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Vietnam

Vietnam: 30 Years After

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Thirty years after the victory of the Vietnamese national liberation struggle, IV's sister magazine Inprecor (Paris) interviews Tuan, a Vietnamese of French nationality, who goes back every year to his native country to rediscover many friends and acquaintances. Interview by Jean-Michel Krivine.

Tuan: I went back to Vietnam after a year's absence and I saw the emergence of a "middle class". Of course, this is only in the cities. There are now lots of new companies, industrial and commercial enterprises whose capital comes from party members who use front people because, according to the old statutes, they don't have the right to engage in business. There are a lot of new buildings, 20- storey buildings, real skyscrapers.

Inprecor: Can a party member be the owner?

In principle, no. But he can use the name of a cousin or a friend.

If I understand correctly, the big difference with the former USSR is that there it is former party leaders who are becoming openly rich, whereas here they are becoming rich behind the cover of other people.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/new_years.jpg]

That's it: the majority of cadres, who had a certain level of education, have become big entrepreneurs. They send their children to study abroad so that they can become managers and take over from them. They are following the Chinese example, but they are many years behind. However, they are acting more quickly, because if you compare the two populations, the percentage of cadres who have become entrepreneurs is greater here.

Having said that, they don't have "kingdoms" here like in China, where they can reach the size of a large province, with the risk of secession. In China certain big entrepreneurs don't hide their membership of the party, because they have brought money to the party and then to the state.

In Vietnam a party member doesn't have the right to engage in trade or industry, but I met people, military men, who have businesses and who have the use of a military bank. I put the question to them: "If you are at the head of a business, you must be making profits. Where do they go? To the army or to the party, since at the end of the day the army is controlled by the party? They replied: "No, no! We have a very special system that it would take too long to explain. Part of the profits go to the army (for the renovation of barracks, for pay rises), the other part constitutes a kind of kitty to be reinvested.

But then who controls this kitty?

Quite obviously the entrepreneur, who takes his cut along the way...

Really the big difference with the East European countries is that the party is still there and still controls everything?

Absolutely, it is still there and it still controls everything, but especially in the countryside and among the ethnic minorities. There people still trust it. If you go to the Central Highlands and start criticizing the district authorities, you

won't get a very good reception. Uncle Ho is still their idol. Many among the ethnic minorities take the name Ho and when you ask them why they don't give their children a name with more "local colour" they reply: it's a sign of gratitude towards Uncle Ho who liberated us, who gave us food, who helped us evolve, etc. In the towns it's different because there is a real crisis of the party.

There has been for five years. And it is coming to the surface now in different ways: in the newspapers, in letters addressed to the Political Bureau, by using the Internet, that formidable source of information with which you can obtain all the documents you want...So therefore on the economic level there is big progress; but it's always the same, it's not for ordinary people. But for the middle classes and the "cream" of the proletariat there is massive consumption. I was astonished by it compared to a year ago.

So, for several years there have been Cora supermarkets in Hanoi and in Ho Chi Minh City. At present the huge American company Metro has established itself. And its slogan is: "You choose, you pay and you take it away". They have bought big plots of land and are copying the USA, building big car parks for the cars of the new class (not for bicycles...) and since they have established themselves nearer to Ho Chi Minh City than Cora, they are in the process of stealing its customers.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/nikefactoryVietnam.jpg>]

Nike factory, Ho Chi Minh City

To get into Metro you need a card because, they say, we sell at wholesale prices, only to businesses, artisans, associations. They buy agricultural produce (water bindweed, lemons, etc.) from the peasants of the region and pay less than the market price. But that is beginning to damage the business of the peasant women who sell at the market: a bunch of bindweed costs less at Metro than at the Saigon market.

Is this part of the population that can buy more a minority, or is it in fact the whole of the population whose standard of living has risen?

The standard of living has risen for everybody, that's sure, but to different degrees. The workers find ways of getting a Metro card, but that has consequences for small-scale agriculture, peasant smallholdings. Vietnam, especially the South, is characterised by family commerce. The family brings fruit from its village, which is 15 km from Ho Chi Minh City, but they don't manage to sell it any more because the price is too high.

What's new on the political level? There was talk of a certain "opening".

Things are in fact opening up a little politically, insofar as at present, and for some time now, the role of intellectuals is appreciated. Before they all had to "follow the line", now they are allowed to stray from it. This is linked to Vietnam's integration into the international community.

Overseas Vietnamese can buy plots of land and houses in Vietnam, even if they don't go and live there. Moreover the Vietnamese who fled after 1975 can recover their house and their property; if the house is occupied the authorities tell the former owner to sort it out with the tenants, either by housing them elsewhere or by giving them a sum of money to leave. At present what is known as the "property fever" is raging, houses are very expensive because big enterprises and rich individuals have bought everything. Prices have risen by at least 80 per cent over the last year. Everything is more expensive than in Paris or New York.

But to get back to politics. For some time now many Vietnamese have been going abroad to pursue their studies, including at their own expense. Before it was the USSR, Eastern Europe and China. Now you can go everywhere, to Australia, to the USA, to France, etc. Either the family pays for all that, or you are a state employee who needs to be

trained in modern administrative techniques and the authorities send you. A lot of people have already gone abroad and seen different things. When they come back they say: why don't we do this or that? So there is now, I wouldn't say democracy, but a certain freedom.

Can this freedom be seen in the press, on the radio or TV?

For the moment there aren't yet contradictory opinions. And many people only dream of going abroad. Before they only sent abroad students who could directly enter University, now you can send children from the age of 12, if you have the money. I've seen a lot of them in Montpellier, without their parents, because they have an organisation that takes charge of them (for which they pay through the nose) and finds them a place to stay and so on.

I imagine that the history that they are taught in Vietnam still follows the party line?

That doesn't change. There is still the history of "Marxism", if I can call it that. But increasingly "Marxism-Leninism" is being replaced by "Ho Chi Minh Thought".

On the other hand there is a definite opening concerning the person of Nguyen An Ninh, who was very well known in Vietnam in the 1930s. He was a friend of the Trotskyist leader Ta Thu Thau and together they published the paper "La Lutte". He wasn't a Trotskyist, because he didn't want to join a party. In fact he described himself as a "non-party Communist". From my point of view he was a genuine Communist: it was he who provided nearly 75 per cent of the members of the party in Vietnam before Ho Chi Minh returned in 1941. He died in the prison of Poulo Condor in 1943.

Up until now he was spoken of in a limited way and only as a good man, a great patriot. Ho Chi Minh appears to have thought a lot of him. Before, under Diem, there were two streets opposite each other leading to the big Saigon market, Nguyen An Ninh Street and a Ta Thu Thau Street. Their names were only changed in 1985.

And now once again a big street has been after Nguyen An Ninh. As far as Ta Thu Thau is concerned, now they speak about him. Books have been published, in particular those by Pham Van HÃ»m, a Trotskyist assassinated by the Stalinists in 1945, like Ta Thu Thau. The publishers "Culture and Information" have just brought out, last year, one of his major works. I have a copy at home.

I said to the bookseller, "You are selling a book by a Trotskyist?" He looked at me and replied: "A Trotskyist, yes, yes! But he was a patriot". It has sold like hot cakes. You can't find it any more because they only published it in 600 copies. As far as Nguyen An Ninh is concerned, we can't call it a rehabilitation, because he was never condemned, but he was completely forgotten. A "house of remembrance" for him has been built near Ho Chi Minh City, where you can find all the documents about him, including photos of Ta Thu Thau. It opened in 2003. At present this period of the 1930s is being referred to in quite a few "Memoirs" by very different sorts of people. They have even translated part of Daniel Hémery's book, "From Nationalism to Communism".

So I'm quite optimistic, but on the other hand there is a sharp power struggle in the party. Within it there is an organisation whose code name is T2 (that stands for Espionage Bureau n° 2). And in this bureau there is an agent that they call T4, who writes very critical reports on (legendary Communist general) Giap and all the "old-timers". I have the impression that they are in the process of rewriting the history of the party and eliminating all the "old ones". They say the worst sort of things about them to demolish them. It is Stalin's principle: Slander! Slander! Something will always stick. But there is already a movement that is beginning to rebel against that.

Giap has written a letter of protest, which I have in Vietnamese. Having said that, the present leading group has no leader of any calibre. The General Secretary, Nong Duc Manh, is only the result of a compromise between different factions. There is a rumour that he is the natural son of Hoi Chi Minh. Journalists asked him if he was, and he replied with a smile: "You now very well that Ho Chi Minh is the father of all Vietnamese!..."

So it's clear that capitalism is gradually taking over in Vietnam, but when will they admit it? Will there have to be the kind of events that happened in Russia?

I don't think so because they stood aside from the events of 1989: they were "open" from 1987, then they put the brakes on, denouncing the events in Hungary, with its dozens of parties creating "disorder". It's been 15 years now since they carried out the *Dã ì Moi* (Renovation). There is a new class that has needs for consumption, for display, for cars: a Mercedes that costs 40,000 euros here is worth nearly 100,000 over there. Furthermore, the price a bowl of *Phở* (traditional soup) has doubled in a year. Only the taxi fares haven't increased because of the tourists and the cutthroat competition.

What do the Vietnamese think of the Americans now? After having fought to the death against them it seems they are adopting many of their habits.

There's no question about it, it's the dollar that rules. They are "aping" the Americans. The young people aren't interested in this war that ended in 1975, that is, 30 years ago already. Those who fought in the war are either frustrated or fatalistic. Many people are waiting for the Tenth Congress of the party, which is due to be held next year and which is likely to do no more than throw them a few bones to gnaw.

In this rather contradictory situation, with the re-establishment of capitalism and the beginnings of a democratic opening, what can we do?

We have to at least restore to their rightful place the revolutionaries of yesterday, and through Nguyen An Ninh obtain the rehabilitation of all the Trotskyists who were massacred. We have to talk again about the 1930s, which the young people don't know about and the old ones tend to no longer want to remember. The publication of Pham Van HÃ»n's book is an encouraging sign. It should be followed by publishing all the writings of the members of the "La Lutte" group, which appeared at a time when Ho was still unknown... Besides that, what we can do is to continue to translate Trotsky's works and then the writings of Trotskyists on the Vietnamese Revolution, so as to make known our positions during the Resistance and at present.