

The Vietnam party congress: The power struggle continues

by Linda de Hoyos

Over the days of Dec. 15-20, the leadership of postwar Vietnam came together in its Sixth Communist Party Congress. The congress had been delayed for more than six weeks, indicating the intense factional debate in the Politburo, the highest policy-making body of the party. The Congress's results—including sweeping changes in the Politburo—and its inconclusive aftermath show that Vietnam's leaders are still locked in debate over the policies and personnel that will lead the nation in its second decade as a unified, independent country.

Vietnamese leaders met within a crucible of pressures imposed on the country and the region, pressures escalated by the July 28 Vladivostok speech of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov. The "Vladivostok doctrine" featured at its center Moscow's bid for full normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China, Vietnam's giant neighbor to the north and major enemy since the Chinese-backed imposition of the Pol Pot Khmer Rouge regime in Kampuchea in 1975. Moscow has given assurances that a Sino-Soviet rapprochement is not to be gained at the expense of any "third" nation—such as Vietnam, but this has not forestalled a Soviet diplomatic offensive into Indochina, with the non-communist ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), and with China to pave the way for a settlement that would end the seven-year Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea begun with Vietnam's invasion and ouster of the genocidal Pol Pot.

Vietnam also faces its most serious postwar domestic crisis, sparked by the party's inability to consolidate control over the south and by an acute economic crisis exacerbated by natural disaster.

The alarm was sounded in an Oct. 19 speech by then party Secretary General Truong Chinh to the 10th party congress in Hanoi, immediately after a visit to Moscow where he met with Gorbachov. "Over the past 11 years," said Truong Chinh, "the entire country entered the first stage of the transitional period to socialism. . . . We have committed serious shortcomings and mistakes in economic leadership. . . . These shortcomings and mistakes have resulted in the productive forces being restrained, imbalances becoming ever more widespread, productivity, quality, and efficiency being steadily reduced, products and commodities becoming scarce, and circulation being choked. . . . Lands, labor, material-technical bases, capital, capability, experience, intelligence, and skills of the entire country . . . as well as the laboring

people's potentials, have not been exploited and put into full use. . . . It is obvious that the more we maintain the old ways of thinking . . . the more difficulties will pile up."

Changes—but not all the way

The Sixth Party Congress reorganized the Politburo in an attempt to deal with these challenges.

The Politburo changes appeared to have the strenuous backing of the Soviet Union, represented at the congress by the Kremlin's number-two man, Yegor Ligachov. In a speech on the congress's opening day, Ligachov stated Moscow's desires that Vietnam embark on a reform program to find new solutions to problems. "The world socialist system has reached a level in its development when the Communist Parties should find qualitatively new and non-standard solutions for complex problems." This calls for a "serious reorganization and renovation of all spheres of public life." Ligachov also called upon Vietnam to act in such a way toward China as to eliminate "unnecessary suspicions and mistrust."

The changes indicated the commitment to the reforms Ligachov demanded:

Three long-time leaders of Vietnam—the warhorses of Vietnam's 50-year national struggle against, first, French colonialist forces, and then, against the United States—were retired:

- Pham Van Dong, Vietnam's prime minister for the past 30 years;
- Le Duc Tho, who negotiated the Paris peace agreement with Henry Kissinger but refused a share of the Nobel Peace Prize with Kissinger; and
- Truong Chinh, who has held the party leadership for the six months since the death of long-time leader Le Duan.

In addition, three Politburo members were noticeably absent from the congress proceedings and appear to have been dishonorably dropped from the leadership: Defense Minister Vam Tien Dung, Political Commissioner for the Army Gen. Chu Huy Man, and Politburo member To Huu.

Gen. Vam Tien Dung led the first North Vietnamese forces into Saigon in 1975, and later wrote a controversial book about the war years. There has been speculation that Dung was a rival of Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, Vietnam's foremost military strategist. Giap, who wrote in praise of the American Constitution and Declaration of Independence, reportedly opposed the occupation, although not the invasion,

of Kampuchea in 1979. Giap was summarily removed from powerful positions in the government in 1980. The sixth congress this week restored the general to the Central Committee; Dung was also retained on the Central Committee.

The new party secretary and top leader is **Nguyen Van Linh**, the former party secretary of Saigon. Before 1967, Van Linh was the head of chief of the COSVN, the operational headquarters of the Vietcong in south Vietnam. In 1982, at the fifth party congress, he was dropped from the Politburo and was reinstated in July 1985. Linh is considered a leader of the reform movement in Vietnam, and a rival of the ousted To Huu, who was removed as deputy prime minister in 1985.

Interior Minister **Pham Hung**, number-two in the new Politburo, is thought likely to be the next prime minister. The next three most important Vietnamese leaders in the Politburo are **Vo Chi Cong**, **Do Muoi**, and head of the State Planning Commission, **Vo Van Kiet**.

Vo Chi Cong and Vo Van Kiet are the two principal individuals identified with the economic reform movement in Vietnam, which, following the 1980-86 economic reforms in the People's Republic of China, has sought to loosen centralized planning and permit conditions in which private agriculture, in particular, might flourish.

Of the top five members of the Politburo, four are from the south. In addition, the current party secretary of Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) has been raised to the Politburo. This, in combination with the retiring of the North Vietnamese wartime leaders, has shifted the regional balance of Vietnam's leadership to the south.

Another individual rising on the scene is Foreign Minister **Nguyen Co Thach**, who was only an alternate on the Politburo last year and is now number 8 on the 14-person leadership body. Thach is considered to be a key representative of the younger set in Vietnam's leadership and has worked to award merit and achievement in the foreign ministry, rather than for war records.

The changes in the Politburo are the most dramatic in the party's history. However, they are not the end of the story. As of early January, those dropped from the Politburo who have government titles, remain in the government. Changes in the government may not occur until April, when elections will be held for the National Assembly. Even then, the elderly statesman honorably dropped will, like China's Deng Xiao Ping, likely hold on to the levers of power as "senior advisers."

Those still in government include Defense Minister Dung. The word from well-informed sources in the region is that the power struggle in Hanoi continues.

Among the issues of this power struggle is reported resistance from within the national police and the military to Soviet demands for Vietnamese concessions to China on the Kampuchea question. The military underlined the point with an outbreak of hostilities on the Sino-Vietnamese border. On

Jan. 6, Vietnam reported major clashes along the border, claiming that it had killed 500 Chinese soldiers. The fighting, considered to be the fiercest clash between the two countries since 1979, continued for three days.

The Laotian model

In his alarmist Oct. 19 speech, Truong Chinh had indicated that the nation's leadership had "squandered" Soviet aid to such an extent that such resources might "dry up." At the Sixth Party Congress, however, Ligachov indicated that the Soviet Union was prepared to double its amount of aid to Vietnam.

The price for this, however, may well be Vietnam's acquiescence in a Soviet-orchestrated deal on Indochina. The Soviet-staged dress rehearsal for the Vietnam Party Congress was the mid-November Communist Party Congress in Laos, headquarters for the Soviet KGB in Asia. According to some sources, there is already contention between Hanoi and Moscow over control of this subsidiary Indochinese state. The Laotian congress's results indicate Moscow has the upper hand in that tussle.

Present at Vientiane to deliver Moscow's demands was Geidar Aliyev of the Soviet Politburo, who was the first to inform the Vietnamese in late 1983 that the U.S.S.R. desired improved relations between Hanoi and Beijing. In Laos, the Soviet diplomatic offensive has met with maximum success. For the last two months, Laos has been improving relations with its neighbor, Thailand. On Dec. 20-25, Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Liu Shuqing visited Vientiane, the first such high-level visit of a Chinese dignitary to Indochina since 1975. Liu stopped in Bangkok both before and after the trip, reporting that Laos-China relations were steadily improving.

The Soviets are also attempting to woo Thailand to an agreement on Kampuchea, and on Jan. 6, Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savestila, to the consternation of many of Thailand's policy makers, announced that he will be going to Moscow soon, on invitation of the Soviets.

For their part, the Vietnamese have repeatedly offered to begin talks with China "at any time, at any place, on any level." But Beijing has only one answer: no talks until Vietnam withdraws its troops from Kampuchea.

There is no question Vietnam needs the economic breathing space it might be afforded by withdrawal from Kampuchea. There are 1 million unemployed in Vietnam; inflation is running at an annual rate of 700%; food production is lagging 7-8% below target; exports are 30% behind, and industrial production 40% short of target. Vietnam also wants to end the diplomatic isolation that has been imposed on the country since it invaded Kampuchea, with hopes of reopening channels of financial aid and investment. However, aside from the question of possible loss of military prestige under a Kampuchea settlement, there must also be deep disquiet in Vietnam over the long-term implications of submission to terms set jointly by Beijing and Moscow.