# Is there opposition in Vietnam?

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« Tell the World » (Defend the Defenders)

Perhaps the Vietnam Communist Party and its ruling apparatus can cavalierly rest easy for a while longer, since there hardly exists any opposition force in Vietnam.

In contrast, the pro-democracy activists in the country and even overseas seem to miss an unprecedented opportunity to take advantage and make something of their "political counterweight," especially after the U.S. visit by head of state Truong Tan Sang in July 2013, followed by an official Paris trip by Vietnam chief operator Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, signaling an "axis rotation" to the West.

It must be added that the "72 Petition" by a group of dissenting patriots, intellectuals in Vietnam in early 2013 has led concurrently to two hot topics that the Party's communication system was required to interact: whether to do away with the 4th Article of the Party Constitution or not, and whether that an opposition force in Vietnam has been established yet.

Some of the most enthusiastic activists tried to prove a powerful oppositional presence to the regime through the 11 anti-China demonstrations in Hanoi in 2011 and the pluralistic multi-party information operated by the social media ever since.

Yet there is a fundamental difference in the mentality of the intellectuals considered close to the Party. In an interview with the Vietnamese BBC on April 26, 2013, Nguyen Dinh Tan - a professor at the Ho Chi Minh Institute of National Politics - Administration, expressed the view: "Indeed in Vietnam we can say that there is no rival with the Vietnam Communist Party. If there is to be opponents of the Vietnam Communist Party as an organization, I think that there is none."

Mr. Tan’s thoughts certainly are representative for a significant number of intellectuals in the state system - people who heretofore have not found any other reason to exist outside the relationship "if the Party remains then we exist.”

Opposition: yes or no?

Professor Nguyen Dinh Tan was right, because objectively considered, the answer is "No" up to this point.

Even the proposed establishment of a Social Democratic Party by lawyer Le Hieu Dang in Saigon on August 2013, which almost became a "successful" reality, does not seem to make a big enough impression on the ruling party about a certain political counterweight.

In fact, a true political opponent must include at least four elements: credo, human resources, financial resources and influence among the people. Or at least, the political opponent must be realized from a certain organization, albeit "nominally."

Organizationally, previously there were two parties that had existed outside the Communist Party, the Democratic Party, and the Socialist Party. However, in 1988 both parties had retreated, and since then there did not exist a party other than the Communist Party. Thus, it is possible to define for the moment that there is no political rival to the Communist Party. Therefore, the evaluation of Nguyen Dinh Tan regarding the "Vietnam Communist Party has no rival" is absolutely right, if only in form.

However, in terms of popular sentiments, i.e. the reality within the societal context and even within the regime makeup, a myriad of images seemingly consistent appear to be jarringly different. Totally unlike the situation where the Party garnered the" citizens’ confidence and love" in 1988, the current situation is described as an unprecedented crisis of confidence from the majority of the population for almost the entire system party and government at all levels.

If the Communist Party has enough courage to conduct a public and transparent referendum on the subject of independent parties, it is probably that a number of organizations outside the Communist Party would be born right about now.

The emergence of organizations and their initial platforms, including logistics and finance is not too daunting for independent political groups, the remaining problem is whether they could build sufficient forces and spread their influence through the reach of their activities to the masses or not.

Previously, the activity of some democratic groups such as Bloc 8406 or Bauxite Vietnam was viewed as hopeful. But in fact, there is virtually no a unified movement for democracy and human rights in Vietnam. Only the "72 recommendations" group should be viewed as a germinating point with its widely rallying nature, but its call to arm is still quite limited.

Currently, the majority of pro-democracy activists are inherently spontaneous, with loosely formed individuals, organizationally fragmented and locally dispersed, with no connection between the main arterial cities such as Hanoi and Saigon, or between these two major cities with locales such as Da Nang, Nghe An, the Red River Delta, the Central Highlands and the South Central region... Also there is almost no connection between local democratic groups with overseas Vietnamese democratic groups.

Thus perhaps it’s still quite early to form an opposition political party, although it is the demand of many notables, intellectuals, workers and peasant class. Because the most important impact for a political party does not rely on its appellation, or something useful, but that which is the actual efficiency of its operation, its influence on the various key social classes of people such as farmers, workers, shopkeepers, even for religious adherents.

In the current fragile situation for the gathering of forces, the cost effectiveness for the embryonic birth of political parties in Vietnam has more cons than pros, the fragility of the effectiveness will lead to the disappointment in the people’s trust, not to mention the problems and difficulty encountered from the impact of the ruling party’s counter offensives.

**Two transformation scenarios**

Objectively, the democracy and human rights activities in Vietnam are still in its first steps, in the first phase of the transitional period prior to reaching a certain completeness, such as the model of civil society in Vietnam.

Typically, the mutually exclusive scenarios take place only under the conditions where the opposition in a society is already formed, reaching a level of antagonism strong enough, capable to replace the target incumbent regime, particularly in the context of the country's economic collapse and the eruption of the social crisis. The phenomenon of the "Arab Spring" in some North African countries is the most relatable testament.

However, the social conditions of Vietnam are not the same as in the case of the North African countries or the insurgent forces in Syria; they heretofore have yet to form a counter-force large enough to have a deciding voice, despite the appearance of many signs of economic recession and social crisis. Thus, for at least the next 3-4 years it is very unlikely to have direct confrontation scenario to be mutually exclusive.

Instead, a "soft" script can be much more easily visualized than the appearance of various civil society groups, which possibly could include their connection to form critical social movements in the next 3-4 years, creating some of the first elements of a civil society model in Vietnam. That the goal of civil society is not trying to replace or overthrow the government, but their impact would lead the state to change or inducing change their policy, their manpower and enforcement of their unreasonable policies, causing social injustice or causing the anger of the people. Thus from the political parties standpoint, the civil society model will attract wider participation components.

Also in the "soft" script, there appears more ideological response leading to the increasing growth of dissenting actions from senior veterans, retired members and a big part of the public civil servants sector, the incumbent cadres of the state body, leading to the fragmentation and ideological divide exacerbating the internecine power-play day by day.

Various evaluations of the current situation estimate that there are three groups within the VCP. The first group consists of about 30% of intellectuals in the Party and in the government structure, including officials who are considered "loyal" and possess themselves the rights and privileges positions in the system. In contrast, the second group has about 20% of the intellectuals in the state agencies, who are not party members or still party members, but radically possessing progressive thoughts, desiring change, but not in a position to represent their views and their actions. Between these two tendencies just mentioned is the third group with about 50% of party intellectuals in the state system - those who do not particularly affiliated with the special interests and positions, having eclectic outlook.

If the current reality approximates the actual proportions then a well-organized civil society would be better able to attract at least half of intellectuals working for the party system and the state.

T**he Burma Script?**

In the coming years, the political transformation of Vietnam are likely to be impacted by international democracy and human rights movements and through the pressure of the peer and dissenting groups in the country, and even from the internal Party politics. Thus, the transformative political scenario in Vietnam would be created by the process of continuous contacts and friction, starting with the crude form of friction between the new and old political forces. Democratic tendencies may gradually formed within the Party, which is inspired by a group of people who are considered "reformists," "radicals" or simply those desiring change because of their personal motives. Also there is a small probability in the next 3-4 years as this group will be a decisive influence and would change the face of the nation politics.

If favorable, up to a certain juncture, the raw friction will transform into static friction, and the "old guards" will find a sympathetic connection with the "new" progressives, and vice versa.

In particular, if the civil movement backed by the international community and the state of human rights in the United States and Western Europe, its probability of success will be much more promising.

Someone will consider such a transformation as "peaceful evolution," but just look at the chaotic situation in Syria and Egypt, perhaps no Vietnamese politicians would want the country to fall into such bloodshed where there would be no safe shelters.

Currently, people are talking a lot about the political experience that the leaders have accumulated in Burma. Clearly, President Thein Sein and his political interest group have been successful in avoiding a wasteful bloodshed and the collapse of the economy.

If Vietnam politicians would also enlist the help of the West as Burma has, they would perhaps temporarily restore the nation’s economy, democracy henceforth would be more pronounced, particularly the avoidance of a fierce confrontation arising from public discontent and resentment with many local authorities and the central government..., then that would be the optimal scenario for the nation's future.

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