

POLITICS

The Vietnamese Communist Regime: 35 Years Since Doi Moi Reform

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December is a month of year-end celebrations in the Gregorian calendar, but it also marks an important historical milestone for Vietnam: the passing of another year of the lunar calendar, the initiation of Doi Moi (Renovation) reform in 1986 by the Vietnamese Communist Party.

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(VCP), which aimed to revamp the economic and political situation in Vietnam after the failure of Soviet Union-style central planning.

Like China with its market reform era, the Doi Moi reform transformed the country into what we know today as one of the most promising rising economies in Asia. While the extent of Doi Moi's positive impacts on the livelihood of the Vietnamese people is debatable, it is nevertheless credited with transforming the country from a war-torn economy to a new "economic dragon" with the potential of following in the footsteps of other East and Southeast Asian countries such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

The Doi Moi reform, however, was certainly not a democratic reform. In contrast to the popular belief that democracy would follow the adoption of a free-market economy, the implementation of a socialist-oriented market economy in Vietnam was not a sign that the VCP was planning, or is planning, to democratize.

Paradoxically, Doi Moi happened mostly due to the VCP's recognition that it needed to adapt to survive as a one-party regime. Doi Moi has significantly contributed to the VCP's resilience, especially when other communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union itself have faltered.

But how did the VCP accomplish this? What will be the future of the VCP in the post-Doi Moi era? This article will discuss the impact of Doi Moi on the Communist regime of Vietnam today.

Regime Stability

The VCP's governance philosophy could be summarized in this very simple keyword: regime stability. Doi Moi was formed with this very particular goal in mind, especially when it came to economic reforms.

Doi Moi was initiated in 1986 after a disastrous period of forced industrialization through central planning, as leaders in Hanoi followed the model of the Soviet Union and China. As historian David G. Marr pointed out in 1991, many early leaders of the VCP were not very well versed in economics. Therefore, they chose to follow the draconian "neo-Stalinist

development model” - a mix of governance copied from the Soviet Union and China - as it seemed to be their best bet to build a socialist economy.

Among many socioeconomic consequences were the well-documented inflation and the poor living conditions of the Vietnamese people. Even the official state-owned press does not deny this. In a recent interview, Vu Quang Viet, an overseas Vietnamese economist who advised the government during Doi Moi, recalled that inflation during this period could be as high as 500 percent per year.

Such an unstable economy led to a chaotic political environment. Coupled with the deep-rooted issue of corruption among government officials, the VCP faced the reality of an unhappy population that could riot and challenge the Party's authority at any time. Furthermore, the VCP knew that it needed to gain support from non-socialist countries to establish international trade outside of the Soviet Union's satellites. Allies of the United States were still hostile to the VCP back then: one example was how Vietnam struggled to open up a flight route with the Philippines.

As a result, during the Sixth Congress of the VCP near the end of 1986, the general principles of the Doi Moi reform were outlined. Most of the important principles concerned economic reforms, even though there were some signs of political reforms. For example, the Sixth Congress affirmed that “the management of the country should be performed by law instead of simply by moral concepts,” which sounds like a nod to establishing a Western-style rule-of-law system. However, “pluralism” (thuyết đa nguyên) - a democratic system of multiple parties - was rejected, as political scientist Carlyle Thayer pointed out.

In other words, the basis of Doi Moi was *not* to change the political system. The point of the reform was to fix the mistakes of previous leaders who chose to follow the Soviet economic model, not to reform the country into a democratic government. The VCP leaders wanted to ripe the fruits of prosperity under a market economy, but they were not willing to lose their monopoly of power.

In this regard, the VCP is not unique compared to other authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian regimes have to constantly improve living conditions through high economic growth, according to political scientist Hai Hong Nguyen. This is because, unlike

democratic systems, authoritarian regimes derive their political legitimacy mainly through the assumed approval of the public. Such disapproval is not expressed through elections but through public opinion and demonstrations.

So, was the VCP successful? Building regime stability around economic development is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, many mass protests nowadays in Vietnam are in response to politics rather than economics - a diverging trend from other countries - which the government could interpret favorably as a sign that its economic policies are working (despite inequality evidently broadening). On the other hand, the VCP faces the pressure of having to constantly deliver economic growth that is proportional to increasing living standards. This is a task that Arab countries manage by utilizing their massive oil and gas reserves, but could be very difficult for a country with fewer natural resources like Vietnam.

Oppression

But how was regime stability in Vietnam possible amidst increasing globalization as the result of the country opening up after Doi Moi? The VCP had to find a way to “tame” the growing middle class in Vietnam and ensure that the middle class stayed loyal to the regime.

With better prosperity, the middle class also has broad access to democratic and capitalist countries - a trend that is evident in the way that a very large number of Vietnamese students are going abroad to study.

Inside the country, unlike North Korea, which is still completely closed off, or China, which restricts information access for its citizens, Vietnam still allows people to enjoy basic internet access to various Western-based social media platforms such as Facebook and Youtube. All of these elements pose a threat to the VCP, as it faces a new generation of middle-class citizens with unrestricted access to the outside world, which makes it easier for them to question the regime.

Therefore, in order for Doi Moi to allow the VCP a monopoly on political power, the Party deploys an important strategy: oppression of free speech and critical thinking. This oppression manifests itself in many different ways, but the most visible aspects are the way

in which the VCP still formally allows limited democratic traits such as elections and civil society, but at the same time informally controls and manipulates them.

Election results are tightly controlled by the VCP, with “independent” officials who got elected still affiliated with the VCP in one way or another. The VCP also cracks down on independent bloggers and journalists and imprisons them with harsh charges, only to release them abroad under negotiations with countries like the United States. Using this tactic of “political deportation,” the VCP limits the influence of dissidents inside the country, preventing protests and popular demonstrations.

Additionally, the VCP also adopted new strategies of propaganda. For example, media researcher Dien Nguyen An Luong of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies noted how the VCP manipulates public opinion by deploying cyber troops to make favorable comments about the government, or mass reporting content that the government does not approve of. This is not even a secret mission: Vietnam is the only Southeast Asian country with a publicly acknowledged that it had a military unit that mainly works in cyberspace.

The government also targets the highly-educated middle class with viral pro-government blogs such as Tifosi, in which lengthy posts with developed arguments defending the government are made on an occasional basis.

Tifosi is different from cyber troops, which mostly comment with slogans or pre-written arguments. This shows that the government is aware of the intellectual middle class, especially the young and educated population which might have less loyalty to the VCP. Tifosi currently has more than 200,000 followers, a modest number compared to many celebrities, but its engagement on sociopolitical topics on Facebook signals a change in the VCP’s approach to propaganda strategies.

Conclusion

Though Francis Fukuyama’s thesis of “the end of history” has been debated and debunked by many, this article is also an occasion to bring it up. Fukuyama, observing the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, famously declared that we have arrived at “the end of history,”

meaning that all countries will essentially follow the path of the surviving capitalist countries such as the United States.

Through the example of Doi Moi in Vietnam, however, the world witnessed a communist authoritarian regime transform itself in order to retain its authoritarian rule while developing some elements of the capitalist market-oriented system as well as some democratic traits. However, this is not unique to Vietnam, as the 20th century witnessed a large number of authoritarian regimes using the same tactics.

How long will the communist regime survive as the sole ruler of Vietnam? Arguably, the tactics of the VCP have been working well so far, resulting in the resilience of an undemocratic one-party government. This was made possible due to the historic reform of Doi Moi, but how the VCP will continue to retain its power decades after the launch of Doi Moi is an open question, not only for the regime itself but also for reformists and pro-democracy activists.

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