We can use Przeworski's four-actor model of Hardliners and Reformers within the leadership and Moderates and Radicals in opposition to analyze the situation, but it is admittedly quite artificial. As Jon Elster has observed, Poland is the only communist country in which the four actors were actually involved in negotiating the transition (Elster 1991, 456). In Vietnam the four are "actors" only in a metaphorical sense; they are no more than ideal political positions reasoned out and juxtaposed by the analyst.

According to Przeworski, in order for peaceful extrication from authoritarianism to occur, the Reformers must be able to engage in effective bargaining with the Moderates, which implies that each group must control its more extreme partner. The feasible compromise, the pact, must be more attractive to both middle forces than confrontation, and the pact must protect the vital interests of the Hardliners. The minimum demand of the Moderates is for limited political contestation, and the minimum demand of the Reformers is for assurance of a political future in democracy. This is not likely to describe a possible bargaining situation in Vietnam because opposition is not allowed to organize. Thus there is no one who could make credible guarantees to the current leadership. Only "virtual bargaining" could occur. For example, Reformers could outline a timetable of reforms that would eventually meet the presumed demands of Moderates for pluralism, or perhaps some Moderate theorist could devise and propagate a limited program designed to accommodate the (hypothetical) concerns of the Hardline and Reform leadership. One could say that in times of peace reforms are designed to appeal to hypothetical moderates, and if a crisis like Tiananmen occurred it would tend to have radical, "all or nothing" demands which, by Przeworski's logic, would invite repression.

I would argue that the real mechanism of democratization in Vietnam is not an implicit bargaining situation, but the fact that the momentum of reform and the new legitimacy of the regime is founded on moving away from centralized, ideological socialism. Reform leaders present themselves as backing away from the mistakes of the past. To draw a line between themselves and a Moderate position (which in any case is not allowed to exist) would be to weaken their position vis-a-vis the conservatives. The reformers hope that liberalization is or can become democratization, in other words, that if the state and constitution are strengthened all significant political interests can articulate themselves within a non-oppositional structure. Democratization is viewed as evolutionary rather than transformative. Of course, expectations are not reality, and twenty-seven years of Hungarian liberalization ended with the reformers organizing the transition to democracy and then receiving less than ten per cent of the vote.

If a threshold of oppositional democracy does prove inevitable, it is far more likely to occur in the midst of a major political crisis, during which there is also a risk of repression, rather than at the bargaining table. A major crisis would confront the regime with the choice of repression or recognition of opposition, hence the expansion of the political system. Many reformers would prefer pluralistic politics to repression, and some might prefer it to liberalization. However, a crisis situation is not conducive to precise bargaining or to binding solutions.

A factor missing from Przeworski's analysis that continues to play a major role in shaping prospects for political reform and political change in many communist countries, including Vietnam, are international influences. These influences are particularly complex for Vietnam. China provides an acceptable model for conservatives as well as a vitally important economic partner for the North. As long as China prospers and remains conservative its cognates in the Vietnamese leadership will be strengthened. If the conservatives in China failed then the conservatives in Vietnam would be undercut, and reformers strengthened. Non-communist countries present a variety of attractions and political-economic inducements, ranging from the appeal of economically successful, one-party systems such as Taiwan or Singapore to the United States. As the economy becomes more involved in the international capitalist system it seems inevitable that domestic forces demanding pluralism would be strengthened. Events in Cambodia could become a minor but distinct influence in Vietnam. If a post-communist regime
stabilizes and prospers in Phnom Penh it would increase the envy and sense of urgency for reform in the South. On the other hand, if it remains shaky and problematic it will strengthen the apparent need for military preparedness.

The most important international influence on Vietnamese reform at present is also the most complex, namely, the fate of European Communism. On one hand, the rapid collapse of European Communism demonstrates for many that the days of communism are numbered. How can Vietnam persist in Leninism after the collapse of the Soviet Union? Ideologically, Vietnam has always been an acolyte, and now the priest has died. Moreover, the central bureaucratic structures of Vietnam had depended on Soviet aid for decades, and the abrupt cessation of aid and even commerce has created a sudden and acute need for international capitalist assistance. On the other hand, the post-communist revolution has brought only economic and political chaos in its wake. The Eastern European regimes and peoples launched their transformations with hopes far brighter than the results so far, and one may ask whether, with hindsight, a more gradual or structured process might have been better. Unless and until the post-communist political economies show signs of stability and prosperity, their fate will be a cautionary tale for Vietnamese leaders, and to a lesser extent for potential Moderates and even Radicals. With some exaggeration, one could say that the fate of European Communism proves conclusively that Leninism is impossible—and that there is no alternative.

**Conclusion: Alternative Futures**

Vietnam’s foreseeable possibilities appear to be threefold, if we extrapolate from both the progress of the 1980s and the remaining societal problems. First, liberalization might indeed evolve into a broad-based regime capable of coopting new societal interests. Secondly, the regime might confront a political crisis, or series of crises, which force it to choose between repression and a leap into democracy. Thirdly, regionalist demands from the South might clash with national/northern resistance and result in chaos or civil war. With the first, the Reformers win and the Moderates win by becoming Reformers. In the second, either the Hardliners or the Radicals win. With the third, everyone loses, at least in the short and medium term.

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**Stable Liberalization**

I have already argued that liberalization might be more durable in Vietnam than in Europe, but more is required if liberalization is to be considered a future rather than a phase. To be stable, it must develop structures that provide avenues into the regime for new societal forces, it must provide an adequate public order for a changing society, and it must pre-empt crises. A liberalizing regime that could accomplish all of these tasks would be considerably more than the "broader dictatorship" mentioned by Przeworski; it would be systematically responsive in its policies to needs and interests of its citizenry. Indeed, one might call it a form of democracy (Womack 1989).

The regime has already made considerable progress in providing for societal entry into governmental processes. The improvement of electoral mechanisms, the strengthening of the National Assembly and local assemblies, and the strengthening of local government provide broader access to elite political participation. They allow latent oppositional forces to express themselves as differing viewpoints and new faces within existing structures. The party structure might find it more difficult to incorporate new societal directions, but if it fails to do so a cleavage could develop between the more inclusive politics of public institutions and the more exclusive politics of the party.

In addition to greater access, stable liberalization requires a policy reorientation toward providing a public order that includes the new, unofficial domains of society and economy. The regime has made considerable progress in permitting the private economy to expand, and it is ahead of China in cutting subsidies to state-owned enterprises. But the state cannot simply retreat; it must also regulate, tax, and provide long-term planning. The expansion of public capacity beyond the state economy might require the encouragement of corporatist institutions in the private sector, such as trade associations and workers' associations. In any case, the interests concerning public order of any segment of society should not be left outside the gates of the government, and the government would build credibility by providing a legitimate structure.

Crisis are the mortal enemy of liberalization, because they present to a regime premised on non-opposition an inescapable confrontation with oppositional demands, and usually in a radical, all-or-nothing context. Economic prosperity is of course useful in avoiding crises, since in good times people are more approving of the government and fewer people feel cornered by the system. However, a general period of rising expectations can contribute to feelings of relative deprivation if a
downturn occurs, or lead to problems such as inflation which are blamed specifically on the government. Moreover, if prosperity is tied to international openness and overseas investment, it might give some societal forces a new feeling of immunity from government retaliation.

Besides prosperity, which in any case is not always under a government’s control, the major strategic policy for avoiding confrontational crises is the cooptation of the other end of the political spectrum. To take two prominent examples, T. J. Pempel argues that the longevity of the Swedish Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan was due not only to prosperity but also to the attention of the labor-based Swedish party to business needs and the attention of the business-based LDP to labor needs (Pempel 1991). By acting as parties of the whole citizenry rather than as parties of their current majorities they have extended their political domination even as the balance of societal forces changed. Perhaps the most famous historical case is Otto von Bismarck, who, after his attempts to repress the socialist parties failed, drafted the world’s first social security legislation. It is perhaps not a coincidence that shortly thereafter revisionism became popular in the German Social Democratic Party.

For Vietnam, the most important area for the party to reach behind the latent opposition in order to defuse it is the problem of southern alienation. The government in Hanoi is seen as a northern regime, and in fact its staffing and to some extent its outlook on national affairs is northern. The regime has responded to this problem by placing southerners first in positions of prominence and then gradually in positions of power, but, geographically and sociologically speaking, the national government remains northern. As an illustration of a more dramatic action, if the party proposed that the national capital be moved to Hue it would demonstrate a selfless concern for national unity, show a commitment to developing the poorest part of the country, and undercut the possibility of southern separatism. Other important areas for preemptive policies would be the political integration of the Hoa into provincial and national government and provision for the official involvement of overseas and returned Vietnamese in appropriate areas. An official apology for the excesses against the Hoa in the 1978-1982 period might also be useful.

Strategic policies alone cannot prevent crises; it is impossible to make everyone happy. Tactical policies are necessary if confrontation is not to be magnified. The dangerous aspect of crisis is that it concentrates political attention on an extraordinary situation. Normal politics is suspended, and the extreme solutions of Hardliners and Radicals seem appropriate. The basic tactical problem is to routinize crisis. This is achieved partly through the regulation of activities with crisis potential, for instance, regulations on parade permits, licensing of publications, and so forth. However, the potential for petty repression in such regulations creates in turn a new potential for crises. More importantly, a credible procedure and institution for conflict resolution is necessary, especially between local power figures (the police, the party) and the citizenry. There are many possibilities: the court system, procurators, obudsmen, Conseil d’Etat, special plenipotentiaries, and so forth. The crux is that the aggrieved persons and the sympathetic crowd can believe that their case will be heard on its merits. Lastly, it should be remembered that the scale of a crisis is always co-determined by its participants and the official reaction. This does not imply that the government should always be permissive, but any controlling or repressive action should be limited to an appropriate response. Tiananmen without the massacre would not be nearly as great a problem for Chinese politics.

**Crises and Democratic Transition**

A major alternative to indefinite liberalization is that a redefining political crisis or crises will occur. If the crisis is repressed, both the reformers within the leadership and the moderate oppositional forces will be the losers, while the conservatives will be in control and the radicals will strengthen their leadership of oppositional sentiment. As Tiananmen demonstrates, repression would have international repercussions; the United States could be expected to react strongly, though there would be little reaction from Southeast Asia and possibly support from China. Liberalization policies would become disoriented by the crisis and repression, but it is unlikely that the conservatives would have a coherent alternative. Further crises would be likely.

If the political crisis (or the last one in a series) leads to an acknowledgement of oppositional forces and the creation of a multi-party system, there is a range of possible outcomes. The most moderate outcome would be that the party respond to the crisis by promising to allow oppositional participation in the current political system, perhaps beginning at the local level. The aim would be to make democratization, like liberalization, a long-term, stable process. However, as the Soviet Union has demonstrated, democratization is less controllable. Another option would be the rapid development of nationally-oriented oppositional parties, perhaps involving a split of the communist party. Contestation for national leadership would be the primary political focus. A third,
most extreme option would be that the national political structure would
be weakened and new political forces would be based on localistic
concerns and perspectives. The danger of national fragmentation as well
as the implicit threat to the military and the former elite might lead to
anti-democratic coups. Meanwhile, it is unlikely that the internal
structure of local political forces would be democratic or tolerant of
opposition.

A democratic regime would be more stable if it is careful to base
itself on national unity and to pay special attention to the needs of
farmers and to the existing party organizations. Rural policy deserves
emphasis because most political crises are urban, but the backbone of the
Vietnamese population is rural. Both the commercial agricultural needs
of the Mekong delta and the survival agricultural needs of central and
northern areas must be provided for. A democratic leadership must also
be careful not to antagonize or isolate the membership and organization
of the communist party. This may be politically impossible, because
victorious democratic regimes in communist countries hitherto have been
defined by their anti-communism. But anti-communism would be more
costly in Vietnam than in Europe. The entire societal elite in the North
is defined by party membership, and a rapid delegitimation of societal
structure would be profoundly disorienting. Moreover, imbalanced as it
is, the communist party is the only national political force in Vietnam,
and its disintegration might well make integrated national politics
impossible. However, it might well happen that a moderate
democratizing leader, no matter how well disposed and capable, would
be marginalized by the centrifugal forces of radical local forces.
Democratization is a victory of the periphery premised on the loosening
of central controls.

Chaos and Civil War

Vietnam is not likely to collapse into chaos suddenly or soon. Chaos
comes after crisis, and the factors that prolong liberalization defer crisis.
However, the anticipated prosperity and internationalization of the 1990s
does not automatically prevent regionalism and separatism, the most
likely root of chaos. Indeed, greater relative prosperity in the South
could increase local demands for political influence and resentment of
national/northern control, and greater internationalization could provide
external support for oppositional demands. In a situation either of crisis
or of democratization, it is easy to imagine regionalist demands
escalating to autonomy or separatism. Separatism does not really require
broad support to be an effective political voice; in the Czech and Slovak
Federative Republic the Slovaks have caused a series of crises over
matters of regional privilege and autonomy, with much talk of
independence, yet an opinion poll in June 1990 found that only eight per
cent of Slovaks and only six per cent of Czechs favored separation
(Cutler and Schwartz 1991, 524 n.24). However, the North would be
unwilling to grant autonomy peacefully both for reasons of nationalism
and for regional political and economic interests. Therefore, if
Vietnamese politics ever became articulated and aggregated on
regionalistic lines, the possibility of civil war would have to be
considered. It is certainly not inevitable. The South is not a nationally
self-conscious entity like Croatia or Slovakia; it has been culturally
inseparable from the North.

The international repercussions of regionalistic chaos and civil war
would be considerable. The economies of southern China and northern
Vietnam will undoubtedly become more interdependent in the 1990s,
which might enhance China’s tendency to see its own interests as more
closely aligned with the North and its influence stronger there (Womack
1991a, 164-166). The common border gives China an additional special
interest in the North’s security. Meanwhile the international economic
connections and prospects for the South lie with Southeast Asia, South
Korea, Taiwan, Japan and the West, and not so much with China. It
would be to no one’s interest if a divisive conflict developed in Vietnam
and thus all might try to prevent and mediate it, but if divisions persisted
and sides were taken, they might well follow the geo-economic pattern.

If conflict did develop, it would be disastrous for both sides. The
initial military advantage would be with the North, but it would be
unlikely to be able to enforce its rule by arms because it would lack the
rural support it had in previous conflicts. Protracted struggle would
require dependence on China. The South might be encouraged to be
assertive by its prosperity and international contacts, but both might
prove quite fragile under the stress of war. If China aligned with the
national/northern government, the needs of the South would face many
well-wishers with uncomfortable strategic choices. And, because of
increased uncertainty, international commerce and investment could be
an early casualty of chaos.

The serious possibility of civil war and the inevitability of devastating
consequences are themselves a powerful inducement to a more
cooperative solution. Such a dread prospect might cause the regime to
take measures to incorporate the South into national politics, and to
forego the convenience of conflating national and northern perspectives
and interests. It might encourage political patience and the single-minded pursuit of economic prosperity that already characterizes the South. In any case civil war would be at the end of a long slide downhill rather than a sudden surprise, and at each stage the political trend could be turned, and the prudence of turning would become more obvious.

The alternatives just described are quite different in their probability. Continued liberalization is almost certain in the very short term. Until a pivotal crisis occurs, which is unpredictable, liberalization will prevail. It is the "muddling through" of reform communist politics. With very prudent and farsighted leadership it might evolve into a kind of one-party democracy. But it is hard to assume good leadership. Given the experience of European communism on the one hand and China on the other, it is hard to rule out the possibility of political crisis. And crises have proven impossible to forecast. Nevertheless, preemption of crisis situations is not inconceivable and Vietnam might learn from the mistakes in crisis management of other regimes. Chaos, the third alternative, is to no one's interest. Nevertheless, it resonates with deep tensions in Vietnamese society and with the options for political voice opened up by crisis and democratization. It cannot be dismissed, but perhaps such a real but distant threat will prompt the necessary preventive measures.

For the reasons outlined in the earlier sections of the paper, Vietnam's alternatives differ significantly from those of Europe or even of China. The recent lesson of political transformation in European Communism is that the European pattern of events is inevitable for all communist countries. It is that political reform and political change are interrelated in far more complex ways than had been previously imagined. Nevertheless, it would be unrealistic to deny that analogous societal forces such as the post-revolutionary syndrome and citizen demands are not also at work in Vietnam, and that repression is futile and radicalizing in the long term. Neither reform nor change can be prevented over the long term, and how they are managed may determine the quality of political life.

Notes

1. As of mid-June 1989, the plan of Solidarity in Poland was to push for free parliamentary election within four years. They did not expect to take over the presidency of Poland until 1995 (Ash 1990, 36-37).

2. Historically Bulgaria had the strongest relationship to Russia, dating from pan-Slavic politics of the nineteenth century. Therefore its sense of national identity was not so threatened by Soviet patronage, and this may have contributed to the continuing strength of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (formerly BCP).


References


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