

ON THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY IN VIETNAM

by ĐÀO, Tăng Dực

*... with a Preface by Stephen Denney of the Indochina Archive,
University of California, Berkeley.*

ON THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY IN VIETNAM
is the first book in the English language which explains the cultural,
religious and political factors affecting Vietnam today.

The author is a practising lawyer in Sydney. His book is the result
of painstaking research. It is a revealing and clearly written thesis
on the problems and cultural influences that have shaped this
troubled nation for centuries.

The successive effects of many centuries of Chinese domination,
French colonisation, and most recently the disastrous Vietnam war
which shook the world and humbled America — all these have led
to the Vietnam of today, run by a Communist government of the
kind that has been discredited and all but disappeared elsewhere
in the world.

The author, writing from his own Vietnamese cultural and
family background, has examined these matters with a clarity
that allows us to see the complex issues without ideological or
sympathy-seeking overtones.

*Recommended reading for expatriate Vietnamese,
as well as Western readers who are concerned
about the South-East Asian question and bewildered
by its complexity.*



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Butterfly Books

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Cabramatta, April 1994.
ĐÀO, Tăng Dực



One of the youngest fighters for human rights and democracy
for Vietnam.

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PREFACE

As one of the last remaining vestiges of Communism in the world, Vietnam has drawn closer to the centre of the world stage in recent years. Like its traditional enemy to the north, China, Vietnam's leaders have managed to preserve their hold onto power by abandoning much of what they once held dear — the egalitarian vision of Marxism, of a society where the poor were no longer oppressed — Vietnam's participation in the world march toward the inevitable victory of communism.

The collapse of the Soviet bloc world in 1989 ended that vision. Today Vietnam no longer depends on Comecon, but the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and multinational corporations for financial support. And while its economy grows — and the Vietnamese government gains acceptability with its former enemies — inequalities between rich and poor also emerge, as does widespread corruption and demoralisation among the communist cadres.

In short, Vietnam today is making the transition from a totalitarian socialist régime to an authoritarian capitalist régime. The government no longer has the driving force of an ideology to guide the country into the future, instead it is in a temporary holding pattern, its aging leaders holding onto power more out of concern for their personal well-being than the welfare of the nation.

It is in this context that Dao Tang Duc's book is a most welcome contribution. Although I do not agree with all of the points raised in the book, I find it most useful to the lay reader in its historical approach, its description of overseas Vietnamese political activities and analysis of Vietnam's new constitution.

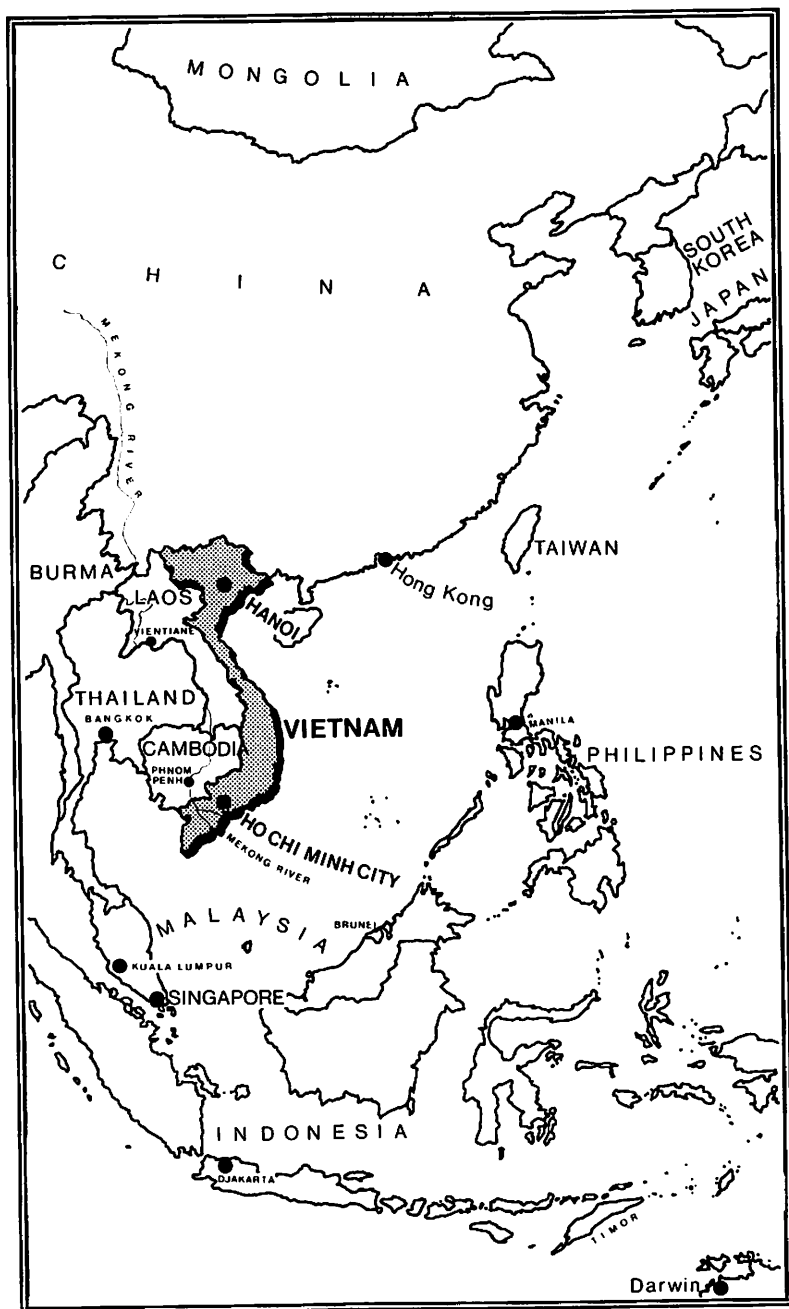
Most important, however, is the author's efforts to link Vietnam's political future with the traditional belief system of the country. Religion and politics have always been closely intertwined in Vietnam. With the collapse of the Marxist-Leninist ideology in Vietnam, we can expect a resurgence of

religious influence in the political arena. But to what extent will that be a positive development? This book may help answer that question and avoid the pitfalls that have occurred in Vietnam's past when religion has sown disunity in the society.

It is unfortunate that so many of the best and brightest people in Vietnam have been forced to flee their homeland over the last nineteen years. As Vietnam reaches an important cross-roads in its political development, we may hope that the voices of creative and patriotic overseas Vietnamese, such as Duc, will be heard once again in Vietnam.

Stephen Denney

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I. INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE OF THIS book is to contribute in a modest way to the debate on human rights and democracy in Vietnam. Thus its focus is on the inception, development of the democratic ideal and the obstacles lying on the road to true democracy. In the process, it becomes necessary to embark on an analysis of Vietnamese history and the elements constituting its traditional culture, since there is a need not only for peoples of the West to understand the Vietnamese people, but also for the Vietnamese people to understand themselves. Many good men and women in the West had fought and died in Vietnam. Many others survived the Vietnam war with deep scars in their souls. Many of these are still trying to understand why their countries were involved in such a war and for what reasons. In this book I have attempted to provide some answers from the perspective of a Vietnamese. An even greater number of Vietnamese men and women had fought, died or survived the same war without understanding it. The people in the North were told by their government that they fought for independence and national sovereignty. The people in the South were told by their government they fought for freedom and democracy. They soon realised that independence, national sovereignty, freedom or democracy were only slogans in an epic ideological conflict of international proportions over which their governments had very little say or control. I have tried to be as objective as possible. However, this is always easier said than done. For, when a human being is born into this world, his mind through the means of his five physical faculties, has to reflect on the objective realities therein. His thoughts and ideas are conceived as the result of the interaction between his subjective mind and an objective reality. Thus, by definition, all ideas and thoughts of a human being are at best a partially alienated reflection of reality. When a human being begins to reflect on the thoughts and ideas of another human being, such as the case of a student reading this book, the element of

alienation from reality is proportionately greater. The first human beings started the thinking process since the dawn of history and there have been interactions between cultures and societies since time immemorial. Human thoughts and ideas have ceased to be true reflections of objective realities altogether. For one thing, reality is perpetually in motion and immediately upon an idea being conceived it has lost its reality. By the same token, this book, like any other work, is merely a faint echo of objective reality.

I was born a Vietnamese and have thought as a Vietnamese with all the limitations and prejudices of a human being under the immediate influence of his people's culture and environment. The unfortunate and inescapable human condition is that if all thoughts and ideas are betrayals of objective reality, the only alternative remains the cessation of the thinking process within oneself and the termination of all intellectual works so that others may not be infected by the disease of subjectivity. But to stop thinking is an impossibility for humans and to remain silent when one's heart is heavy requires a strength of character that I do not possess.

Finally, to my fellow Vietnamese, in particular my friends of the Vietnamese community overseas who have shared with me, for more than a decade, many moments of joy and sorrow during our common struggle for democracy in Vietnam, and who think me less of a friend after having read this book, I have this to say: this book is only a set of ideas, thus at most a partial reflection of reality, an illusion, and should occupy the lowest priority in the universal scheme of things. This book should not be allowed to wreck friendships for ideas are only all-important in the minds of foolish men. Those men and women who allow ideas to take over reality, who live and die because of ideas, generally belong to the psychiatric hospitals. Meanwhile, there is always the reality of poverty, unhappiness and absence of human rights in Vietnam which should continue to justify our struggle and to join us in friendship.

SYNOPSIS

I INTRODUCTION

II THE NATURE OF THE VIETNAMESE TRADITIONAL BODY POLITIC

A *An Outline of History*

Vietnam has a 4,000 years history, one thousand of which was under Chinese domination, and Vietnam became only independent from China from 939 A.D.

B *The Components of the Traditional Body Politic*

The main components of the traditional body politic are:

- a) A culture totally immersed in a tradition of harmonious co-existence between the three great religions of the far East: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.
- b) A society based upon the village, the monarchy and a class structure dictated by moralistic, not religious or economic principles; and
- c) Confucianism as the pervading state ideology.

Thus with the arrival of the French and Catholic missionaries with their evangelical zeal, the first ideological conflict in Vietnam took place at the end of the 19th century between Catholicism and Confucianism. The Vietnam war (1963–1975) was the second ideological conflict and has resulted in less damage to the nation compared to the first.

III THE FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH DEMOCRACY

A *The Pre-colonial Contacts*

The reasons for French colonisation of Vietnam are:

The conservatism of the Vietnamese Confucian scholars, the zeal of the French Catholic missionaries, the French military establishment, and French merchants and industrialists.

4 ON THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY IN VIETNAM

B *The French Conquest (1884)*

The French conquest and occupation provoked fierce resistance from: Confucian scholars and movements, and the various modern political parties and organisations that were created during the period of French occupation (including the Communist Party of Vietnam).

IV INDEPENDENCE AND A DIVIDED NATION

A *North Vietnam: The Marxist-Leninist Consolidation*

Since the Geneva Agreement in 1954, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPVN) has recast Vietnamese society along Leninist lines and eliminated all Nationalist Parties in North Vietnam.

B *South Vietnam: An Uneasy Attempt at Democracy*

In the South, the Americans stepped in and lent support to the Ngo Dinh Diem régime while pushing to the margin of political life all Nationalist forces. The Nguyen Van Thieu régime was also supported by the Americans. Both presidents were Catholic in a nation dominated by the three fused religions of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.

C *The Vietnam War: Ideologies and Superpowers Conflict*

The various superpowers having an influence on the destiny of Vietnam are: The USA, the Soviet Union, China, France, the Vatican and Japan. It is possible that the influence of the Vatican was decisive in modern Vietnamese politics during the post-French period and even during the Vietnam War.

V A NATION RE-UNITED

A *The Conquest of South Vietnam*

Despite the valour of its troops and massive American aid, South Vietnam lost the war, not on the battlefields but in the streets of Washington, London, Paris and Sydney due to the Anti-War lobby, and the corruption of its régime.

B *The Tragedy of the Boat People*

About one million refugees escaped the Communist inferno and due to the world recession, thousands are stranded in sub-human conditions in various refugee camps in South-East Asia with no hope of resettlement.

C *South Vietnam: The Marxist-Leninist Re-education*

For the first years from 1975–1988, the CPVN applied a strict Leninist type of dictatorship, however, with the fall of the international Communist movement, it has lost its ideological purity and now only hangs on to power with the army and the secret police.

VI THE CONTINUED STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

A *The Degradation of the Communist Party of Vietnam*

The Communist Party, despite its tight grip on power, is no longer the party of the future. Its rank and file has been completely demoralised.

B *An Evaluation of the Forces of Opposition*

However, the paucity of opposition (thanks to the ill-planned American intervention which almost destroyed the power base of all Nationalist forces) with their traditional cultural and organisational defects will prolong unnecessarily the realisation of the democratic ideal in Vietnam. However, the Nationalists are still the forces of the future.

C *A Critique of the 1992 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam*

One major obstacle to democracy is the unwillingness of the Communist Party to adopt pluralism (and a multi-party political system). In order to consolidate this position, they have created a monster of a constitution based upon the novel concept of the socialist rule of law in order to consolidate one-party dictatorship. A detailed analysis of this constitution is provided.

VII THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL

A *Defining Democracy*

There is a need to define the democratic ideal for Vietnam as having the following elements:

- a) A constitution which lays down the fundamental laws of the land and which recognises the most important human rights as defined by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- b) A system of rule of law as opposed to the socialist rule of law and as opposed to the Confucian rule of the righteous man.
- c) A pluralist political system.

B *The Diamond Sutra, or, on the Shattering of Prejudices*

In addition to the infusion of the democratic ideal, the Vietnamese people need the determination to destroy all prejudices ingrained in their consciousness in order to realise true democracy. Some typical prejudices are:

- a) That ideologies can capture reality in their intellectual or metaphysical constructs.
- b) That the Nationalist forces' weakness is their internal division.
- c) That the relationship between the government and the people is one similar to the relationship between parents and their own children.
- d) That only the masses can make history.

Indeed, the destruction of all prejudices in particular ideologies, to free the thoughts of men will ensure lasting democracy in Vietnam.

II. THE NATURE OF THE VIETNAMESE TRADITIONAL BODY POLITIC

A. AN OUTLINE OF HISTORY

BY ANY STANDARD, VIETNAM as a nation has a long history. Indeed the belief that Vietnam has a 4,000-year history is a universally accepted truism regardless of each person's social status, political persuasion or religious creed. However, as far as recorded history is concerned, written documentation can be traced back only to the Thục dynasty (258–207 B.C.). Before this period, legends have it that the Vietnamese nation was founded with the Hồng Bàng dynasty (2879–258 B.C.). This analysis of the traditional body politic deals only with the period between the Hồng Bàng dynasty (2879 B.C.) and the period prior to the French occupation of Vietnam (1884), the reason being that the colonial period under French domination can be rightly considered a turning point and from that point onward the traditional Vietnamese political culture has been subjected to serious challenges whose nature is unknown to its traditions.

For the purpose of analysis, this lengthy part of history may be divided into five main episodes:

1. The mythical Hồng Bàng dynasty (2879–258 B.C.)
2. The Thục dynasty (258–207 B.C.)
3. The Triệu Đà dynasty (207–111 B.C.)
4. Chinese domination (111 B.C.–939 A.D.)
5. Independent Vietnam (939–1884).¹

¹ For more details see *Việt Sử Toàn Thư* by Phạm Văn Sơn, 1960, Khai Trí Library.

So far as the origins of the Vietnamese are concerned, there are many theories. In the main however, they either support the proposition that the Vietnamese are descendants of the numerous Việt (or Yueh) tribes which constituted the once powerful Việt state during the period of the Eastern Chou's empire. On the death of the able king Câu Tiễn (465 B.C.) the succeeding leaders could no longer hold the various tribes together and Việt as a state was finally conquered by a rival state Sở in 333 B.C.

In order to escape the new rulers, some of these tribes migrated south to the area known today as North Vietnam and are the original Vietnamese.²

On the other hand some theories support the proposition that the Vietnamese are the result of the interbreeding between the Melanesian, Indonesian and Australoid races from the Pacific Islands south of Vietnam and the Mongoloid race from the north.³

The above proposition is partly reflected in the popular legend of the marriage between the most sacred animal of Eastern mythology: the dragon (Lạc Long Quân) and a fairy (Âu Cơ). Nguyễn Khắc Kham, in a paper sent to the 36th International Congress of Orientalists held at New Delhi from 4th to 10th January 1964 entitled "Vietnamese studies and their relationships to Asian studies" gave the following account:

Some more than four thousand years ago, King Đế Minh, a descendant of the Chinese king Thần Nông (God of agriculture) went on a tour to the south and met at Ngũ Lĩnh Mountain (Hunan province) a fairy whom he married and who bore him a son by the name of Lộc Tục.

Lộc Tục received from his father the southern part of his kingdom named Xích Quỷ and reigned under the royal title of Kinh Dương Vương. One day he called on

² Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ, *Nguồn gốc dân tộc Việt Nam*, Montreal 1985, pp 13-24.

³ *id.*, p. 88.

the God of the seas whose daughter Long Nữ he married. From this union was born a son named Sùng Lãm who succeeded his father under the royal title of Lạc Long Quân (the dragon). Later on Lạc Long Quân withdrew to his former palace of the seas. But as the Xích Quỷ kingdom was invaded by the army of Đế Lai, a Chinese emperor, her inhabitants invoked Lạc Long Quân who came back from his palace under the seas and saved the country from Đế Lai's oppression.

Lạc Long Quân then married Âu Cơ, the daughter of Đế Lai. Âu Cơ bore a pouch of 100 eggs which gave birth to 100 sons. Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ shared their sons between themselves. Half of them followed their father to the South China Sea and the other half their mother to the mountains located in the area of Phong Châu. Once in Phong Châu (now Bạch Hạc, Vĩnh Yên province), the sons who had followed Âu Cơ named their eldest brother the first king to reign over the new kingdom. This was the first Hùng Vương of the Hồng Bàng dynasty and this kingdom was called Văn Lang.

The above legend has been interpreted by various generations of Vietnamese as indicative of the fact that both the Vietnamese living in the plains bordering coastal areas (heavily Sinicised) and the tribal minorities in the highlands or mountainous areas (with more obvious Melanesian, Indonesian and Australoid traits) are indeed brothers coming from the same ancestors.

For the purpose of this book, the search for the racial origin of the Vietnamese people is largely an academic exercise. What is important is indeed not the species of blood that flows in the veins of each Vietnamese but the ideas and traditions that constitute the mainstream of Vietnamese culture.

THE HỒNG BÀNG DYNASTY

According to traditional belief this dynasty had a succession of eighteen kings stretching over an astonishing period of more

than two thousand years. The king governed with the assistance of civil chieftains (*Lạc Hầu*) and military chieftains (*Lạc Tướng*). Each chieftain had his own fiefdom, administered his own territory, had the right of life and death over all the subjects therein. In the words of Đào Duy Anh:

“The people inside the fiefdom knew only the chieftain and did not know who the king was, knew only their families and did not know what the society or the nation was.”⁴

Thus as far back as four thousand years, Vietnam had a social and political structure with some characteristics similar to European feudalism of the Middle Ages. In particular we note that the relationship between the king and the chieftains resembles the relationship between a European lord and his vassals. We note also the fact that the presence of the king is not indicative of a strong monarchical system but merely a decentralised aristocracy, and the nation state existed as a faint echo that never reached the consciousness of the subject of the kingdom of Văn Lang. Obviously the analogies must stop here since feudalism is strictly a European phenomenon and its application to the analysis of Vietnamese society is fraught with danger. The Vietnamese communists have not heeded this danger in their feverish revolutionary zeal and the scars they have left on the souls of several Vietnamese generations are lasting scars.

THE THỤC DYNASTY

Very little information is available on this period. Đào Duy Anh is of the opinion that in the year 257 B.C. Văn Lang was conquered by An Dương Vương, the king of a neighbouring state, Thục, and the name of the kingdom was changed to Âu

⁴ See *Việt Nam Văn Hoá Sử Cương*, or *An Outline of Vietnamese History*, by Đào Duy Anh, 1976, p. 139 for more details.

Lạc.⁵ Nguyễn Khắc Kham however wrote that around 258 B.C. Văn Lang was lost to a Chinese general Thục Vương Phán who founded a new and independent kingdom of Âu Lạc.⁶

TRIỀU ĐÀ DYNASTY AND THE KINGDOM OF NAM VIỆT

Meanwhile, in the north around 293–260 B.C. the Eastern Chou dynasty of the Chinese Celestial Empire began a drastic decline. In the end, the armies of the state of Ch'in conquered all the other states. The prince of Ch'in, the well-known despot by the name of Ch'in Shi Huang Ti who initiated the construction of the Great Wall of China to protect his dynasty "for thousands of years to come", unified China and became her first absolute ruler. This episode of Chinese history is important to the kingdom of Âu Lạc. Indeed before the advent of the Ch'in dynasty the Celestial Empire was for centuries only a federation of quite autonomous states with vast residual powers in the hands of the dukes or princes of each state. The Eastern Chou dynasty was also one of, if not the most, creative episodes of philosophical and political thought in China.

Due to the impotence of central authority and the rivalry between States whose princes competed against each other to attract competent administrators, wise men or intellectuals to their service, the schools of thoughts that were formulated during this period, together with Buddhism, influenced and continues to influence the lives of Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Taiwanese, Singaporeans and Vietnamese today. Confucius, Lao Tsu, Mo Tsu, Mencius, Chuang Tsu were the greatest names of that memorable time.

However, after having reunited all China, the new Ch'in emperor dispatched an army to the deep south to conquer the kingdom of Văn Lang. The mission was duly accomplished by

⁵ *id.*, p. 25.

⁶ *ibid.*

an able but ambitious general by the name of Triệu Đà who became the governor of the newly conquered territory. Then the Ch'in dynasty collapsed within a few years of the death of Ch'in Shi Huang Ti in 210 B.C. Triệu Đà promptly proclaimed himself king of the newly-founded kingdom of Nam Việt in 207 B.C.⁷

Under the Thục and Triệu Đà dynasties the traditional chieftains still kept their powers and influence. They recognised however the authority and paid taxes to new masters.⁸

CHINESE DOMINATION

Ch'in Shi Huang Ti, upon unifying China, abolished all the former states, replacing them with administrative units under the supervision of governors appointed by the imperial court. On this he followed the advice of his first minister Lý Tư who was a fervent disciple of the school of legalism founded by Tuân Tử during the decline of the Eastern Chou dynasty.⁹

After the fall of the Ch'in, the Han dynasty saw fit to continue to consolidate central power. At the height of its glory the then emperor set his eyes on the southern barbarians. In 111 B.C. his generals defeated the descendant of the Triệu Đà Dynasty, made the kingdom of Nam Việt into a Chinese protectorate with a governor appointed by the celestial imperial court.

Under the Chinese rule, what used to be the Nam Việt kingdom was divided into administrative districts in order to eliminate local chieftains' ambitions about local independence.

According to Nguyễn Thế Anh, until 40 A.D. Chinese domination was no more than a protectorate with the native aristocracy still in control.¹⁰ The civil and military indigenous

⁷ For an account of the atrocities of the Ch'in dynasty see *The Smaller Dragon, A Political History of Việt Nam* by Joseph Buttinger, 1958, p. 89.

⁸ Đào Duy Anh, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁹ Trần Trọng Kim, *Nho Giáo*, (Confucianism), Sài Gòn, pp 333-7.

¹⁰ *A Survey Of The History Of Vietnam* published by the Ministry of State in charge of cultural affairs, Saigon, Vietnam.

chieftains continued to administer under the authority of the Chinese governor and had to pay annual taxes and tribute to him. In turn the populace had to cultivate the land and pay taxes to these chieftains. They could also be drafted to build fortifications, roads, castles and military camps As a general rule, the native aristocracy was relatively free to mind its own business without too much intervention from the Chinese central government.

However from 40 A.D. the Chinese Imperial Court saw fit to impose direct administrative rule. The native aristocracy was no longer trusted by the governor. Policies were more ruthless on the general population as well. In short, the greater degree of colonial exploitation united the native aristocracy and populace and spurred numerous revolts and insurrections culminating in the final one by Ngô Quyền in 939 A.D. who proclaimed at last the independence of Vietnam.

Vietnamese history books show that before Ngô Quyền there had been other, less well-organised, revolts.

They had been fairly easily defeated by the troops of the Han dynasty. It should be noted that the legalist policies of the Ch'in dynasty was briefly abandoned by the first Han emperor Liu Bang who reinstituted the various former states and appointed his relatives and trusted lieutenants kings of these feudal domains. However, on the advice of Trương Lương he successfully spent the rest of his life, using various underhand methods, either demoting or killing all these royal personages. He again abolished all the feudal states, renamed them as provinces and appointed governors who are totally dependent on the central government. After his death, his widow, the Empress Dowager Lữ Hậu completed his task with brilliance.

The Han dynasty began in 206 B.C. and the process of political centralisation of power started within a few years of the proclamation of the new dynasty. Yet it took more than 200 years for these policies, first applied by the Ch'in emperor, then more successfully by the Han emperor, to reach Vietnam. When they did they brought about reactions leading to the final independence of Vietnam.

Another factor is that even the Middle Kingdom itself was at times subject to internal strifes. An empire torn apart within its own boundaries and by different but equally ambitious war-lords, it was sometimes forced to neglect the movements of a satellite state in the deep south. Such events happened continuously at the decline of the Ch'in and Han dynasties. Movements claiming independence by the native people made the most of these political and military instabilities which weakened the authority of the Dragon Throne and enfeebled the once invincible armies of the Son of Heaven. It happened quite often in the history of both countries that a period of internecine war in the Middle Kingdom corresponded to an attempt at overthrowing the Chinese yoke in the Province of Giao Chỉ.

The last point which it is important to emphasise is the growth of a sense of national identity. According to Nguyễn Khắc Kham, it seemed that the Chinese colonisation process, while attempting to impose Chinese culture on the so-called barbarians through the memorable accomplishments of such governors as Hsi Kuang (Tích Quang), Jen Yen (Nhâm Diên) and Shih Hsieh (Sĩ Nhiếp) in the propagation of Chinese civilisation, was in fact giving birth to nationalist sentiments which had been non-existent before the Chinese conquest due to the tribal character of native society until then. Under this growing sense of national identity, and due to the diminishing Chinese power, in 906 A.D. a Chinese governor was replaced by the first Vietnamese governor Khúc Thừa Dụ, and finally in 939 A.D., after defeating the Chinese forces at the Bạch Đằng River, Ngô Quyền completely freed Vietnam from Chinese suzerainty.¹¹

Thus very early in history, two seemingly contradictory features of Vietnamese culture emerged: cultural affiliation to China and political aversion to its dominance. When a French scholar Phillipe Langlet termed Vietnam "a national state within the ambit of Chinese civilisation",¹² that description

¹¹ Nguyễn Khắc Kham, *id.*, p. 15.

¹² Langlet, Phillipe, *La Tradition Vietnamiène: un état national au sein de*

should be understood in the context of these contradictions. These subtle contradictions have been passed down from generation to generation of Vietnamese, and constitute a major component of the Vietnamese national moral character and underline the foreign policies of all Vietnamese governments from the dawn of our history until today.

The current disputes on sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratley Archipelagoes in the South China Sea involving China, Vietnam, Taiwan, The Phillipines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore is a case in point. The Communist party of Vietnam (CPVN) and The Communist Party of China (CPCN) are among a handful of Stalinist communist parties in the world still in power. They apparently need each other for their political survival against enormous international and domestic pressures for human rights and democratic reforms. Yet to the extent that these disputes involve China, any concessions on the part of the CPVN would be in direct conflict with the above-mentioned Vietnamese national moral character and could fatally wound the CPVN.

VIETNAM AND INDEPENDENCE (939-1884)

According to the historian Đào Duy Anh,¹³ it is important to note that the Chinese colonisation process could clearly be subdivided into two episodes.

The first, from 111 B.C. until 40 A.D., could be considered by and large a peaceful process of Sinicisation. Not only did the natives, in contact with Chinese cultural values and traditions, adopt them of their own free will, but during this episode there were also large movements of Chinese into the colony. Indeed Chinese immigrants, whether civil, military or convict, frequently intermarried with natives and the influence of Chinese culture became more accentuated as a result. In particular, in about 7 A.D. the imperial rule of the Han dynasty was usurped by a high minister by the name of Wang Mang (Vương Mãng).

la civilisation Chinoise, Saigon, 1970, Société des Études Indochinoises.

¹³ *id.*, p. 26.

Many members of the Chinese aristocracy loyal to the Han escaped to the southern land, especially to the Giao Chỉ district under the governorship of Tích Quang. They assisted this governor in teaching to the natives Chinese culture, Chinese writing and classics, agriculture and moral rules of conduct.

The second episode, from 40 A.D. until 939 A.D., saw the implanted Chinese culture beginning to mature and intrude into the lives of each native as well as the native aristocracy. It is quite possible to argue that the first episode brought about tangible benefits to both the natives and their traditional chieftains. However the second episode represented a much more intensified process that saw the governor reaching directly to the now more cultured and literate individual natives, bypassing the traditional chieftains, appointing able natives to responsible positions in the civil or military service of the governor. Thus the Chinese governor gradually lost the support of the native aristocracy. However, as long as the governorship remained in the hands of a popular personality (for instance Tích Quang) the land could still be kept under control. However, when the governorship fell into the hands of an unpopular tyrant the likes of Tô Định, the Chinese authority lost both the support of the aristocracy and the populace. The conditions were then ripe for the general insurrection under the leadership of the Trưng sisters in 40 A.D.

As soon as the revolt by the Trưng sisters was put down, the Chinese general Mã Viện abolished all the remaining native aristocracy, instituted a policy of direct rule from the governor through appointed officials. However village and canton chiefs were left untouched and they remain a dominant feature of social political structure to this day. It is probable that the abolition of the civil and military chieftaincy by General Mã Viện effectively terminated the period of feudalism in Vietnam. In its place, Chinese centralised rule gave rise to a sense of national identity that became the moving force behind the various later wars of independence culminating in the victory of Ngô Quyền in 939 A.D. who proclaimed the birth of a lasting nation.

The new king modelled his administration on the Chinese monarchy and in every sense became a satellite state within the Chinese social and political sphere of influence. It would be fair to argue that the Vietnamese traditional feudal system was able only to put up unsystematic revolts and opposition to foreign domination because there was then no strong unified national will. Each chieftain merely looked after his individual self interests. A lengthy period of Sinicisation, coupled with the abolition of feudalism, gave the Vietnamese a national consciousness and a coherent social political structure which eventually enabled them to expand southward at the expense of the Champa and Khmer empires.

In addition, the above-mentioned native village and canton structures which survived the purge by Mã Viện were able to consolidate the southern march of the Vietnamese through the creation of Vietnamese villages immediately upon acquisition of land from the Champa or Khmer peoples. These villages had a traditional administrative and defence structure capable of self-defence as well as further expansion if necessary. In later times when the Chinese Empire itself attempted to reconquer Vietnam, these villages also formed a redoubtable infrastructure contributing effectively to the repulsion of Chinese imperialist aspirations.

Thus in the final analysis, the Chinese colonisation processes have forged a native tribal and feudal political structure into a Vietnamese nation with a distinct national consciousness. To paraphrase Toynbee, the Chinese colonisation processes were indeed a challenge which provoked a brilliant and well-deserved response from the part of the Vietnamese.¹⁴

This phenomenon is in no way uncommon in human history. Two thousand years later, the Spanish occupation of The Phillipines, the Dutch occupation of Indonesia, the British occupation of Malaysia and the Indian subcontinent similarly led to the birth of new nation states. However, a major difference

¹⁴ A re-statement of Arnold Toynbee's comments on the rise of the Vietnamese nation, in his analysis of the rise and fall of civilisations, *A Study of History* 1934-61.

must be noted, in that the latter new nations were born in the twentieth century, when the world had already undergone a period of technological and communication revolution that enabled these new nations to escape easily from the grasp of their former colonial masters and choose their own destiny. Not so with the Vietnamese nation which, after a much longer period of Chinese occupation of one millenium, found Vietnamese independent but carrying Chinese blood in their veins, thinking Chinese thoughts in their mind, in a world completely dominated by the majesty of the Middle Kingdom. Thus independent Vietnam has by and large remained a satellite state orbiting the Chinese Empire. Vietnam's destiny has not yet escaped the destiny of China. Indeed it is possible to argue that even during independence, the Sinicisation process continued unabated through the eleven royal dynasties before the French invasion.

The fault appears not to lie with the Vietnamese people who through the various stages of their history have displayed remarkable courage, creativeness and at times strokes of genius. Rather, the fault appears to lie with a ruling class of mandarine who laid claim to the mantle of Confucius but whose greed, prejudice and aversion to progress are anathema to Confucian philosophy itself, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

This period of independence saw the rise and fall of eleven royal dynasties:

1. *The Ngô dynasty 939-944*

This dynasty was founded by Ngô Quyền and lasted only five years when the new nation was torn internally between twelve local warlords. The confusion ended only with the victory of the founder of the next dynasty in 968.

2. *The Đinh Dynasty 968-980*

One of the warlords by the name of Đinh Bộ Lĩnh conquered the domains of all the others and founded the new dynasty.

3. *The early Lê dynasty 980–1009*

This period saw two significant military victories: one against the invading troops of the Chinese Sung (Tống) dynasty and the other against the Champa empire in an effort to expand southward at the expense of the Champa people.

4. *The Lý dynasty 1010–1225*

This period saw the ascendancy of Buddhism whose philosophy dominated the consciousness of the people, the mandarin, the royal family and the whole national culture. This dynasty saw the further territorial expansion of Vietnam at the expense of the Champa empire and the military exploits of Lý Thường Kiệt into Chinese territory against the Celestial Empire itself. It could reasonably be argued that this dynasty witnessed the maturation and growth of a proud nation asserting herself against a socially less coherent Champa state in the south while challenging the might of a troubled Middle Kingdom.

5. *The Trần dynasty 1225–1400*

This dynasty saw the continued flourishing of Buddhism in the consciousness of the nation. At the same time, Vietnam survived brilliantly under the generalship of Trần Hưng Đạo the invasion of the invincible hordes of the Mongols.

This period also saw the further consolidation of the territorial gains of Vietnam at the expense of the Champa state, except for a span of time between 1361–1390 when this latter nation had an extremely able king by the name of Chế Bồng Nga who defeated the Vietnamese, and threatened the existence of the Vietnamese nation itself. However this heroic king was fatally wounded by Vietnamese troops during a naval outing in 1390 and his successors were unable to preserve the territorial gains he made. Thus the Vietnamese resumed their march southward.

6. *The Hồ dynasty 1400–1407*

In 1402 further land was acquired of the Champa empire, namely the regions of Chiêm Đông (now part of the Quảng

Nam province) and Cổ Luỹ (now Quảng Ngãi province). However, under the instigation of the loyalists of the Trần dynasty whom Hồ Quý Ly overthrew, the Chinese intervened and occupied Vietnam in 1407. Hồ was a man of extraordinary talent and vision. Had it not been for the ultra-conservatism of the then mandarin and scholarly class, coupled with Chinese imperialism, his breathtaking reforms could have transformed Vietnam into a powerful and exciting nation.

7. The later Lê dynasty 1428–1527

During this period the borders of Vietnam expanded to the southern confines of the present province of Phú Yên, again at the expense of the Champa empire.

8. The Mạc dynasty 1527–1592

This period was one of political and social instability which eventually led to the partition of Vietnam into two princedoms, one under the Trịnh lords and the other under the Nguyễn lords.

9. Restoration of the Lê dynasty 1592–1788

This period was marked by the partition of the country into two parts. The north was under the rule of the Trịnh family and the South under the Nguyễn family. Both families claimed allegiance to the Lê emperor but in reality the nominal emperor was deprived of all powers. Unable to expand their princedom and power base northward the Nguyễn lords had no alternative but to move both their frontier and Vietnamese settlers southward. This relentless population and frontier movement completely obliterated the Champa state. The Nguyễn also led a further expansion this time at the expense of the Khmer empire who had to cede the whole fertile Mekong delta to the Vietnamese. The whole of South Vietnam now was indeed part of the Khmer empire. It would be fair to say that without the intervention of the French colonial ambitions in the whole of Indochina (comprising Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) towards the end of the 19th century Vietnam would have absorbed a

great part if not the whole of the Khmer state of Cambodia.

10. *The Tây Sơn dynasty 1788–1802*

This period witnessed the coming to power and exploits of one of the greatest — perhaps *the* greatest — military strategist of Vietnam: Emperor Quang Trung. Besides being a military strategist of extraordinary talent the emperor (born Nguyễn Huệ) was also an administrator of vision, a social and political reformer who stood for greater independence from China on both cultural and political spheres. Unfortunately he died of illness at the young age of 40. His work was rapidly undone by his arch rival, the Nguyễn dynasty, whose chief interest lay in the preservation of their throne and in the unimaginative copying of the then already declining Chinese imperial code of administration and conduct. Had Emperor Quang Trung survived, the fate of the Vietnamese nation could have been much improved. Despite his too-brief reign, this remarkable man carved himself a special spot in the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people, and Vietnamese history would be much poorer without him.¹⁵

11. *The Nguyễn dynasty 1802–1945*

This was the last imperial dynasty in Vietnam. There were thirteen emperors crowned during this period. However, during the brief reign of Kiến Phúc (1883–1884) the French army defeated the imperial troops in the decisive battle at the capital Huế and imposed on the country a Treaty of Protectorate, officially starting French colonial rule in Vietnam. The Nguyễn emperor Gia Long is rightly credited with the unification of the nation after decades of internal strife. However, the later Nguyễn emperors since Kiến Phúc became hapless witnesses to a momentous period of Vietnamese history when the nation was rudely awakened to the realities of Western nations who were technologically superior, whose colonial and missionary

¹⁵ For a comprehensive account of this national hero, read *Quang Trung Nguyễn Huệ, Anh Hùng Dân Tộc 1788–1792* by Hoa Bằng, revised edition 29 September 1950.

zeal were at their highest, and whose contact also brought to Vietnam philosophical and political concepts totally different from the Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist principles.

The influence of Confucianism on the mandarin class at the imperial court and pervading the whole ruling class under the Nguyễn dynasty was indeed awesome. While Buddhism and Taoism were the religions of the nation, Confucianism laid down authoritatively the basic tenets of all social and political behaviour. It was, in every sense of the words, the true ideology of the imperial state.

At the same period of history, France emerged from the industrial revolution as the standard-bearer of the Catholic Church. To that extent, the conflict between a zealous Catholicism and an equally intolerant Confucian mandarin class was the first ideological war ever fought on Vietnamese soil.

B. THE COMPONENTS OF THE TRADITIONAL BODY POLITIC

VIETNAMESE HISTORY AS DISCUSSED above should be understood within the context of various factors underlining the soul of each Vietnamese and the society in which he lives. These factors could be enumerated as follows:

- (a) A culture totally immersed in a tradition of harmonious co-existence between the three great religions of the far east: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.
- (b) A society based upon the family, the village, the monarchy and a class structure dictated by moralistic not religious or economic principles.
- (c) Confucianism as the pervading state ideology.

THE TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Like Japan and Korea, Vietnam is much indebted to China in its culture. It would be fair to say that an understanding of one of the above nations' cultures would greatly assist the understanding of the others. Further, an appreciation of the basic tenets of the above religions would help understand why they were able to coexist without much friction. Such frivolous religious zeal as to be conducive to full-scale religious wars, either internally or among nations, were inconceivable to the mind of the traditional Vietnamese. It might be possible that the influence of one of the three religions under a particular monarch was greater than the other two, to the disappointment of their respective leaders or establishment. However, the basic harmonious coexistence remained the underlying principle until modern times. It appears not only that these religions at the metaphysical level seek to transcend all the bondage of human conditions, including religious prejudices or dogmatism, but also each of these religions has truly responded to different spiritual needs in the human mind. Thus the Vietnamese village temple displays harmoniously Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian

figures for worship and together these religions contribute in their different ways to the building of the national character of the people. Thus, significantly, the village temple is called the Temple Of The Three Religions, or Tam Tông Miếu. A typical Vietnamese is at the same time a Buddhist, a Confucian and a Taoist and feels no spiritual contradiction within himself whatsoever.

- The first of these religious traditions is Buddhism. Buddhism started in India 26 centuries ago with a man, born into a royal family, by the name of Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakya clan. He was not a god nor a saint nor a prophet but merely a man who, through the power of his own intellect, shattered finally all the fetters and bondages that characterise all living beings across countless galaxies of the endless universe since beginningless time. While other sentient beings still labour under the burden of prejudices, greed and desire for self-gratification and are, in consequence, hopelessly immersed in the sea of ignorance and suffering, the Buddha supremely liberated himself from such condition and became the awakened or enlightened one. This indeed is the meaning of the word Buddha since the Sanskrit root *budh* means to wake up and to know. Upon reaching supreme enlightenment or perfect wisdom, his mind pierced through fathomless mysteries of the universe and reflected on the sorry state of the human condition. Out of compassion for all sentient beings including humankind, the Buddha decided to travel by foot the length and width of the Ganges River basin for 45 years to spread one of the most celebrated theses of liberation, known as the Four Noble Truths.

The first Noble Truth is a detailed analysis of the sorry state of the existence of all sentient beings leading to the acceptance of the proposition that life is *dukkha*, generally translated as "suffering".

The second Noble Truth is an analysis of the cause of suffering, leading to the acceptance of the proposition that it is *tanha*, loosely translated as "desire". However, as correctly

pointed out by Huston Smith, *tanha* is a specific kind of desire, namely the desire of self-gratification: "all forms of selfishness, the essence of which is desire for self at the expense, if necessary, of all other forms of life".¹⁶

The third Noble Truth is the acceptance of the inevitable conclusion that in order to eradicate suffering and reach enlightenment one must liberate oneself from the domination of selfish desires.

The fourth Noble Truth announces in concrete details this very method of liberation, known in Buddhist terminology as the Eightfold Path. This Path is a detailed road map to achieve no less than supreme enlightenment and consists of the following steps practised by all monks and true Buddhists, from a Japanese pagoda in Tokyo, a Thai Wat in Bangkok to the Phước Huệ Temple in a suburb of Sydney, founded by Vietnamese refugees in Australia:

1. Right knowledge;
2. Right aspiration;
3. Right speech;
4. Right behaviour;
5. Right livelihood;
6. Right effort;
7. Right mindfulness; and
8. Right meditation.

The full meaning of each step is comprehensively defined in many scriptures and all sentient beings will be able to reach supreme liberation through the practice of the Eightfold Path.

There is no place or role to play for any divinity (in the Greek, Indian or Biblical sense of the word) in the Buddhist path to enlightenment. In the Buddhist cosmology, the God or gods if ever in existence are either illusions of desperately

¹⁶ *The Religions of Man* by Huston Smith, 1965, pp 113-4.

confused human minds or helpless sentient beings themselves tormented in their own selfish cravings and in need of salvation as much as you and I. The fact that they might or might not be able to perform certain miracles is totally beside the point and merely conducive to an aggrandisement of their selfish ego, in consequence worsening their miseries and sufferings. Thus Buddhism stresses the importance of mindfulness of the ordinary things in life. Hence the familiar Zen dictum, "When you walk, know that you are walking". The search for miracles and useless indulgence in theoretical speculations are strictly forbidden by the Buddha. Enlightenment is a direct personal experience by a person who, through the practice of the Eightfold Path, has liberated himself from the confines of his selfish ego, not an intellectual, theoretical or semantic exercise.

The Buddha's message was nothing short of an intellectual and spiritual revolution against the rigidity and prejudices of the Hinduism of his time. During his lifetime he was revered by kings and for 1,500 years up to 1000 A.D. his message was accepted by millions in India. However Hinduism gradually regained lost ground and it is the destiny of China and the Far East to provide the environment for and to reap the fruits of his teachings.

Like other religions, Buddhism eventually split into two main streams: the big raft (*Mahayana*) and the small raft (*Hinayana* or *Theravada*). Theoretically the former stresses *karuna* or compassion as the key virtue whereas the latter stresses *bodhi* or wisdom. However, the difference is only one of emphasis since a Mahayanist would be quick to point out that true and infinite compassion can only come from the acquisition of wisdom, whereas any Theravadin would be aware that the mere fact that the Buddha spent 45 years of his life to discourse on this method of liberation is undeniable evidence of his compassion. Further the difference is only theoretical and has very little value as far as any practising Buddhist is concerned, since for a Mahayana Japanese monk or a Theravada Thai monk, in the solitude of their meditation in accordance with the last step of the Eightfold path, all theories

are irrelevant because they both strive to reach that state of the mind known as buddhahood discovered by Gautama 26 centuries ago which transcends theories, concepts or perceptions of the human senses and mind.

The Mahayana stream spreads across Mongolia, Tibet, China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. The Theravada stream spread to Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Since the difference is only one of emphasis, and doctrine or theory plays a secondary role in this religion, no religious wars or even minor conflicts have ever emerged between the two schools. In South Vietnam, it is not unusual for Vietnamese to worship in a Khmer pagoda and vice versa, despite the traditional animosity between the two races.

The Mahayanists with their emphasis on compassion gradually enlisted an army of *bodhisattvas* whose vow is to refuse to enter the realm of personal liberation until each sentient being, including even a blade of grass, a worm or a fly in the vast expanse of this endless universe, has become enlightened, despite the fact that these bodhisattvas have already rigorously practised the Path and can enter the realm of liberation or *Nirvana* if they so wish.

Popular Buddhism in Vietnam is also steeped in this tradition and the worship of bodhisattvas or the Buddha as though they are veritable gods is a common sight. But the true message of Gautama is never lost to the *Shangha* or clergy and the intellectuals of Buddhist nations. To some extent popular Buddhism responds to the needs of the vast majority of the populace and provides an environment in which traditions can be preserved and scriptures can be printed and transmitted to later generations. There are always individuals within the populace who would rise above the masses and grasp the meaning of the Buddha's message in its essence. In the final analysis, the Buddha's thesis of liberation is conducive to a state of realisation that transcends the realm of relativities altogether. Thus the difference between a worshipper and a bodhisattva or a buddha is merely an illusion created in the mind of the ignorant, while from the viewpoint of the absolute

from which the bodhisattvas or buddhas observe, all sentient beings are already enlightened anyway. Indeed from that latter viewpoint, there is no longer any distinction between the past, present, future, suffering or enlightenment. In a powerful *tour de force*, as seen by the eyes of ordinary sentient beings, a particular bodhisattva may be perceived to endure countless hardships and sufferings to pursue his vow of saving even to the last form of life in the universe, and all would be looking up to him in awe and gratitude, yet for him there is really no sentient beings to be saved, no sufferings or hardships to quench, no awe or gratitude necessary, no enlightenment to aspire to and no thesis or doctrine to follow. The Diamond Sutra is there to shatter all human prejudices that litter the path to Supreme Wisdom.¹⁷

If there is a religion of the future for mankind, it should be Buddhism as postulated by Albert Einstein, possibly the greatest scientist of the twentieth century:

“The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal god and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual, and a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description. If there is a religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism.”¹⁸

- The second religious tradition is Confucianism. This religion, contrary to its name, did not start with Confucius who was born in 551 B.C.,¹⁹ although we have to agree with

¹⁷ *Kinh Kim Cang*, translated from Chinese to Vietnamese by Venerable Thích Thiện Hoa, 1982 ed.

¹⁸ Quoted by Ven. S. Dhammika in *Good Question, Good Answer*, Edition by the Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, pp 11, 12.

¹⁹ *Nho Giáo or Confucianism*, by Trần Trọng Kim, published by Tân Việt, Saigon, p. 50.

Huston Smith that he remains its supreme editor.²⁰ While Buddhism dominates at the metaphysical level, Confucianism is unchallenged at the moral, social and governmental levels. That does not mean that Confucianism does not have its own metaphysics. On the contrary, its metaphysical concepts are authentically Chinese and had become part of the people's way of life long before the time of Confucius.

I Ching, or *The Book Of Changes*, edited by Confucius himself, encapsulates this metaphysics. According to the Chinese, the universe owes its origin to an absolute reality beyond conception by the name of Tai Chi. Although Tai Chi remains absolute at the non-manifest stage it already contains within itself two opposite yet complementary principles *Yang* (the positive) and *Yin* (the negative). The dialectical interaction between these two cardinal principles gives rise to all forms of existence of the universe. However, we should hasten to note that Confucian dialectics is different from the Hegelian version which was later on to be copied by Karl Marx, turned on its head and renamed Dialectical Materialism.

Indeed the emphasis in *I Ching* is on the restoration of the perfect balance between Yin and Yang so as to achieve a state of Great Harmony (*Thái Hoà*). As an example, Chinese medicine aims at restoring that perfect harmony between Yin and Yang within the body, and the illness will disappear. The same principle applies to family matters, or running the vast Celestial Empire. Thus the *I Ching* appears to conceive Yin and Yang as opposites because of the difference in their nature, not because of any inherent conflict. For no conflict is possible since within Yin is the seed of Yang and vice versa, and no existence is possible without both being in existence. Because existence is supported and prolonged by the harmonious balance of Yin and Yang, it follows therefore that any imbalance would result in decay and eventual destruction of the entity in existence. It does not matter whether the imbalance is in favour of either Yin or Yang. On the other hand Hegelian-Marxist dialectics postulates

²⁰ Huston Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

a spiralling process of change whereby the *thesis* (the positive) will necessarily be destroyed by the *anti-thesis* (the negative). However, in that act of destruction, the anti-thesis would preserve within itself elements of the thesis and transform itself into a new entity to be called a *synthesis*. This synthesis will become a new thesis to be opposed by another anti-thesis and the process will go on.²¹

Thus, we can spot four major differences between Confucius and Hegel. First there is no concern in Hegel about any balance between the thesis and the anti-thesis. Second, Hegel conceives dialectical change only upon the triumph of the anti-thesis, whereas Confucius conceives change upon any imbalance in either direction. Third, whereas Hegel appears to be giving dialectical change a subjective historical interpretation in favour of the anti-thesis, Confucius appears to remain historically objective *vis à vis* both Yin and Yang. And fourth, whereas Hegel conceives of the anti-thesis as preserving within itself elements of the thesis it has negated as the result of the dialectical process, Confucius conceives that it is immanent within the nature of Yin to contain the seed of Yang and vice versa. For him, Yin is no other than Yang and Yang no other than Yin. Hence the well-known dictum among Confucian scholars: "when Yin reaches its peak Yang will be born, when Yang reaches its peak Yin will be born." (*Âm cực Dương sinh, Dương cực Âm sinh*). It goes without saying that within one form of existence, such as the human body, the complete destruction of Yin at the expense of Yang will bring about the death of the body and indirectly the destruction of Yang itself. It would be in the interest of Yin to protect Yang and vice versa.

As will be discussed later in this book, the above differences will result in major social and political impacts.

Armed with the knowledge of I Ching, the Confucian scholar should engage in social and political matters to bring

²¹ For a simplified definition of dialectics see: *Introduction à la Philosophie Politique* by Roger Labrousse, translation from Spanish by E. Labrousse, Paris, 1959, p. 213.

about harmony and happiness to all humans. Thus Confucius developed a code of conduct for the Chinese people that is still observed throughout the Far East. In time, his code of conduct received more and more rigid interpretations, new rules were created in his name to perpetuate the position and monopoly of power of the class of mandarins and scholars. More of this will be discussed in this book, given the fact that Confucianism has become an integral part of the Vietnamese culture.

Last but not least in the Confucian scheme is the concept of Heaven. This concept is not to be confused with the concept of a personal and anthropomorphic god in the biblical sense of the word. It appears rather to refer to an ultimate principle that governs all forms of existence in the universe. Perhaps it is identical to the concept of Tai Chi. Further, Confucius seems to acknowledge the presence of the individual soul and other spiritual beings in the universe. However, all beings are equally subject to the law of permanent change as enunciated in the I Ching.

- The third religious tradition is Taoism. This religion started with a most remarkable man by the name of Lao Tsu (Lão Tử) born about 604 B.C.²² He was a mandarin in charge of the archives for the Chou emperor.²³ He was a recluse in the truest sense of the word, shunning fame and instructing very few disciples if any at all, since not only might he consider this impermanent world not worth the bother, but also he believed much of the sorry state of the world was the direct consequence of the actions or thoughts of its saviours. In any case, he did not display any great urge to save the world.

At the period of the decline of the Chou dynasty, he rode away in the direction of Tibet on the back of a blue water buffalo. At the gate of the pass to Tibet, the mandarin in charge,

²² *Đi Tìm Một Căn Bản Tư Tưởng*, or *In Search Of A Platform For The Intellect*, by Nghiêm Xuân Hồng, Lion Press, 1985, p. 23.

²³ *Lão Tử Đạo Đức Kinh*, or *"The Sutra Of The Tao And Its Virtue" Of Lao Tsu*, by Nguyễn Duy Cần, Khai Trí, Saigon, p. 11.

by the name of Doãn Hỉ, who had been his admirer, implored: "Your Grace intends to retire from the world, I would be much obliged if you could leave me a book."²⁴ It would be totally in accordance with Lao Tsu's character for us to assume that he had no intention of writing anything whatsoever. The fact that he wrote the now famous *Sutra Of The Way And Its Virtue (Tao Te Ching)* was merely a gesture to quickly rid himself of a not necessarily welcome admirer. Nevertheless, he left a book of about 5,000 words, rode away and was never heard of or seen again.

The book he left, in time, gave rise to one of the most powerful religions and schools of thought in the Far East. Its influence is felt in the arts, in the way of life, in the inner thought of the mandarin and in the martial arts rivalling the Shao-Lin Buddhist monastery. Curiously enough, though the *Tao Te Ching* is basically a book for spiritual purposes it is also a book on the art of government, albeit an art of government with a difference.

Firstly, both Lao Tsu and Confucius were heirs to the philosophical traditions of the *I Ching*. There seems to be no difference between the two men at the metaphysical level. Lao Tsu believes that the Universe owes its existence to a primal and absolute principle which he called Tao. Tao is a reality beyond human words or conception and can be comprehended only through a process of mental discipline similar to Buddhist meditation. Hence his famous opening verses in the *Tao Te Ching*: "The Tao that could be conceived as Tao is not the real Tao. The Name that could be conceived as Name is not the real Name."²⁵ Thus *Tai Chi* in the *I Ching* as edited by Confucius, and Tao as described by Lao Tsu appear to be identical. But here ceases the similarity. Whereas Confucius advocated an active interference in human affairs to rectify all the worldly ills, Lao Tsu advanced a totally opposite thesis: the theory of

²⁴ *id.*, p. 12.

²⁵ *id.*, p. 37: Đạo khả Đạo phi thường Đạo, Danh khả Danh phi thường Danh.

Non-action and the proposition that the weak overcomes the strong.

The theory of Non-action can be easily misunderstood unless we pay attention to what he really means in the Tao Te Ching:

The real Tao does not indulge in action
 But nothing escapes its 'action'
 Kings and emperors who follow the Tao
 Will see the world change for the better without their
 interference.
 Should they attempt to interfere
 We should stop the attempt.

The above verses in Chapter 37 of the Tao Te Ching sums up in a nutshell his theory of statecraft. Hence another famous catchcry for the Taoists: "Non-action but not inaction". For him the most successful political leader would be one who never interferes in the people's affairs, but merely fosters the right conditions for the people to run their affairs themselves. The ultimate leader thus is the one nobody has ever heard of, and yet to him they owe most. Indeed, in a world full of ambitious busybodies chasing fame the Taoists advocate that "the Supreme Man is egoless, the Divine Man is without merit, and the Saintly Man without fame." (*chí nhân vô kỷ, thần nhân vô công, thánh nhân vô danh*). The Taoists believe that society, like nature, is best when left alone without interference. Lao Tsu was definitely against empire building in any shape or form. Chapter 80 refers to an ideal state so small that the crowing of the cocks and the barking of the dogs in one could be heard in the other.

His proposition that the weak overcomes the strong permeates the entirety of his book. Chapter 78 puts the point concisely:

Under heaven, nothing is softer than water
 But nothing hard can overcome water

And nothing can replace water
 Therefore the soft overcomes the hard
 The weak overcomes the strong.

This proposition of the Tao Te Ching gave rise among other things to various schools of soft-style martial arts in China (Tai Chi Chuan), Japan (Judo and Jiu-jitsu) and Korea (Hapkido) as opposed to the 'hard' styles of martial arts created by the Buddhist monks at the famous Shao-Lin temple.

Despite the relative brevity of the Tao Te Ching, its suggestive power is so overwhelming to any reader that it would be impossible to analyse the meaning of this book in the confines of this short summary. Suffice to say that Taoism, in many ways, is the antithesis of Confucianism and to that extent provides a welcome antidote to the sometimes heavy-handed approach to worldly affairs by zealous fanatics and ideologues who believe that their point of view is the only righteous one and seek to convert others to their beliefs through force. Popular Taoism, like other religions, is full of divinities and spirits to be worshipped. Thus the true meaning of the Tao remains the privilege of the scholars and, curiously, mandarins steeped in Confucian mores. Here we come home to a point already made earlier on the harmonious coexistence between the three religions.

THE TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

There are four key aspects to the traditional society: the family, the village (or commune), the monarchy and the Confucian moralistic class structure. They could rightly be considered the four pillars of the social political fabrics of society. First, the family constitutes the foundation, then the village (or commune) as the second layer in the pyramidal system, and last is the absolute monarchy as the superstructure. Then, the whole system is completely immersed in a class culture founded on Confucian ethics. E. Heckel, founding director of the Colonial Museum of Marseille, once wrote:

"... If the family is the independent social basis of this antique civilisation ... with the principle of the unity of authority as the essential foundation and with the cult of ancestors as the point of culmination, all the organisms of social life and more particularly the commune, despite their complex organism and their deep imprint of democratic independence, have learned, throughout antiquity, how to emancipate themselves and maintain their freedom next to an absolute power still embodied by the Emperor and the imperial court of Annam, although the dynasty tends to vanish and the court tends to disappear by natural death."²⁶

- The most outstanding features of the Vietnamese family consist of the cult of ancestors, the unity of authority in the hands of the father and the independence of the family *vis à vis* public authority as a whole.

Although the cult of ancestors must have begun even before the Chinese influence in Vietnam, it is a custom totally in accordance with Confucian belief in a human soul surviving the death of the physical body, coming back to the world to protect members of the family and generally keeping in touch with all its forebears as well as offspring. This belief is further consolidated by the fact that filial piety is considered one of the cardinal virtues of a Confucian society. Thus, even after the death of an ancestor, it is the duty of all descendants to offer incense and food at the altar in remembrance of his past life, and as a sign of gratitude on the part of his children. In a typical Vietnamese home, the altar to the ancestors occupies the central position of the house.²⁷

The position of the father is also unique in the family. He is the ultimate source of authority both in worldly and spiritual matters. As to worldly matters, he is recognised by society as

²⁶ *L'Annam d'autrefois, or Annam of Old*, by Pierre Pasquier; Introduction by E. Heckel, Paris, 1907, p. 8.

²⁷ Đào Duy Anh, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

leader of the household. His wife and children are morally bound to follow his advice and leadership undisputedly. Spiritually, in the Confucian tradition, he is the link between Heaven, the omnipresent and yet benevolent ancestors and the living members of the family. In all religious or spiritual ceremonies, he acts as the priest of the family unit.

The family is further strengthened by the fact that tradition seems to recognise the particular internal by-laws (*gia quy*) of the family. Although these by-laws could not override the laws of the village or the laws of the king, it was customary for the higher authorities to leave a matter to be resolved internally within the family first, before interfering. This custom alone provides the family unit with the kind of self-reliance and independence that tended to resist the intrusion of public powers.

- The village in traditional society is probably the most important institution in each person's life; indeed more so than any other institution at the too-remote national level. It is possible to construe that, since time immemorial, families living in the same area and more or less related by blood or marriages, facing the same natural disasters, cultivating the same types of soil, worshipping the same gods, defending themselves against the same enemies, would feel the need to get together and organise themselves administratively in order to achieve efficiency, power and recognition by the central authorities. This basic Vietnamese social institution, later on in history, became the single most effective weapon for national defence, on the one hand, and territorial conquest on the other. The most memorable case in point was the Mongol invasion in the mid-13th century, with an overwhelming force of 500,000 troops. The then Trần king, in the first ever-possible referendum of the time, convened all village elders to the capital to discuss whether they should fight or surrender to the Mongols. The elders at the now-famous Diên Hồng meeting resolved to fight. Thus, with the backing of all the villages, the central administration was able to mobilise national resources on

unprecedented scales and defeat the, up to then, invincible troops of Kublai Khan.

The territorial conquest of the Vietnamese up to the 19th century of Champa and Cambodian land was not only spear-headed by the village units but also consolidated by the formation of new villages on conquered land. By then the Vietnamese villages had matured into highly viable social, political, economic and military organisations relentlessly expanding their control over what is now much of central Vietnam and the Mekong delta at the expense of the socially much less organised Chams and Khmers respectively. In this respect Nguyễn Đăng Thục wrote:

“The state never ceased to promote the establishment of communes for the colonisation of the country and its expansion towards the south of the Indochinese peninsula. In a decree of Emperor Minh Mạng of 1830 one can read: wherever there are fallow lands anybody has the right to cultivate them: he who succeeds in cultivating 20 measures of ricefields and recruiting 10 men can submit an application for the establishment of a new commune, and the chief of his administrative district will forward it to the Ministry for approval.”²⁸

Since the village was and remains until today such an important part of the Vietnamese way of life, and since 80 percent of its population still live in the rural countryside, then what were the main organisational features of the traditional village?

First, residents were divided into two types: villagers (*nội tịch*) and non-villagers (*ngoại tịch*). The latter category included *éléments déclassés* such as servants, entertainers (presumably due to their ‘loose morals’) and guests of the village. The former consisted of, in descending order of importance, mandarins who had passed official examinations, ex-members

²⁸ *Democracy in Traditional Vietnamese Society* by Nguyễn Đăng Thục in *Văn Hoá Tùg Thư*, translated into English by Nguyễn Thế Hồng, N. 17.

of the council of village notables, scholars who had passed examinations, elders from 50 or 55 years old, adult males from 18 to 49 years old and children from six to 17 years old.²⁹ Women unfortunately did not receive a mention because their position within the Confucian scheme of things was negligible. Indeed, in her parent's home a woman followed her father's orders, upon being married she followed her husband and upon the death of the husband she followed her eldest son (*Tại gia tông phụ xuất gia tông phu, phu tử tông tử*).

Prior to the Lê dynasty, the village chief was appointed by the central government. Then, sometimes during the reign of Long Đức Vĩnh Hựu, according to historian Đào Duy Anh,³⁰ the villagers elected their own village chief and the influence of the king waned as his mandarins only rubber-stamped the people's choice. The village chief (*Tiền Chủ*) was assisted by a Council of Notables also elected by the villagers. Obviously, given the prestige of age and scholarship in the traditional society, most of the positions in the Council were held by elderly scholars.

Within its bamboo curtain, the notables ran the village's budget, levied taxes for the central government, redistributed the common properties of the commune as necessary, looked after its elderly and underprivileged, and generally administered all public affairs including the defence of the village.

Several villages formed a canton (*tổng*) under a canton chief elected by the notables of the villages. Several cantons formed a sub-district (*huyện*). Several sub-districts formed a district (*phủ*), and several districts formed a province. All these administrative units were headed by central government appointees. Thus, in traditional Vietnam democracy stopped by and large at the gate of the village, and to a lesser extent at the boundaries of the canton.

- The monarchy in traditional Vietnam was an absolute

²⁹ Đào Duy Anh, *op. cit.*, pp 125–6.

³⁰ *id.*, p. 127–9.

monarchy following the Chinese model. Each dynastic ruler claimed legitimacy through a mandate of heaven and while he could effectively control the country, he was recognised as the official and only link between Heaven and the nation. In the same way that a father in traditional society had absolute power over members of the family, the emperor had absolute power over all citizens. One of the cardinal social rules of the time was the motto: "A subject who refuses to die at the wish of his sovereign is a disloyal subject, a son who refuses to die at the wish of his father is an unfilial son." (*Quân sử thần tử thần bất tử bất trung, phụ sử tử vong tử bất vong bất hiếu*). It appears that in the Far East, there has been even until today a powerful alliance between the older generation and the ruling political class in order to consolidate each other's position. However, while the relationship between father and son is generally tempered by genuine love, that between ruler and subject is really motivated by self-interest and power. Thus the latter could become unreasonable and oppressive. Chinese and Vietnamese opera is full of themes where the drama is the more heart-rending when a virtuous young prince, due to internal palace or dynastic politics (involving unscrupulous eunuchs and ambitious concubines) coupled with the stupidity of his father-sovereign, was given the order, by his own father, to die (probably so that his younger brother born to a favoured concubine could succeed to the throne with more ease). Such a position was clearly of more than MacBethian proportions. Should he or should he not die? On the one hand, he knew that he was the victim of a conspiracy orchestrated by self-interested factions of the palace, on the other hand he was in a most unenviable dual role of being not only a son but also a subject to his father-king. He had been born into and raised in the undisputed belief that the two most ignominious crimes of all times were to be a disloyal subject and an unfilial son. He also knew that if he fled to another part of the country with his own men and tried to resist the wish of his father, there would be an army sent by the court to crush him without pity, led by self-righteous elderly mandarins or their puppets brandishing Confucian textbooks, the content of which was well-known to him, and obviously

against whom he stood no chance whatsoever.

These deliberations invariably led him to the conclusion that he should remain a virtuous man, die and be "praised by generations to come". And indeed this position was not even questioned until the whole Far East was fundamentally shaken by its decisive encounter with the West in the late 19th century.

The moral here is not only that princely paternal love is not for the faint-hearted, but more importantly that no rebellion from the younger generation was possible because of that iron-clad alliance between the aged mandarins and their sovereign.

The situation of course could develop to an extent where a king was not only so unjust but also so stupid as to lose the support of the scholars or mandarins, and the alliance broken. In such times, no less than the sage Mencius (the greatest disciple of Confucius) uttered the counterpart motto which was also often quoted when a ruler appeared to have exhausted his mandate of Heaven: "The people are to be honoured, the nation is of secondary importance, the king is to be despised." (*Dân vi quý, xã tắc thứ chi, quân vi khinh*).

Then this might be the time for a bold man, generally from the mandarin or the rich peasantry, to take up the standard. If he were clever enough to get the support of the scholars who would provide him with military tactics and propaganda about his supposed virtues, he would have a chance to chastise the 'tyrant' and snatch the mandate of Heaven from the outgoing dynasty.

However, the stakes were high. Many times the line of demarcation between the choice of whether a ruler still deserved to be called a sovereign or was already a tyrant was so paper-thin that many ambitious bold men had miscalculated and lost not only their lives but also their reputation.

- The Confucian class structure was the fourth characteristic of traditional Vietnam. This structure recognised only four official classes of society: Scholars, peasants, artisans and merchants (*sĩ, nông, công, thương*) in descending order of status.

To complete the picture I should also include the social contempt held for singer-entertainers as *éléments déclassés* (*xuống ca vô loại*). This was clearly a class attitude based upon moral premises, not wealth or birth. The Confucian scholars were at the top of the society, supposedly not only because they happened to be mandarins but also because they were learned in the Confucian classics and observed the most stringent moral conduct. The peasants, not only because they formed the bulk of the population and fed the whole nation but because at the same time they were the most conservative carriers of traditions and moral rules.

The artisans were third because although their profession was honourable, their numbers were fewer and partook less of the underlying moral mores of the nation. Then, the merchants, despite their wealth, came last because the motivation of their profession was profit and the various means of making profit were not necessarily in accordance with the moral beliefs of that time. But they could obviously throw punches and were nevertheless considered a honourable class. Singers and entertainers were outcasts because of the perception of the time about their rather loose moral conduct.

Such a class concept is thus totally different from the European and Indian ones. The rigidity of the Indian concept of caste not only encompasses a man's present life from birth to death, but also transcends the physical plane and lays claim to spiritual causes well beyond. Although the European concept of social class is less rigid than the Indian model, it allows no interclass mobility whatsoever. As a consequence, at the height of the communist revolution in Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s, the mindless and brutal application of the Marxist thesis of class war on the Vietnamese society resulted in cruelties surpassing any in the West, amidst a people trying desperately to grasp the meaning of this strangest scourge of Heaven ever unleashed upon them.

Traditional Vietnam is necessarily part of the present Vietnam despite the many ups and downs of this nation, and despite the vicissitudes of internal strifes, colonialism, ideological

wars, class revolutions and modernisation. Today, Vietnam remains a rural nation of peasants who were the true heroes of the many wars of independence against China, the true pioneer conquerors of the fertile Mekong delta, and the repository of traditions.

THE STATE IDEOLOGY

It would be both impossible and gravely misleading to underestimate the influence of Confucianism in either traditional Vietnam or even in Vietnam today at the social and political levels. The basis of Confucianism is outlined in the Four Dissertations (*Tứ Thư*) by Confucian followers or disciples, and the Five Books (*Ngũ Kinh*) by Confucius himself. The four dissertations include The Annals (*Luận Ngữ*) edited by scholars of the T'ang Tzu school, The Great Learning (*Đại Học*) by T'ang Tzu, The Doctrine Of The Mean (*Trung Dung*) by Tzu Tzu and The Book of Mencius (*Mạnh Tử*) by Mencius himself. The Five Books include *I Ching* or the *Book Of Changes* (*Kinh Dịch*), the *Book Of Songs* (*Kinh Thi*), the *Book of Rites Or Civilities* (*Kinh Lễ*), the *Book Of Spring And Autumn* (*Kinh Xuân Thu*) and the *Book of Records* (*Kinh Thư*).

The above books and dissertations constituted the main guidelines for the moral, social and political conduct of every single soul in the vast Chinese empire and the whole Far East for more than two thousand years. The dictates of Confucianism were furthermore scrupulously enforced by a class of scholar and mandarin, at times carried to unreasonable extremes, totally in contradiction to what Confucius himself would have done. Indeed, the Confucian mandarin and the vast bureaucracy they created to consolidate their power base constituted an institutionalisation process unparalleled in human history, both in the depth of their influence on society and in the endurance as an institution — that is, with the exception of the Roman Catholic Church at the height of its power up to the Age of Enlightenment and Reformation. It would be fair to say that, without Confucius's authority or approval, his disciples created out of his teachings a veritable

state ideology before which emperors bowed, and according to which the Chinese and Far Eastern civilisation was recast.

So, what are the main doctrines of this powerful state ideology?

We have already discussed Confucian metaphysics. Now is the time to discuss Confucianism as the manifestation of that metaphysics in human affairs. Given the vast literature on Confucianism, this would be an impossible task without the greatest work on Confucianism ever written in Vietnamese by the famous Vietnamese writer and researcher Trần Trọng Kim: "Nho Giáo" or "Confucianism". According to Mr Trần, in order to understand this part of Confucianism we should acquaint ourselves with the following aspects:³¹

- a. The opposing concepts of the Righteous Man (*Quân Tử*) and the Petty Man (*Tiểu Nhân*).
- b. The education and conduct of the Righteous Man.
- c. Confucius's teaching methods.
- d. His political philosophy.

1. The opposing concepts of the Righteous Man and the Petty Man are central to Confucianism. The Righteous Man is the ideal man. The Righteous Man is one whose intellect and spiritual development are such that he always acts in accordance with heavenly principles (*Thiên Lý*) and in accordance with the principles of social justice and equity (*Công Chính*). The Petty Man is one whose intellect and spiritual limitations are such that he always acts in accordance with his selfish instincts. It is up to each person in society to choose between becoming one or the other. It goes without saying that a society where righteous men prevail would be an ideal society and a society where the petty men prevail would be a society in decline.

31 Trần Trọng Kim, *Nho Giáo*, (4th edit.), pp 105-6.

2. One of the cardinal differences between Confucius and rival philosophers of his time was his belief that man was fundamentally good by nature (*nhân chi sơ tính bổn thiện*), as opposed to the legalists led by Tuân Tử who believed that man was born naturally bad (*nhân chi sơ tính bổn ác*), and the Mohists led by Motsu who believed that man was born neither good nor bad but that goodness or badness is entirely due to social influence. So, if men were fundamentally good, then it was possible for Confucianism to educate all men to become righteous men. This education is spelled out in the following steps in The Great Learning: analytical ability, rational understanding, sincerity in the mind, righteousness in the heart, personal moral training, setting order in one's household, administering the affairs of the state, then pacifying the empire. (*Cách vật, trí tri, thành ý, chính tâm, tu thân, tề gia, trị quốc, bình thiên hạ.*)

It is important to note here that in the above sequence of steps, the preceding step is an absolute prerequisite for the next one. Thus, if you intend to rationally comprehend a certain phenomenon, it is necessary to have the ability to analyse the object of your perception. You can achieve sincerity in the mind only if you have the ability to objectively and rationally perceive things as they are, not as you would like them to be. To install righteousness in your heart you must banish from your mind all selfish motivations and become absolutely sincere. Righteousness of the heart is an absolute requirement for the basis of moral values. You can truly set order to your household only if you have perfected your moral training and conduct. A man who fails to discharge his duty towards his household (or family) cannot and should not be trusted with running the affairs of the state. A man who fails in running the affairs of his state cannot and should not be trusted with the administration of the empire because he will undoubtedly bring about disorder and social unrest.

The above should be read in the context of all righteous men's ultimate wish to serve society, during the Spring and the Autumn period of the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–476 B.C.)

when China was a feudal empire divided into powerful vassal states whose rivalries created much havoc and sufferings to the people.

This perception of the model politician has even today such an influence on the Far East that a politician the like of Australian ex-Prime Minister Robert L. Hawke, who cried on national television, voluntarily disclosing his offspring's drug problems and his adulterous flirtations, would incur an electoral disaster of monumental proportions. This does not mean that the electorate in the Confucian cultures are less tolerant. It merely means that on the basis of the above teaching of Confucius, such a human being may deserve compassion, but he failed in his role as a model husband and an attentive father, and the affairs of his household therefore were perceived as less than desirable. Thus he should not be trusted with any government office.

3. Confucius's teaching methods are described in the Confucian textbook *Khổng Tử Gia Ngữ* or *Words by Confucius* as follows:

"Confucius' methods of teaching first resorts to the Book of Songs (*thi*), the Book of Records (*thư*), then he uses filial virtues (*hiếu đễ*) to guide the student, explains humaneness (*nhân*) and goodness (*nghĩa*), teaches the student to consider civilities (*lễ*) and music (*nhạc*) and last he uses literature (*văn*) and moral rectitude (*đức*) to complete the formation of the man. He considered the study of songs (*thi*), civilities (*lễ*) and music (*nhạc*) especially important for the formation of character. In the Analects he said that singing will revive the spirit, civilities will restore dignity, music will bring harmony to the character (*hưng ư thi, lập ư lễ, thành ư nhạc*)."³²

He only suggested; it was up to the student to think on his own and to understand. His philosophy comprised two parts, the first

³² Trần Trọng Kim, *op. cit.*, pp 134-5.

was a code of moral and social conduct (*hình nhi hạ học*), the second was his metaphysics (*hình nhi thượng học*). He relied less on language to teach the second. On this he was at one with Lao-Tsu and the Buddha, since his metaphysics aimed at the understanding of the nature of Tai Chi which pertained to the sphere of the absolute or, in Kant's terminology, 'Essence' or 'Noumène', and beyond the limit of the spoken words. However, on the teaching of his code of moral and social conduct, which pertained to the manifestations of Tai Chi at the level of phenomena that could be grasped by the five physical senses, he considered the power of language especially important. From this arises the doctrine of the rectification of names.

4. Central to his political philosophy is the concept of Humaneness. He believed that politics was the business of all men (*nhân đạo chính vì đại*)³³ and the politician was a man powerfully moved by the spirit of Humaneness or Compassion (*nhân*) seeking actively to serve mankind. The concept of *nhân* is extremely difficult to translate into English. One of the best attempts was made by Huston Smith in his *The Religions of Man*:³⁴

[Nhân] "... involves simultaneously a feeling of humanity towards others and respect for oneself, an indivisible sense of the dignity of human life wherever it appears. Subsidiary attitudes follow automatically: magnanimity, good faith and charity."

The etymology of the Chinese or Vietnamese words for politics (*chính trị*) literally means 'to set onto the way of righteousness'. Confucius says the following words to Quí Khang Tử in the *Analects*: "Politics is setting things onto righteousness, if you treat people with righteousness, who would dare not to be righteous?"³⁵

³³ *id.*, p. 162.

³⁴ Huston Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

³⁵ *id.*, p. 164.

Thus, in the hurly-burly of Chinese politics of his time, Confucius, his heart full of humaneness and compassion, trod the length and width of the then already vast Chinese empire in search of a prince who would recognise his virtues and employ him to set the state, then eventually the empire, onto the path of righteousness. They all listened to him courteously but were too involved in *Realpolitik* to appoint him to any position of significance. It appeared to be quite clear that as a politician he failed. But as a teacher to a whole civilisation he probably remains without serious rivals.

His political doctrines could be summed up as follows:

- Rectification of names (*chính danh*) is the first task of the politician or ruler. Indeed, in any society, each person has a function to perform. If a prince behaves like a true prince both in substance and in name, and if a subject, a father, a son do likewise, then harmony is achieved. But if a prince is really a tyrant, a subject a traitor, a father a bully, and a son a dishonest bastard, then names are not in accordance with substance and social upheavals will ensue.
- Allocation of positions (*định phận*) is naturally the next step: since names are already in accordance with substance, then each person would be able to be granted the position to which he is most suited. Thus a dishonest man would never be appointed to a position of authority or trust and the righteous man would be able to pacify the empire.
- Support for the monarchical system (*tôn quân quyền*)³⁶ is the next doctrine of Confucianism. This system comprises not only the monarch but also the mandarin advising the monarch. Loyalty to the sovereign is an extremely important aspect of this doctrine and this is one of the reasons why different dynasties in China chose to elevate Confucianism to the level of state religion, thus acting in their self-interest. This doctrine is tempered by the general belief that the mandate of

³⁶ *id.*, p. 165.

Heaven is not immutable and a monarch who does not act in the interest of the good will lose the mandate. Indeed, the will of Heaven is none other than the will of the people. *The Book Of Records* says: "Heaven sees through the eyes of the people, Heaven hears through the ears of the people." (*Thiên thị tự ngã dân thị, thiên thính tự ngã dân thính*).³⁷ The Great Learning asserts that a sovereign should "love what the people love, hate what the people hate, and that is the way to be father and mother of the people" (*Dân chi sở hiếu, hiếu chi: dân chi sở ố, ố chi. Thủ chi vị dân chi phụ mẫu*).³⁸

- Administration by Virtues (*đức trị*) is the doctrine preferred by Confucius. Criminal justice is only the last resort to penalise an offender. Rehabilitation onto the path of virtue and righteousness so that a criminal can be totally reformed is the task of the ruler or mandarin. His administration would aim at three targets: to increase the population (*thù*), to make the people rich (*phú*) and to teach them propriety or civilities (*lễ*) and goodness (*ngĩa*).³⁹

The above political doctrines of Confucius formed an ideology on which the scholarly class built a vast and comprehensive bureaucracy jealously guarding the interests of the mandarin. For more than 2,000 years their power was unchallenged. The rigidity, conservatism and inward-looking attitude of the mandarins of the Nguyễn dynasty by the end of the 19th century was, to a very significant extent, a betrayal of Confucius who was the supreme editor of *I Ching*. He once observed the reality of permanent change while watching a river flowing on endlessly and uttered: "Flowing continuously forever, without interruption" (*thê giả như tư phù, bất xả trừ dạ*).⁴⁰

³⁷ *id.*, p. 167.

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *id.*, p. 173.

⁴⁰ *id.*, p. 69.

During the outstanding Lê, Lý and Trần dynasties when the influence of Buddhism was at its zenith, most of the mandarins and the royal houses were also practising Buddhists. The rigorous self-discipline and sense of detachment from worldly affairs of Buddhism provided Confucian scholars of the time with the necessary ability for introspection, and acted as a restraining influence on an otherwise zealous, ambitious mandarin bent on empire-building and intolerant of any challenge to their mastery of affairs of state. But regrettably, mandarins of the Nguyễn dynasty were among the most conservative, and did not have the benefit of that introspection.

The arrival of Catholicism through French Jesuit missionaries brought about the first contact with another ideology supported by another vast bureaucracy: the Roman Catholic Church. This resulted in a clash of titans, subsequent massacre of the Catholics who were labelled, frequently without justification, as French collaborators, and the eventual conquest of Vietnam by the French. The second and much better-known ideological war was the one that was concluded in April 1975, between South Vietnam supported by the Americans and its allies on the one hand, and North Vietnam supported by the former Soviet Union, China and its allies on the other. This so-called capitalist and communist ideological war may appear to be more recent and more dramatic in terms of international involvement, physical destruction, and the triumph of the Marxist-Leninists. However in terms of the depth of its impact on the destiny and culture of Vietnam as a nation, the first ideological conflict has left on the soul of the Vietnamese people much deeper scars.

Indeed, with the support of the Vatican, the French colonised Vietnam for almost a century. The Confucian bureaucracy's influence was gradually eroded and a new breed of intellectuals trained in the Western tradition took over. They may by and large be descendants of these scholars or mandarins, but the nature of this new class and the values they cherish are totally different. Whereas, as dramatic as it may appear, the second conflict brought about communist rule on the whole of Vietnam

only in 1975, the régime may already have lost its vitality and been on the brink of collapse, especially in the context of the fall of the Third International in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Every indication points to the inevitable conclusion that the dictatorship of the proletariat in Vietnam will be much more short-lived and will leave far fewer scars on the soul of the people than the French conquest which followed the first ideological war.

III. THE FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH DEMOCRACY

ALTHOUGH THE ADMINISTRATION OF the villages displayed significant and no doubt important democratic features in traditional society, it would be erroneous to describe village internal politics as 'democratic' in the modern sense of the word. It was, rather, a meritocracy dominated by aged scholars and as a rule women had very little say in anything.

Vietnam only came into contact with Western democratic values during the French occupation. Traditional Vietnam was first and foremost an absolute monarchy. The following interpretation of the genesis of the concept of absolute monarchy, by the Vietnamese writer Nghiêm Xuân Hồng, may appear to be plausible to Vietnamese intellectuals trained in the Western tradition and bent on being unnecessarily critical of old values:

"This absolute monarchy was the reflection of a metaphysical ideology dominating all levels of society. This metaphysical ideology was the result of the fusion of the three religions (Confucianism, Buddhism or Taoism), in which Confucianism prevailed ... but whether Confucianism, Buddhism or Taoism, these ideologies had created an atmosphere of convergence on the following point: faith in a metaphysical natural order dictated by a Supreme Being (God, Buddha or Tao) who taught humans to place less importance on this current life in favour of spiritual training and contemplation to achieve deliverance in their future lives. This metaphysical viewpoint, when reflected upon human affairs, had become the concept of absolute monarchy, in which the King was the Son of Heaven and had absolute power."⁴¹

⁴¹ *Lịch Trình Diễn Tiến Của Phong Trào Quốc Gia Việt Nam or The Developmental Process of the Nationalist Movement in Vietnam* by Nghiêm Xuân Hồng, Hưởng Việt Publish., p. 14.

However, careful analysis shows that the above assumption of a causal relationship between the three fused religions and absolute monarchy is an untenable proposition.

First, the concept and practice of absolute monarchy had existed in China well before the birth of Confucius or Lao-Tsu, thus was independent of their influence. Indeed, even before the unification of China by Ch'in Shi Huang Ti, the dukes or kings of various states in the Chinese Empire were absolute rulers in their domains. The introduction of Buddhism to China happened much later, of course, in the third century (A.D.). At best, it might be argued that the harsh realities of absolutism were significantly tempered by the benevolent teachings of these three clearly humanist religions. At worst, it might be argued that they had provided, through their harmonious fusion, a rather comprehensive thesis of liberation, encompassing the social through to metaphysical aspects of the human condition, reducing the role of any supreme beings to realistic proportions, and elevating the role of humanity and human effort to the position they deserve in the universal order. In so doing they had inadvertently provided a safety valve to the absolutist political system and prevented the social and political revolutions that could have brought about, in the Far East, the overthrow of absolutism and the birth of democracy similar to the West.

Second, the concept of ideology cannot be applied to Buddhism or Taoism and could only be applied with the utmost care and to a very limited extent to Confucianism. While an ideology could be defined as a system of thought which has been intellectually worked out and organised,⁴² Buddhism and Taoism make it abundantly clear that for an individual seeking spiritual liberation, the single most important requirement is to discard the very system of thought that has introduced him to these respective teachings. Indeed central to these teachings is the need for the individual to directly experience the state of deliverance through personal experimentation, and to transcend the artificial constraints of language and ideas, the reason being

⁴² *Comparative Government* by S.E. Finer-Allen Lane, Penguin, p. 43.

that although language and ideas are essential to communication on the relative plane, once a person is on the verge of entering the domain of the Absolute, they become cumbersome carcasses to be discarded. Ideology is also anathema to Confucianism at the metaphysical level, since although Confucius did not elaborate on the method of reaching Tai Chi, it is assumed that meditation similar to Taoist meditation should be practised. Nhan Hôi was the disciple most highly regarded by Confucius because he practised this type of meditation. However, since Confucius also advocated active interference in social affairs, his followers have subsequently created numerous doctrines to be followed coupled with the largest and most enduring bureaucracy the world has ever known. These rigid doctrines have imprisoned the intellect of the Chinese nation for hundreds of years and deserves in every respect to be called an ideology.

Thirdly, all these three religions clearly reject the concept of a personal and anthropomorphic Supreme Being of the biblical type. Every sentient being will become a buddha eventually. Even the Emperor of Jade must follow the law of the Tao. The Confucian concept of Heaven may refer to Tai Chi, and all the spirits or gods conceivable must move according to its principle on the same basis as any other forms of existence in the universe. Thus, the conclusion that the concepts of Buddha, Tao or Tai Chi could be conducive to absolutism is far-fetched indeed.

On the other side of the Earth, the Roman Empire was feeling the pressure from the barbarians from the north. Christianity had become the predominant religion of the populace. Emperor Constantine (323–337 A.D.) saw in the monotheistic Christian concept of a personal anthropomorphic god, a powerful lever to boost the vitality of the ailing empire. He decided to convert to Christianity and eventually was regarded by the Church “as the 13th Apostle, as the master of all churches, as a monarch whose office was commissioned by God. A situation of this sort is traditionally called ‘caesaro-papism’. It arises from a political structure in which church and state are both

controlled by a single individual, a caesar-pope.”⁴³ It is arguable whether these tactics actually gave the empire a reprieve or accelerated its downfall. But fall it did in 395 A.D. when the empire was first divided into two portions east and west, to be reunited briefly by Justinian (527–565). But the Roman Empire fell into decay. Then more than a thousand years later the concept of royal absolutism was again revived by royalists who quoted Roman Law that “the will of the prince has the force of law”. Then, by 1600, the Divine Right of Kings was back in favour. The Old Testament was also quoted to support this theory.

This study of history shows that absolutism appears to be the product of human societies at certain stage in their development, in any centre of civilisation, and not an exclusive feature of the Far East. Thus when the French effectively completed their conquest of Vietnam in 1884 and officially made the whole kingdom a French protectorate, their influence effected deep changes to the people, the society and the monarchy as will be discussed later.

⁴³ *The Rise And Development of Western Civilisation* by Stipp, Hollister and Dirrim, 2nd ed., p. 211.

A. THE PRE-COLONIAL CONTACTS

SINCE THE BEGINNING of the 19th century, there have been constant efforts by European governments, including the French, to open diplomatic relations and trade with Vietnam. The French were the keenest and wanted special trade concessions. However, the resistance to French approaches was strong for a number of reasons:

Firstly, the mandarin class was extremely conservative and feared the Westernisation process would spell the end of their privileges and dominance of society.

Secondly, the attitude of Catholic missionaries⁴⁴ led the authorities to the conclusion that these Jesuits actually incited their Vietnamese converts to rebel against the central government. Thus since 1831 there had been several royal anti-evangelisation decrees. Some French Catholic priests were executed either for refusing to observe imperial orders or inciting rebellion, such as Gagelin and Marchand. However, the evangelisation process did not always work in favour of the French. Many Vietnamese Catholics later or during the colonial period joined the ranks of anti-French freedom fighters and fought for national independence.

Thirdly, the militant section of the French military establishment wanted to expand French military might over the Far East.⁴⁵ And, last but not least, were the French merchants and industrialists who wanted to expand markets for French products in the Far East. During the Second Empire, the French monarch Napoléon III, under pressure from the powerful French Catholic Church and his devout Queen Eugénie, founded the Commission de la Cochinchine which met in April, 1857, to recommend the French occupation of the three Vietnamese ports of Đà Nẵng, Sài Gòn and Kê Chợ.⁴⁶ Thus the French conquest of Vietnam started, culminating finally in the Patenôtre Treaty on 6th June, 1884, with the recognition of French suzerainty over Vietnam.

⁴⁴ Nguyễn Thế Anh, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁴⁵ *id.*, p. 20.

⁴⁶ *id.*, p. 22.

B. THE FRENCH CONQUEST AND DOMINATION

FIRST, THE colonial policy of the then French government was aiming not at modernising Vietnam but at exploiting its labour and its natural resources. Despite the fact that the country had abundant natural resources such as iron ore, coal, rubber etc. — enough to sustain a native industry — French colonial policy by and large reflected the position of a spokesman of French capitalism, that, in a perfect organisation, colonial production should limit itself to the supply to the mother country of raw materials or goods not produced by the mother country. But if the colony abandons its responsibility and competes with the mother country, colonial production would become a redoubtable adversary.⁴⁷ As a result, Vietnam emerged from colonisation into independence much less equipped economically and industrially than Malaysia and Singapore (under the British) and Taiwan, Korea and Manchuria (under the Japanese) despite the fact that these traditional societies had had the same level of culture and technical skills at the start of the colonisation process.

Second, colonial rule has brought about significant changes to the traditional class structure. To the existing class structure it added new classes: an upper capitalist class comprising largely non-Vietnamese; a not-too-numerous middle class based on land ownership or social and economic status in the new society; a new class of intellectuals whose educational background and values are different from the Confucian scholars; and a working class comprising miners, plantation workers, government enterprises and industrial workers.⁴⁸

However the vast majority were still peasant villagers living off the land. Although statistics are scarce on this era, according to P. Bernard, in 1931 Vietnam had 12,342 French in civilian

⁴⁷ *L'évolution Economique de L'Indochine Française* by Robequain, Paris, 1937, p. 146 as quoted by Nguyễn Thế Anh in *Việt Nam Thời Pháp Đô Hộ, or Vietnam During French Occupation*, 1970, pp 214–5.

⁴⁸ *id.*, p. 243.

occupations; 10,400 French in the military, 8,600 rich natives, 810,000 middle-class natives and 8,300,000 poor natives.⁴⁹ Thus, excluding the French residents, the population of Vietnam by then was 9,118,600. According to Isoart, in 1930, it was estimated that Vietnam had about 221,052 industrial workers comprising 53,240 miners, 86,624 industrial and commercial workers, and 81,188 rural workers.⁵⁰ Although the above workers included only those working in French enterprises, not those employed by Vietnamese or Chinese enterprises and transportation workers,⁵¹ their numbers compared to the population was very small indeed (2.66%). Furthermore, it would be fair to assume that most of these workers were originally peasants and remained peasants at heart. As soon as they had earned enough cash they would go back to the villages and resume the job they loved most anyway, which was tilling the land. Thus, the 'working class', in the Marxist sense of the term, was even scarcer and possessed an element of fluidity and unpredictability that distinguishes them totally from the situation in Europe. In 1930, when the Vietnamese Communist Party was formed as the result of amalgamation of three rival factions, there was no mandate for a dictatorship of the proletariat whatsoever, nor even today, I may add, since the rank of the proletariat was almost non-existent then, and is minimal in present-day Vietnam. A Vietnamese peasant has been always a landowner. Although the land he owns may not be very extensive, he is closer to being a capitalist than a proletarian. In consequence, of the communist dual call for national liberation from French colonial rule and socialist revolution, only the first leg of the proposition was justifiable. I believe history will also recognise their contribution in respect of their fight for national independence. However there were, and are, no justifications whatsoever for a Marxist revolution in Vietnam. Indeed, the official aims of the party as proclaimed

⁴⁹ Bernard, P., *Les Problèmes Économiques Indochinois*, Paris, 1934, pp 20-24.

⁵⁰ *Le Phénomène National Vietnamiens*, Paris, 1961, pp 264 & 268.

⁵¹ Nguyễn Thế Anh, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

then had an air of false pretension:

1. Overthrow French imperialism, feudalism, and the reactionary Vietnamese capitalists.
2. Establish complete independence of Indo-China.
3. Form a government of workers, peasants and soldiers.
4. Confiscate the banks and other imperialist enterprises.
5. Confiscate plantations and other estates and redistribute them amongst the peasants.
6. Introduce an eight-hour working day.
7. Abolish forced loans, poll-tax and all taxes bearing heavily on the poor.
8. Establish democratic liberty.
9. Provide universal education.
10. Establish equality between men and women.⁵²

Indeed, the so-called reactionary Vietnamese capitalists were so few in numbers and so limited in their wealth that it was completely possible that this term was used merely for its propaganda value. Complete independence of Indo-China did not have any meaning in the context of the hundreds of years of enmities between the three nations that formed French Indo-China. They were glued together merely because of the coercive colonial French administration. Only independence for each of the nations of Indo-China would be justifiable. However, the then Third International in Moscow refused to accept this position and forced the newly-created Vietnamese Communist Party to change its name into The Indo-Chinese Communist Party, a subdivision of the Third International, whence this absurd aim.

Reference to workers and peasants at the same time is not merely of tactical value but indicative of the intellectual malaise within the ranks of Marxist revolutionaries. For, to

⁵² *Vietnam: History, Documents and Opinions On A Major World Crisis* by Gettleman (ed.), London, 1966, pp 40-42.

their chagrin, the 'workers' were so few in number that there was no justification for the party's existence, while the peasants were extremely conservative and abhorred the materialist position and the revolution. There was a need to reconstruct, at least notionally, peasants into a rural working-class proletariat. This convoluted intellectual gymnastic was performed brilliantly by Mao Tse-Tung in mainland China, and on this basis the above third and fifth demands were made.

The other points listed above, including the demand for democratic liberty, were of course tactical in nature and had no long-term policy substance. For one thing, nothing could be further from the communist mind than democratic liberty, as any fair-minded person would agree. The numerical insignificance of the Vietnamese proletariat was the reason the communists were not the first nor the only anti-colonial political group during the French occupation.

Some members of the Roman Catholic Church at the time wanted eventually to replace the native Confucian culture with the Christian culture by mass conversion of the Vietnamese people into Catholicism. In this respect, Bishop Paul François Puginier wrote the following words to the then French Minister for the Navy and the Colonies, in a letter dated May 6th, 1887:

"We can do nothing good and lasting in Tonkin if we do not have the will to undertake the systematic destruction of the old Confucian morale which constituted the basis of the Vietnamese society and substitute it with a new moral force which we have already in this country: Christianity. Thanks to this force, we can gradually assimilate the Tonkinese people and install, in the near future, 'a small France' in Tonkin."⁵³

Further the bishop also proposed the abolition of Chinese and *Nôm* writing from, firstly, official, then all means of communication to destroy the influence of Confucianism and the native

⁵³ *Đạo Thiên Chúa Và Chủ Nghĩa Thực Dân Tại Việt-Nam or Christianity And Colonialism In Vietnam* by Cao Huy Thuần, 1988, p. 405.

culture (Nôm writing is the Vietnamese way of writing Vietnamese using Chinese strokes). The aim was to gradually replace, first, the writing with *Quốc Ngữ* (a means of writing Vietnamese invented by a Catholic priest Alexandre de Rhodes using Latin characters, and which the Vietnamese are currently using). Then finally replacing *Quốc Ngữ* with French, thus completing the assimilation process. However, as it turns out *Quốc Ngữ* became a much more simple means of writing, easier to learn than the traditional Chinese and Nôm writing, thus improving literacy among the ordinary people. Under the influence and promotion of the *Nam Phong* newspaper and its famous editor Phạm Quỳnh, *Quốc Ngữ* finally won the day and has become ever since the official writing of Vietnam at the expense of the much more cumbersome Nôm and Chinese characters. Thus Alexandre de Rhodes made one of the greatest contributions to reducing illiteracy in Vietnam. The French were finally expelled from Vietnam by force at the battle of Điện Biên Phủ in 1954; the French language has since been studied only as a foreign language in Vietnamese schools, while the Vietnamese language written in the *Quốc Ngữ* style has become the means of learning and official writing at all levels of society.

Under French rule, the Confucian scholars did not lie down easily. Indeed, the first movements for independence from the French were led by Scholars (*Văn Thân*) under the Royalist standard (*Cần Vương*). The movements lasted from 1862 to 1900. Their aims were to expel the French invaders from the country, restore the power of the Vietnamese imperial court and defend the Confucian culture from the threat of Catholicism. However this time they were up against an enemy who confronted them with technological weaponry the power of which was almost unimaginable. Thus the same people who, centuries ago, had defeated the Han, then Mongol, then Manchurian invaders many times their number, found themselves heroically but helplessly brandishing their swords against French sophisticated rifles and artillery fire. In vain they tried to bridge the vast technological gap in warfare with their lives.

However by the end of the 19th century they realised that their valour and Confuceen morale could not assist them in defeating the French. In addition, the monarchy they wanted to restore appeared to be a hopeless puppet of the French resident governor. Thus even reform of the monarchy seemed necessary. They began to look seriously at the modernisation process and the acquisition of new ideas and weapons.

THE CONFUCEEN RESISTANCE

The period from 1900 to the end of the First World War (1918) was the period of Modernisation (*Canh Tân*) and Eastern Studies Movement (*Phong Trào Đông Du*) led by progressive Confuceen scholars. The two towering figures of this time, with their opposing views, were Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh. The political leaders of this period were profoundly moved by the realisation that, unless the traditional culture and society were ready to accept into their midst the technological progress and social and political advances of mankind achieved in the world other than the Chinese sphere of influence, they had no chance whatsoever of terminating French domination. Under the instigation of these leaders, hundreds of young men were sent to Japan to study and bring back their knowledge in order to serve their cause. It was perfectly understandable that Japan was the model and ultimate inspiration for these progressive Confuceen scholars. She was also an Asian nation deeply influenced by the three religions of the East (Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism) and yet through her success in learning Western technology, while still preserving her traditional culture, Japan was able to defeat the Russians in 1905, thus destroying the myth of Western invincibility. The movement led by Phan Bội Châu was characterised by the following features:

1. A gradual realisation that absolutism was no longer the political system most suitable for a developing country trying to modernise itself, and a leadership struggling to attract support for organised resistance to foreign occupation. Indeed at first, when establishing the Vietnam Modernisa-

tion Association (*Việt Nam Duy Tân Hội*) in 1906, these Confucian scholars advanced a three-point programme including: the liberation of the country from French domination, the restoration of the monarchy, and more significantly the promulgation of a constitution based on the Japanese model.⁵⁴ Thus, they consciously moved one step further from the traditional monarchical doctrine that was the aim of the Văn Thân and Cần Vương leaders with their espousing of the concept of constitutional monarchy. Then, during the six years between 1906 and 1912, many young leaders had gone to Japan, Shanghai and Hong Kong and had been exposed to more modern thoughts. Further the Republican revolution of 1911 led by Sun Yat Sen in China acted as a powerful influence on these Confucian leaders. Thus, in 1912, with further change in mind, Phan Bội Châu founded The Vietnam Restoration Association (*Việt Nam Quang Phục Hội*) the aim of which was to create a democratic republic upon defeating the French. In an effort of reconciliation with the conservative elements of society and of the movement, they made a descendant of the Nguyễn dynasty, Cường Để, leader of the Association. In order to counter the French intention to split the country into three states to weaken the national revolution, the Association made a point to include among its leaders men of high standing from all the three parts of Vietnam: Nguyễn Thượng Hiền from Tonkin or North Vietnam, Phan Bội Châu from Annam or Central Vietnam, and Nguyễn Thành Hiến from Cochinchina or South Vietnam.⁵⁵ Thus it took the Vietnamese Confucian scholars 28 years from the shock of French domination in 1884 to move towards representative government. This may be a long period in the life of an individual but in terms of the life of a nation and a social class, it is short enough to bear evidence to the fact that the culture in which traditional Vietnam and her leaders were cast (a harmonious fusion of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian values)

⁵⁴ Nghiêm Xuân Hồng, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁵⁵ Nguyễn Thế Anh, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

was in no way an inflexible ideology in the Western model.

2. A policy of national modernisation and simultaneous armed liberation from French occupation. This was the reason members of the Association, while studying in Japan, or in exile in China, had also to learn the techniques of making and operating modern weapons and explosives. Inside Vietnam, they had to operate secret organisations, incite civil discontent and armed rebellion by native members of the French army. As a result, they were considered extremely dangerous by the French administration and dealt with in the most severe manner. In 1925, Phan Bội Châu was arrested in Shanghai by French secret agents⁵⁶ and placed under house arrest in the Imperial city of Huế until 1940 when he died.
3. An initial reliance on Japanese assistance and good will on the belief that, since Vietnam and Japan share the same cultural heritage, the latter will genuinely assist the former in achieving independence. Further, the then Japanese Pan-Asia doctrine sounded attractive to many Vietnamese leaders. However, to Japan, Japanese interests naturally came first. Then, under French pressure, the Japanese government decided to expel all Vietnamese students from its soil. In 1910, they went a step further by expelling Cường Để and Phan himself, thus creating further difficulties for the Association.⁵⁷
4. Despite the fact that the leaders of the Association were Confucian scholars of the old society, their effort in sending younger men to study in Japan, China, France or even Russia sowed the seeds for the next generation of political leaders that eventually overthrew the French administration in Vietnam. Indeed, it would be quite accurate to say that although the thoughts and revolutionary techniques of the next generation of leaders were to be markedly different from Phan and his associates, generally they were in any case children of these Confucian scholars. Thus there

⁵⁶ *id.*, p. 310.

⁵⁷ *id.*, p. 302.

appears to be a social class continuity between the two generations of intellectuals whose influence dominated Vietnamese politics during and after the French occupation. That position was true not only for nationalist but also communist leaders in Vietnam. Almost all of these people were sons of mandarins and Confucian scholars, although communist leaders at times pretended to be sons of peasants for political purposes.

5. Although the movement led by Phan Bội Châu advocated changes to the traditional body politics, their leaders were by and large simply progressive Confucians who sought to preserve the survival of these traditions through necessary adaptations and modernisations. They were not revolutionaries seeking to 'overthrow' an existing socio-political order in the modern sense of the word; nor did they know how to, I would suspect. In this they differed vastly from the founders of various nationalist parties and communist groups succeeding them.

The movement led by Phan Châu Trinh and his associates differed from Phan Bội Châu's on the following points:

1. They had a strong suspicion of Japanese imperialism in Asia despite the fact that the two movements and the two leaders were contemporaries and exchanged ideas on a friendly basis. Thus self-reliance was the basis of their movement, not foreign assistance.
2. They believed a prerequisite of independence was the modernisation of the country through education and lifting the people's educational level above the general backwardness of that time. This was the reason behind the founding of the Eastern Capital School (*Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thực*). The School sought to infuse their students with new and more practical values in lieu of their familiar belief and superstitions. They were taught that the traditional class structure giving little status to the artisans and merchants (behind the scholars and peasants) was already outdated and impractical. They were told that for the country to be strong the

people should learn trades and professions, they should become technicians and merchants and become successful in businesses instead of being only peasants, or scholars composing worthless poetry. The promotion of respect for the artisans and merchants was one of their main aims.⁵⁸

3. They believed in gaining independence through non-violent and peaceful resistance to French occupation.
4. They accepted temporary French 'protection' because they believed that at that time Vietnam was in any case the helpless prey of international imperialism and needed time to consolidate herself. Indeed Phan Châu Trinh proposed cooperation between the French colonial administration and the Vietnamese intelligentsia in a letter to the French Resident Governor Paul Beau in August 1906.⁵⁹ Regrettably, French colonialists both in Vietnam and in France were at the same time arrogant, conservative and short-sighted. French pure greed was referred to by these colonialists as a "civilising mission"; French repressive cruelties against an impoverished native population labelled "defence of the glories of the French fatherland". As a result, his proposals were treated with disdain and ignored.
5. Through Phan Châu Trinh, they had connections with the League for Human Rights (*Ligue des Droits de l'Homme*) in France and fought for democracy in Vietnam. Indeed, when Phan Châu Trinh was imprisoned in 1911, it was the League for Human Rights that intervened effectively for his release from jail.⁶⁰ Unfortunately he died prematurely in 1925 at the age of 53.

Phan Châu Trinh and Phan Bội Châu were the last of the great Confucian leaders who stood up against French domination. Although in the above respects he differed from Phan Bội Châu, Phan Châu Trinh nevertheless fought for the restoration

⁵⁸ *id.*, p. 313–4.

⁵⁹ *id.*, p. 313.

⁶⁰ *id.*, p. 316.

of the old Confucian values, albeit a system now bereft of superstitions and with a more practical emphasis on artisans and traders.

By contrast, while those who succeeded them may have been sons of Confucian scholars, they were heavily influenced by Western education and modern revolutionary techniques. Thus the political movements and parties they created were a marked departure from the two famous Phans'.

THE MODERN POLITICAL PARTIES

1. The Constitutionalist Party

(*Đảng Lập Hiến*)

According to Nguyễn Thế Anh, one of the first political parties founded by the new generation was the Constitutionalist Party formed in 1923 in Saigon, the capital of what was then Cochinchina, by French-trained intellectuals under the leadership of Nguyễn Phan Long (a journalist), Dương Văn Giáo (a lawyer) and Bùi Quang Chiêu (an engineer).⁶¹ This political party was by and large reflective of the political platform of one of the most influential journalists-cum-writers of that time, Phạm Quỳnh.⁶² Phạm Quỳnh, through his newspaper *Nam Phong* and through the Khai Trí Tiến Đức Association founded in 1919 by intellectuals with similar views, actively promoted social and political reforms within the framework of French protection. The Constitutionalist Party, through its official newspaper *The Indigenous Tribune* (*La Tribune Indigène*) and another mouthpiece *The Annamite Echo* (*L'Echo Annamite*), as well as through its petition to the then French Resident Governor Varenne on 28th November, 1925, titled *Book of Annamite Wishes* (*Cahier des Voeux Annamites*), expressed the same political views.

⁶¹ *id.*, p. 322.

⁶² *id.*, pp 318–24.

In brief their political demands were:

1. A freer press and media policy.
2. Equal opportunities for the native Vietnamese in the colonial administration.
3. More liberal conditions for native Vietnamese to open legal practices.
4. Freedom of movement inside and outside of French Indochina.
5. Self-administration for Cochinchina.

Within the framework of self-administration for Cochinchina they also wanted the Administrative Council of Cochinchina (*Hội Đồng Quản Hạt Nam Kỳ*) to become a real legislative house. Indeed, despite the very restrictive conditions for entering this Council, all candidates of the Constitutionalist Party were elected and Nguyễn Phan Long became its Vice-Chairman.⁶³ Their rationale for cooperation with the French was spelled out as follows in an article entitled: "What is the foundation of French Annamite collaboration?" in the 4th December, 1929, issue of *La Tribune Indochinoise* (formerly *The Indigenous Tribune*) by Bùi Quang Chiêu:

"The Annamites, in full economic development, will not find their interests in a violent revolution which will erase all existing matters, but on the contrary, in a methodical evolution whose rhythm must be determined by the unique concern to submit themselves to a plan of universal progress. French protection should assure us of a regular march during which each of the parties should render more effective each day without reticence."⁶⁴

⁶³ *id.*, pp 322-3.

⁶⁴ *id.*, p. 39. This passage is taken from *Mouvements Nationaux et Lutte de Classes au Vietnam* by Anh Văn and Jacqueline Roussel, where it is quoted on p. 39. The original French version appearing in *La Tribune Indochinoise* was: "Sur quoi fonder la collaboration france-annamite? ... Les Annamites, en plein developement économique, ne sauraient trouver d'intérêts dans une révolution violente qui ferait table rase des choses existantes, mais au contraire, dans une évolution méthodique dont le rythme doit être déterminé par l'unique souci de se mettre au plan du

Both the demands and the rationale of the Constitutionalist Party appear to be perfectly reasonable. However, France did not conquer her colonies because of altruistic motives. French 'protection' was, naturally, only a euphemism for crude domination and exploitation. The platform of the Constitutionlists was considered by proud French industrialists and administrators as a ruse to gradually achieve total independence, hence clearly unreasonable. Thus, without the cooperation of the French colonial administration, the party fell into disrepute, focused solely on economic demands that tended to favour intellectuals, abandoned most of its original political aims, and lost all its popular support as a serious political party.

2. The Vietnamese Communist Party (Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam)

After many formative years with the Third International, Hồ Chí Minh founded in 1925 The Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League (*Việt Nam Thanh Niên Cách Mạng Đồng Chí Hội*) together with Lâm Đức Thụ, Hồ Tùng Mậu and Lê Hồng Phong in the leadership.⁶⁵ The emphasis on the younger generation was intentional because the older Vietnamese were too much influenced by the three traditional religions and would be unlikely to accept Marxism. Unfortunately in 1927, Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek launched the famous purge of all communists. As a consequence, the league was dispersed and most members escaped back to Vietnam. Hồ Chí Minh also left for Moscow leaving Hồ Tùng Mậu to lead the league.

Due to internal dissension, the League eventually split into three separate groups: The Indochinese Communist Party (*Đông Dương Cộng Sản Đảng*), The Annamite Communist Party (*An Nam Cộng Sản Đảng*) and the Indochinese

progrès universel. La protection française doit nous assurer une marche régulière qu'il appartient aux uns et aux autres de rendre chaque jour plus efficace et sans réticence."

⁶⁵ Nghiêm Xuân Hồng, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

Communist League (*Đông Dương Cộng Sản Liên Đoàn*). However upon his return to Hong Kong on 6th January 1930, Hồ Chí Minh was able to unite all three groups into a single Vietnamese Communist Party which was to be renamed The Indochinese Communist Party⁶⁶ less than a year later, probably at the insistence of the Third International. This achievement was not only due to the fact that he was recognised as the official link between the native communists and the Third International, but also this was a measure of the respect felt for him by all members of the different groups.

Given the nature of the Vietnamese traditional body politic, a communist party with its ideology based on industrial workers and proletarians appears to be irrelevant. Thus in order to survive, various tactical measures were adopted including voluntarily 'disbanding' the Indochinese Communist Party and giving all power to the then Vietnamese Allied Front (*Mặt Trận Liên Việt*) during the 1946–1949 anti-imperialist period, in order to assuage nationalist feelings within the people; or renaming the party The Labour Party in lieu of the communist party. But the substance of the party policies were the same: those of a political party strictly within the mould of the Third International.

The Communist Party has been by far the most professional and successful political group in Vietnam. In May, 1941, the now famous Vietminh front was founded.⁶⁷ The full Vietnamese name was *Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh* or Alliance For Independence For Vietnam. This front organisation of the then Indochinese Communist Party became an extremely successful political force. Meanwhile, the Chinese Kuomintang government wanted a share of influence in Vietnam and sponsored the formation of an alliance of all Vietnamese nationalist groups, initially under the leadership of Nguyễn Hải Thần in October 1942. This alliance was called *Việt Nam Cách Mạng Đồng Minh Hội* or Vietnamese Revolutionary Alliance.⁶⁸ Due to the

⁶⁶ Nguyễn Thế Anh, *op. cit.*, pp 332–3.

⁶⁷ Nghiêm Xuân Hồng, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁶⁸ *id.*, p. 57.

ineffectiveness of, and divisions among, various nationalist groups, and under the guise of a nationalist himself, Hồ Chí Minh was able to gain the confidence of the then Chinese Kuomintang government for the Vietminh front to be allowed to join the alliance, and become its senior partner. Hồ Chí Minh was appointed leader of the alliance, allegedly, according to Nguyễn Thế Anh, on the condition that he assisted the Chinese Kuomintang and the Americans in establishing a spy network in Vietnam.⁶⁹

Leadership of this alliance gave the communists an immense strategic advantage. Its Vietminh front was able to consolidate itself and by May, 1945, its guerrilla force had almost 10,000 fighters armed with American weapons and trained by Chinese Kuomintang officers.⁷⁰ Luck appeared to favour the communists and on 14th August, 1945, the Japanese surrendered to the Allied forces. Taking advantage of the situation, the Vietminh skilfully staged a takeover in Hanoi and on 2nd September, 1945, Hồ Chí Minh declared independence for Vietnam without much opposition or bloodshed.

However, under the terms of the Potsdam Agreement, British troops disarmed the Japanese in South Vietnam and the Kuomintang disarmed the Japanese in North Vietnam. Through private arrangements with the French, the British released all the French troops imprisoned by the Japanese and re-armed them so that they could re-occupy Vietnam as a French colony again. Meanwhile, in the north, the troops of General Lu Han armed the Vietnamese Nationalist Party or *Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng* (more on this party later in this book) and the Vietnamese Revolutionary Alliance to fight the Vietminh for control of strategic and tactical military areas.

Under pressure, the communists agreed to include nationalist elements in a Coalition Government such as Nguyễn Hải Thần, Nguyễn Tường Tam, Chu Bá Phượng, Vũ Hồng Khanh ... eighty seats were reserved in the national assembly for

⁶⁹ Nguyễn Thế Anh, *op. cit.*, p. 356.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

nationalists. In addition there were some 'notables', such as Huỳnh Thúc Kháng and Phan Anh, who belonged to no political groupings.⁷¹ However, on 28th February, 1946, the French and Chinese (*Trùng Khánh*) signed an agreement whereby the Chinese nationalist forces were to withdraw from North Vietnam. The communists took advantage of their superior military strength, purged all nationalist elements in government and crushed all nationalist forces occupying strategic areas in the northern highlands. At the same time they attempted to woo the French who moved their troops into northern Vietnam in place of the Chinese with the 6th March, 1946 agreement reached under the terms of the French representative Sainteny. This agreement acknowledges that France recognise the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a free state within the French Union and forming part of the Indo-Chinese Federation. More ignominiously, this agreement recognised the right of French troops to re-enter North Vietnam.

To the extent that the communists needed the breathing space during which they could decisively eliminate the nationalist forces, this treaty could be compared to the Brest-Litovsk treaty signed by Lenin with the Germans in March, 1918, in which Lenin made drastic territorial concessions to the Germans so as to have a free hand in order to destroy all his enemies within Russia. Indeed the coming-back of French troops as allowed under the treaty with Sainteny opened the scene for probably the most bloody episode of the war of independence in Vietnam. Hồ Chí Minh was skilful enough to persuade the then pro-Chinese leader of the Nationalist Party to co-sign the treaty, partly to ensure the withdrawal of the Chinese troops and partly to share the blame from the people and from future generations.

However the Vietnamese communists did not have the luck Lenin had had in 1918. For, six months after Lenin signed the Brest-Litovsk treaty, American, French and British troops pierced the Hindenburgh line, forcing Germany to negotiate for peace; thus they had to return all the territories acquired from

⁷¹ Nghiêm Xuân Hồng, *op. cit.*, pp 68-9.

the Russians. The Vietnamese communists, on the other hand, had to fight the French with all their resources, to the point of mutual exhaustion.

The intention of the French had always been to re-occupy northern Vietnam so as to re-establish colonial rule over the whole country. France thus kept on expanding the occupation zone of her troops at the expense of Vietminh positions. The Vietminh had no choice but to counter-attack on 19th December, 1946, and the ensuing war continued for eight years until the French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ on 7th May, 1954; the subsequent Geneva Conference in July, 1954; and the partition of Vietnam at the 17th parallel.

The then renamed Labour Party ruled North Vietnam under Marxist-Leninist principles. The Americans supported the régime of Ngô Đình Diệm in South Vietnam.

During the Franco-Vietminh war, despite initial French superiority in weaponry and significant American assistance to the French later in the war, the Vietminh was decisively favoured by fate, at the expense of both the French and the Vietnamese nationalists, by the victory of the Chinese communists in mainland China and the proclamation of the People's Republic of China on 1st October, 1949. The Vietnamese nationalists were immediately wiped out of their remaining sanctuaries in South China. The Chinese began in early 1950 a massive military assistance programme to the Vietminh culminating in the French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ and the final French capitulation in Vietnam.

The Americans now stepped in politically in South Vietnam, at the expense of the French colonial authorities being forced to disgorge, this time for good, a prey too tough to swallow.

3. The Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng)

Despite its failure in expelling the French from Vietnam, and its failure to win government at any time, this political party

has occupied a special place in Vietnamese history. The party originally started with a group of patriotic youth comprising, among others, names such as Phạm Tuấn Tài, Nguyễn Tống and most famous of them all a young man by the name of Nguyễn Thái Học. The group called itself the Nam Đồng Thư Xã Publishing House whose aim was to publish books relating to the 1911 revolution in China, Dr Sun Yat Sen and his Three Peoples doctrine (*Tam Dân Chủ Nghĩa*), to raise the political awareness of the populace and to educate the people about the concept of democracy. Soon enough, the French authorities closed down the publishing house and banned all activities of the group. In November of the same year, their members decided to form The Vietnamese Nationalist Party along similar lines to the Chinese Kuomintang. Their aim was to overthrow French colonial domination by force of arms and establish a republican régime in Vietnam. Nguyễn Thái Học and Nguyễn Khắc Nhu were respectively elected Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Party.

According to Hoàng Văn Chí,⁷² Nguyễn Thái Học resorted to a tactic that proved to be quite effective to elude the very tight French security surveillance of their activities. He divided the party into two groups, a semi-overt group and a completely covert one. The first one comprised those whose names and faces were well known to the French secret police and their aim was solely to spread propaganda among the people. They would try to avoid engaging in illegal activities warranting arrest and thus acted as a cover for the secret activities of the second group. This method was so successful that by January, 1929, the party had 120 secret cells and 1,200 members, including more than 100 soldiers. The aim of the party leadership was to expand for a few years until they had enough strength to organise a general uprising against the French authorities. However many things went wrong for the party.

First, the assassination of a French colonial leader René Bazin on 9th January, 1929, by a young Vietnamese man

⁷² *Từ Thực Dân Đến Cộng Sản, or From Colonialism to Communism* by Hoàng Văn Chí, translation into Vietnamese by Mạc Định, pp 44-7.

brought about the early suspicion of the French security and as a consequence all members of the semi-overt group were arrested and some were interned at Côn Đảo Island but later released due to lack of evidence. The French never discovered — or discovered but never disclosed — the identity of the killer. There were two hypotheses relative to this assassination. The first by the communist historian Lê Thành Khôi that the young killer was an *agent provocateur* is dismissed by Hoàng Văn Chí as implausible given the fact that the French would not have killed one of their own for such purpose. The second referred to by Mr Hoàng and considered more likely by him is that the young man was a communist agent whose aim was to wreck the nationalist agenda and to arouse the feeling of the workers in French-owned rubber plantations.⁷³

Whatever the truth, as a consequence of this incident the French began to know about the identity of the clandestine group. Thus the leadership began to fear that any delay may hurt their plans. Further, due to the lack of a tight organisational structure and command, the French got wind of a planned uprising. Nguyễn Thái Học hastily ordered a general uprising on 10th February, 1930, then postponed it to 15th February. But because of the lack of communication to the Yên Bái bastion, this bastion rose on 10th February. All this of course was too amateurish for the French. Their repression was ruthless. French war planes bombarded Cổ Am village where the leadership was meeting. Within a few weeks the whole leadership was arrested and on 17th July, 1930, thirteen heads fell at Yên Bái shouting "Long Live Vietnam", in one of the most celebrated moments in Vietnamese history. Miss Giang, who was a member of the party and Nguyễn Thái Học's fiancée and associate, was able to mix with the public and watched the execution of her lover. Then she went back to his paternal village and shot herself with a pistol in order to force the local authorities to bury her near the graves of the Nguyễn family.

Some members fled to China to reorganise the party. They

⁷³ *id.*, p. 45.

received the assistance of the Kuomintang and went back to operate inside Vietnam. But generally they were outmanoeuvred by both the communists and the French. In any event, the Chinese Communist Party overran China and deprived them of their sanctuary. Their new leader Vũ Hồng Khanh took command of 10,000 troops consisting, by and large, of Chinese and returned to Vietnam. However under the pressure of French military power, they agreed to accept the authority of the then French puppet government of Emperor Bảo Đại. Since then the party ceased to be a serious political force, according to Hoàng Văn Chí.⁷⁴

The Nationalist Party did not succeed in Vietnam for several reasons:

First, although the membership and leaders of the party belonged to a new generation of men and women whose republican ideal was markedly different from that of their Confucian fathers, the Confucian ethics of their forebears still deeply influenced their revolutionary zeal. Indeed, the much-admired words of Nguyễn Thái Học, while ordering that fatefully premature general uprising: "even if we do not succeed, we would at least become worthy men" (*Không thành công cũng thành nhân*), encapsulated the position of the Righteous Man (*Quân Tử*) in the social scheme. This philosophy, while arguably deserving of praise, was totally unrealistic in the bloodstained politics of colonial greed and cruelty. It deprived the party of the kind of tactical and strategic flexibilities that all the skilful political players of that time, including the French government and the Vietnamese communist party, possessed in abundance to survive and dominate. The fact that Miss Giang went back not to her own village, but to the village of her intended husband so as to be able to be buried next to the graveyard of his family, should not be understood in the light of modern romantic love, but should be understood in the context

⁷⁴ *id.*, p. 47.

of the Confucian precept that a woman really belongs to the family of her husband, not her father's.

Second, although the Nationalist Party borrowed much from the Chinese Kuomintang, that was about the limit of its international connection. Its world never went beyond the then already too-troubled Chinese world at a time when the fate of Vietnam and its political leaders had become increasingly dependent on overpowering international players the likes of Japan, the U.S.A., the Soviet Union, England, the Vatican and the Chinese communists since 1949.

Third, the communist victory in China and the routing of the Kuomintang in 1949 was a decisive blow to a political party founded by heroic men and women who genuinely fought against foreign domination with all the sincerity of their hearts and who appeared to be untainted by ideological or religious motives.

4. The New Vietnam Revolutionary Party (Tân Việt Cách Mạng Đảng)

On 14th July, 1925, a number of Confucian scholars, converted to Western studies and ways, founded the Viet Restoration Party (*Đảng Phục Việt*), on their release from the Côn Sơn Island gaol for anti-French activities. The party was soon renamed The New Vietnam Revolutionary Party. Its original leaders were Lê Văn Huân and Nguyễn Đình Kiên. The well-known intellectual Đào Duy Anh was its general secretary. Its programme declared:

"Our New Vietnam Party should not recruit its membership from any single social class. The number of workers are too few and this class has no clear political direction, while the peasant class is not yet united and little aware of political direction. For this reason, we have to recruit members from the most progressive elements of each social class. Our agenda must be a nationalist agenda and

should not be contrary to the interests of any social class participating in the revolutionary front."

The party was able to organise mass movements against the colonial authorities in the years 1925–26.⁷⁵

5. The Troskyists or the Fourth-Internationalists (Cộng Sản Đệ Tứ)

During 1932, the Troskyists formed a group under the leadership of two prominent members by the names of Tạ Thu Thâu and Trần Văn Trạch at the then capital of Indo-China, Saigon. In cooperation with the Third Internationalists they published the newspaper *La Lutte (The Struggle)* in the French language. However the alliance proved to be short-lived due to political differences. In addition both groups were severely repressed by the French authorities and the Third Internationalists had a greater ability for adaptation and survival. Thus by 1945, the Troskyists were no longer an effective political group in Vietnam.⁷⁶

6. The Vietnam National Restoration Association (Việt Nam Phục Quốc Hội)

On 22nd August, 1940, Japanese troops penetrated the northern Vietnamese province of Lạng Sơn. On 30th August, 1940, the French were forced to sign a treaty with the Japanese in which the Japanese recognised French sovereignty in Indo-China in return for which the French had to recognise the Japanese right to use and control the Kwang Chow-Vietnam rail and road system. Taking advantage of the rising influence of the Japanese and initially with their support, a number of people formed the Vietnam National Restoration Association under the

⁷⁵ Nghiêm Xuân Hồng, *op. cit.*, pp 44–5.

⁷⁶ *id.*, pp 50–51.

leadership of Trần Trung Lập and Đoàn Kiềm Điểm. However the French soon entered into negotiations with the Japanese. As a consequence the Japanese abandoned them to the French who crushed these anti-French fighters without pity. Trần Trung Lập was arrested by the French Authorities.⁷⁷

7. The Great Viet People's Political Party (Đại Việt Dân Chính Đảng)

During the same period, in Hanoi, the capital of the then Tonkin, a famous literary league which dominated the modern history of Vietnamese literature under the well-known name of Self-Reliance Literary League (*Tự Lực Văn Đoàn*) led by one of the most famous Vietnamese writers and political activists Nguyễn Tường Tam, converted itself into a political party under the name of *Đại Việt Dân Chính Đảng*. The party attracted numerous students and intellectuals and wanted to take advantage of the conflict between the French and Japanese to liberate Vietnam from colonial rule. However the French effectively negotiated with the Japanese and were able to destroy the party. Nguyễn Tường Tam was forced to flee to China. Some members later on joined the Great Viet National Socialist Party (*Đại Việt Quốc Xã*) under the leadership of Nguyễn Văn Tiểu, Nguyễn Văn Đệ and Đặng Văn Hình. The remaining membership of the *Đại Việt Dân Chính Đảng* joined the Vietnamese Nationalist Party when both parties officially merged in 1944–45.⁷⁸

8. The Great Viet Nationalist Party (Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng)

This party was founded by another famous revolutionary Trương Tử Anh in 1941–42. It had initially a few strongholds

⁷⁷ *id.*, pp 53–4.

⁷⁸ *id.*, pp 54–5.

in Di Linh (Thanh Hoá province) and Kép (Bắc Giang province). It had significant influence in Tonkin and Annam.⁷⁹

9. The Great Viet People's Party

(Đại Việt Duy Dân Đảng)

A group of anti-French revolutionaries — the majority of them former members of The Vietnam National Restoration Association in 1942 — decided to form this new political party under the leadership of the first-ever serious Vietnamese political theoretician Lý Đông A. He founded the People's Doctrine (*Duy Dân Chủ Nghĩa*), being much influenced by the thoughts of Chinese political thinkers the like of Sun Yat Sen, Khang Hữu Vi and Lương Khải Siêu. The party, in 1944, sent back to Tonkin and Annam a significant number of members and had significant support in these areas.⁸⁰

10. The Democratic Party

(Dân Chủ Đảng)

During the years 1944–5, this party was founded by a group of intellectuals under the leadership of Dương Đức Hiền and Vũ Đình Hoè. However from the August, 1945, takeover in Hanoi until today the party has become the front organisation for the Communist Party.⁸¹

11. The Great Viet Nationalist League

(Đại Việt Quốc Gia Liên Minh)

The party was founded following 9th March, 1945, by Nguyễn Xuân Mai, Ngô Thúc Địch and Nương Tống in order to take

⁷⁹ *id.*, p. 55.

⁸⁰ *id.*, p. 56.

⁸¹ *id.*, p. 58.

advantage of the popular anti-colonial fervour of the time. Then the August, 1945, takeover took place before the party could even consolidate its existence.⁸²

12. The Vietnam Democratic Socialist Party (Việt Nam Dân Chủ Xã Hội Đảng)

This political party started with one of the greatest — and still not sufficiently recognised — religious, political leaders and popular poets in the history of Vietnam: The Most Venerable Huỳnh Phú Sổ. His life was nothing short of extraordinary. He began by founding the Hoà Hảo Buddhist Sect in South Vietnam with the aims of reviving the Buddhist religion under threat from Western culture, rendering Buddhist philosophy more accessible to the common people, and ultimately overthrowing French colonialism. With this last aim in mind, he founded the Vietnam Democratic Socialist Party in 1946.⁸³ He was assassinated by the Communists in 1947. He was, in every sense of the words, a true poet, a patriot and a religious mystic of great vision. His stature truly escapes the confines of this book and he will be recognised, as time goes on, as one of the greatest men in Vietnamese history.

13. Caodaism (Đạo Cao Đài)

This religion was founded by a Vietnamese mystic, The Most Venerable Ngô Văn Chiêu, in 1928 and subsequently came under the guidance of The Most Venerable Phạm Công Tắc. This religion, which is an attempt to synthesise all religions of the world, is also an anti-colonial revolutionary movement. The

⁸² *id.*, pp 58–9.

⁸³ *Phật Giáo Hoà Hảo Trong Lòng Lịch Sử Dân Tộc* by Nguyễn Long Thành Nam, 1991, p. 40.

latter leader was sentenced by the French to exile and under the Diệm régime he died in exile in Cambodia.⁸⁴



With the exception of the Communist Party of Vietnam which succeeded in achieving power in North Vietnam in 1954 and in the whole of Vietnam in 1975, none of the above political parties achieved power or even national prominence. Their contribution to the anti-colonial struggle however has been duly recognised in Vietnamese history books. Some of them have survived until today and may have a role to play in a future Vietnam with a pluralist political system.

⁸⁴ *id.*, pp 40-41.



(Above, below & opposite) Typical of the demonstrations organised by the Vietnamese Community in Australia, before the Vietnamese Communist Embassy, Canberra, to demand human rights and democracy for Vietnam.







Mr Cường Võ flanked by the Venerable Thích Quảng Ba (Buddhist monk) and Mr Nguyễn Chánh Giáo of the Caodai sect during a demonstration against the visit by the Vietnamese Prime Minister, Võ Văn Kiệt, in 1993.



The Prime Minister of Australia, Mr Paul Keating, speaking to a Vietnamese delegation including the president of the Vietnamese Community (Mr Cường Võ) and religious leaders from the Buddhist, Catholic and Caodai communities.

IV. INDEPENDENCE AND A DIVIDED NATION

A. NORTH VIETNAM: THE MARXIST- LENINIST CONSOLIDATION

AS A RESULT OF the Geneva agreement in 1954, the Vietnamese Communist Party (then known as the *Lao Động* or Workers' Party) asserted control over that part of Vietnam north of the 17th parallel. Thus North Vietnam under the official title of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam began to embark upon a campaign for socialist consolidation along Maoist principles. The Chinese influence was particularly strong at this period because of the assistance given at that critical time to the Vietnamese communists by their Chinese counterparts during the war against the French, and also because of the easily recognisable fact that the cultural and social structure of Vietnam was similar to the Chinese one. The campaign for socialist consolidation aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- (a) Confirming the dictatorship of the proletariat.
- (b) Completing the process of class struggle with the view to specifically eliminating the class of intellectuals.
- (c) A radical land reform programme aiming at collectivising all of the thousand-years-old agricultural sector and eliminating private ownership.

The campaign in Vietnam was much bloodier than those in the Soviet Union or China due to the fact that none of the Vietnamese communist leaders were really interested in the study of the creative application of Marxism to Vietnam in the manner Lenin did for the Russians and Mao Tse-Tung for the Chinese. The reason was threefold: first, they had to spend all their time and energy in the struggle against the French for survival and

had no time left for this rather luxurious type of intellectual exercise. Second, their admiration for Marx, Lenin and Mao Tse-Tung was so overwhelming that their critical faculties were gravely injured. Third, they acknowledged the fact that they and the Vietnamese people were merely students in the vast school of Marxism and the injustices resulting from the trial application of this theory could always be rectified and above all justified, given the perceived immense benefits it was to bring to the Vietnamese people in due course. As a result, the people of North Vietnam bore the brunt of this socialist experiment while the people of South Vietnam were spared until 1975 when communist troops overran the South and reunited the nation.

Thus the dictatorship of the proletariat was firstly established in the North, using the same methods as Lenin in Russia in 1917. That was to completely destroy all political opposition and all forms of dissent from either outside or inside the ruling party. Freedom of the press was completely terminated, all means of communication were made property of the party and strictly controlled. A comprehensive secret police network was established to spy on each citizen of the régime. Children became secret agents for the party to report on supposed counter-revolutionary behaviour of their parents. Wives were encouraged to report on their husbands; students on their teachers; friends to report on friends. In this manner the party ruled over the people in an atmosphere of immense terror.

Second, the party embarked upon a process of class struggle to resolutely eliminate the intellectuals. The latter became the hapless victims of a party which has drawn its inspiration from the vast and bitter experience of Lenin and Mao Tse Tung during their respective struggles in Russia and China. According to Mao Tse-Tung, an who is not converted to Marxism is worth less than excrement because excrement can at least be used as manure to enrich the rice fields.⁸⁵ As a result of this

⁸⁵ *Từ Thực Dân Đến Cộng Sản, or From Colonialism to Communism* by Hoàng Văn Chí, translation into Vietnamese by Mạc Định, Chân Trời Mới edit., p. 158.

of this process many intellectuals including party members who could not or refused to renounce reactionary ideas such as idealism (as opposed to materialism), romanticism, individualism, freedom of trade, admiration for Western technology, human rights or civil rights, parliamentary democracy etc. ... were first encouraged to express their thoughts freely (during the Hundred Flowers campaign), then criticised, then expelled from the party or tortured and killed. The aim really was to ensure within the rank and file the supremacy of the materialist thesis.

Third, the land reform programme was divided into two steps: the first was land tax reduction (*Giảm Thuế*) and the second was land reform proper. However the land tax reduction was only an excuse. The real aim of the party at this stage was to eradicate the very rich peasant class. Then the land reform proper completed the programme by eliminating landowners altogether. Hoàng Văn Chí gives the following example to illustrate the process:

For instance in a village there were 25 families named from A to Z in descending order of wealth. A was most wealthy and Z was least. At the first stage of land tax reduction, the party members would teach the peasants in detail the following class identification table:

A,B,C	:	Rich landowners
D,E,F	:	Rich peasants
G,H,I,J	:	Hard middle class peasants
K,L,M,N	:	Moderate middle class peasants
O,P,Q,R	:	Soft middle class peasants
S,T,U,V	:	Poor peasants
W,X,Y,Z	:	Extremely poor peasants

Then the party would promote the slogan that: "We should rely on the extremely poor and poor peasants, ally ourselves with the middle class and rich peasants in order

to destroy the rich landowners." Thus the communists would call on the families from G to Z to form a powerful alliance in order to destroy A, B, and C. The rich peasants were not allowed to participate in the class struggle, but were promised peace if they agreed to cooperate.

The middle peasants were given the title of honorary poor peasants and considered themselves lucky. They espoused the cause of the party with great enthusiasm.

Then A will be executed, B and C condemned to hard labour. However about one year later, the land reform proper would be launched. A delegation of party members would inspect cursorily the village and say words to this effect: "Our peasant comrades did not grasp the concept of class identification correctly and too many rich landowners escaped the net." They requested the peasants to study the class identification table again and added that, according to the very scientific study by our Chinese advisor comrades (in reality a delegation of Chinese advisors only passed casually through the village) the number of rich landowners should be many times more. They asked the peasants to study a revised table which included this time as rich land-owners D,E,F and G,H,I,J. Thus this time K,L,M,N became rich peasants etc. ...

The order from the central committee of the party was that the number of executions should be fivefold the previous number. As a result the number of executions were more than 100,000 up to 1959, according to a French professor Gerard Tongas.⁸⁶

The aim of the Communist Party of Vietnam in this Marxist-Leninist consolidation process was no less than to recast the whole thousand-year civilisation and create a new Vietnamese society and new Vietnamese men and women with a view to building the ideal socialist utopia in Vietnam. Such lofty ideal

⁸⁶ *id.*, pp 223-5.

and revolutionary aspiration demanded more than ordinary measures and the end justified the means in this particular case.

However, this experiment failed, not only to bring about a socialist utopia but even in the elimination of social classes. Indeed the party mandarins became an even more oppressive class than the former landowners. Further the economy was devastated to such an extent that it was to take more than a generation to cure it from this overdose of ideological folly.

B. SOUTH VIETNAM: AN UNEASY ATTEMPT AT DEMOCRACY

WHEN THE FRENCH WERE defeated at Điện Biên Phủ on 7th May, 1954, the psychological reverberations of this event on French public opinion were so catastrophic that the French government lost all its will to hang onto this colony. As a result the Geneva agreement was signed two-and-a-half months later dividing Vietnam temporarily into two parts at the 17th parallel with the North under the communists and the South under the French-backed Emperor Bảo Đại. The Geneva agreement further provided that a nationwide election be held on 20th July, 1956, in order to reunite Vietnam.

After the Geneva convention France was resigned to withdrawing all troops from Vietnam. However a new international superpower, the Americans, stepped in. This new superpower had other plans for the newly independent nation. And obviously a new leader was needed.

1. The First Republic

This period of South Vietnamese modern history is difficult to analyse with objectivity. The President of the First Republic was Ngô Đình Diệm. Due to the controversies surrounding the presidency, there are currently two views of history that we have to consider:

- (a) The anti-Ngô Đình Diệm view; and
- (b) The pro-Ngô Đình Diệm view.

Then, as usual, the truth lies somewhere in between these two extremes.

A. THE ANTI-NGÔ ĐÌNH DIỆM VIEW

The proponents of this view say that, under pressure from the Americans, the Head of Government in South Vietnam, who

was also the last heir to the Nguyễn imperial dynasty Bảo Đại, was sacrificed to make way for the new strong man of South Vietnam Ngô Đình Diệm who had been the first mandarin under Bảo Đại's reign and who had never participated in the risky and heroic struggle to liberate the country from French occupation, apart from offering some support for the late Prince Cường Để's activities. Ever since 1945 he had realised that the Cường Để solution had lost all its appeal, and started to cultivate the American connection.

Thus Ngô Đình Diệm, a staunch Catholic, had, prior to his coming to power, consolidated his American support. Through his brother Archbishop Ngô Đình Thục he had been introduced to the head chaplain of the American Army, Cardinal Spellman. Since 1951, he had stayed for two years in America at the Catholic Maryknol and Ossining Monasteries in New Jersey and New York respectively. Through the assistance of the Cardinal he had been able to gain the support of influential politicians such as Senators Mike Mansfield and John Kennedy, Congressman Walter Judd, Justice William Douglas and other Catholic politicians in America. Thus the thesis of the necessity for a Catholic president for South Vietnam had acquired American support right up to the time of the Second Republic in South Vietnam under another Catholic convert, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu.⁸⁷

With American assistance at his disposal, Diệm won a referendum that was rigged in his favour to overthrow Bảo Đại, then declared himself President of the Republic of Vietnam. He received 98.2 percent of the votes and in Saigon he received a third more votes than there were registered voters.⁸⁸

Had the Americans been sincere about introducing democracy and the rule of law to South Vietnam, they could have advised him that the proper and legal way, which would have

⁸⁷ *Việt Nam Máu Lửa Quê Hương Tôi* by Hoàng Linh Đỗ Mậu, 1986, p. 105.

⁸⁸ *Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia* by Daniel Robinson and Joe Cummings, The Lonely Planet, 1991, p. 24.

paid due respect to the intelligence of the Vietnamese people, was first to organise a referendum so that the people could decide whether they wanted a republic in lieu of a monarchy.

Then, had the people decided on a republic, a constitutional assembly should have drafted a constitution and general elections held where all candidates, both for the assembly and the presidency, should be allowed to stand. Ngô Đình Diệm should have been only one of the many presidential candidates which would have included all the historic revolutionary figures who had spent their whole lives fighting French colonial rule in Vietnam, who took refuge in the South because of communist rule in the North, and who would have had not only more popular but also more organisational support than Diệm.

Had the Americans been more attuned to the religious and historical sensitivities of the Vietnamese people, they could have assisted the genuinely patriotic Vietnamese nationalist forces in South Vietnam in building up a political régime with much more popular support, which would be equally anti-communist and possibly more so, since all nationalist forces had suffered under the hands of the communists. Much bloodshed could have been avoided.

However, fearing that their man would have lost such an election, the Americans opted for this illegal manoeuvre and simply made Vietnam into a republic and Diệm into its president simultaneously, overnight. Further, they pressured all their allies such as France, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Japan, Thailand and South Korea to give prompt diplomatic recognition to the new régime.

South Vietnam was thus introduced to the circle of free nations of the world under the leadership of the Americans.

With American advisors and cash on his side, Diệm eliminated the private armies of the Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo religious sects and the Bình Xuyên crime syndicate.⁸⁹ The C.I.A. man, Colonel Edward Lansdale, was instrumental in Diệm's success.

⁸⁹ *id.*, p. 25.

It was Lansdale who thwarted the planned *coup d'état* by General Nguyễn Văn Hinh, convinced General Trình Minh Thế to support Diệm and persuaded Generals Đỗ Cao Trí (Commander of the Green Berets), Dương Văn Minh (Commander of the Saigon Military District) and Trần Văn Đôn (Inter-Armed Forces Chairman of Staff) to assist Diệm in suppressing the Hoà Hảo and Bình Xuyên armies ... He also provided the material and administrative support for the settlement of 800,000 refugees from North Vietnam, the majority of them Catholic supporters of the régime. His intervention with the American State Department had probably saved Diệm's political life when Bảo Đại wanted to sack Diệm as his prime minister. Indeed, none less than American State Secretary John Foster Dulles had openly supported Diệm at this critical point in his political career.⁹⁰

Under Diệm all political opposition in South Vietnam was suppressed. According to Nguyễn Văn Châu, once his most trusted man, fellow Catholic and chairman of the Military Commission of the Cần Lao Nhân Vị party, Diệm could not accept any political opposition whatsoever.⁹¹ Thus feeling the need for organised support, Diệm, through his brother Ngô Đình Nhu, created the Labour And Personalist Party (*Cần Lao Nhân Vị Đảng*) to prop up his standing and consolidate his rule. The party drew its inspiration from Catholicism and a mixture of political ideas such as those of Emmanuel Mounier (personalism) and Phillipe Pétain (nationalist revolution).⁹²

Its most trusted personnel were Catholic and by and large under the direct and strict control of the Ngô family. At the height of its power the party was able to control its various front organisations such as The Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (*Phong Trào Cách Mạng Quốc Gia*), The Revolutionary Government Employees Movement (*Phong Trào Công*

90 55 Ngày & 55 Đêm Cuộc Sụp Đổ Của Việt Nam Cộng Hòa by Chính Đạo, 1989, pp 58–9.

91 Ngô Đình Diệm Và Nỗ Lực Hòa Bình Dạng Dở by Nguyễn Văn Châu, 1989, p. 76.

92 Chính Đạo, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

Chức Cách Mạng), The Revolutionary Teachers and Students (*Giáo Chức, Học Sinh Và Sinh Viên Cách Mạng*), The Revolutionary Commerce Association (*Hội Thương Gia Cách Mạng*), The Revolutionary Senior Citizens Association (*Hội Phụ Lão Cách Mạng*), The Victims of Communism Association (*Hội Nạn Nhân Cộng Sản*)⁹³

However due to the lack of popular support, the dictatorial nature of the leaders and absence of political know-how, the party soon fell into disrepute. It ceased to exist as an organisation when the whole régime was brought down by a military coup and both Diệm and Nhu shot dead.

B. THE PRO-NGÔ ĐÌNH DIỆM VIEW

According to this view represented by Dr Phạm Văn Lưu,⁹⁴ the crucial factor in the ascendancy of President Ngô was the decision of Emperor Bảo Đại to look for a prime minister who was young, knowledgeable and of the highest integrity to navigate the ship of state in difficult times. Obviously Mr Ngô qualified and received the support of his sovereign. The fact that he resigned from power on 1st September, 1933, because the French Resident Governor Pasquier refused to implement his recommendations on democratic reforms, was testimony to his integrity and patriotism.

He spent considerable time fighting French domination by allying himself with Prince Cường Để. He also contributed to the anti-communist cause and was imprisoned by the communists for some time in Quảng Ngãi.⁹⁵

His exile to China (1947), Japan (August, 1950) and America (later in 1950) was evidence of his concern for the fate of Vietnam within the context of international politics. The fact

⁹³ *id.*, p. 91.

⁹⁴ *Biến Cố Chính Trị Việt Nam Hiện Đại – I: Ngô Đình Diệm và Bang Giao Việt - Mỹ 1954-1963*, or *Contemporary Vietnamese Political Events – I: Ngo Dinh Diem and Viet-American Relations 1954-1963*, by Dr Phạm Văn Lưu, Centre for Vietnamese Studies Publ., pp 12, 15.

⁹⁵ *id.*, p. 31.

that he cultivated the American connection was only a calculated move of a skilful Vietnamese politician of international standing and there were few of them indeed at that crucial time of history.

Even Phan Bội Châu, the grand patriarch of all Vietnamese patriots, was reported as mentioning Mr Ngô's name with utmost respect and reverence.⁹⁶

To answer the charge that his administration was a Catholic administration, his supporters would point to the fact that in 1963, out of 18 members of his Cabinet, five were Catholic, eight were Buddhist, three Confuceens, one Caodaiist and one from the Hoà Hảo sect. On the military side, of the 19 generals in 1963 only four were Catholic and, of the commanders of the four Military Zones, only one was Catholic.⁹⁷ Thus it appeared that President Ngô had always stood above religious denominations. He was indeed a President for all Vietnamese, not only for the Catholics.

C. A BALANCED VIEW OF HISTORY

Naturally, one may lend oneself to one view or the other. However, it is clear that despite the conflict of various pieces of evidence, it appears to be beyond doubt that President Ngô was a mandarin of the highest integrity, a patriot, and, at this troubled juncture of history, he had a vision for a new Vietnam. Further, he was also a man of destiny since, due to his Western education, he was considered by many sections of society as a blend between the past and the future. In particular, he had crucial American support.

His presidency was greeted with a great deal of anxiety and expectation both inside Vietnam and among his supporters in America. Indeed, the first years of his presidency could be considered the most happy period of modern South Vietnam in the minds of most Vietnamese. South Vietnam was pacified and

⁹⁶ *id.*, p. 19.

⁹⁷ *id.*, pp 223-4.

rid of the various pseudo-political factions and warlords. The economy was stabilised and on the move. However, he failed on three crucial tests and they were the strategic causes of his downfall.

First, like all other political parties, his Labour and Personalist Party (LPP) was comprised of two main factions: the moderates and the fanatics. The moderates consisted of those who, despite their Catholic convictions, were finely attuned to the cultural and religious sensitivities of the nation, and sincerely supported the concept of peaceful religious co-existence in Vietnam. The fanatics genuinely believed that the best solution to the long-term Vietnamese problem, in the context of the anti-communist cause, was the conversion of South Vietnam to Catholicism, thus transforming the whole nation into a Catholic stronghold to withstand the onslaught of the communists. Their methods of conversion were at times crude and cynical.

President Ngô failed to check the excesses of the fanatical elements of the LPP and in consequence he lost control of the political agenda in South Vietnam.

Second, he was not able to prevent members of his immediate family from unduly interfering in affairs of state. In particular, the excesses of his sister-in-law Madam Ngô Đình Nhu (whereas her husband who was the theoretician behind the LPP appeared to be a respected and able adviser to the President); and his brother Ngô Đình Cẩn.

The latter, Ngô Đình Cẩn, conducted virtually a mini-imperial court in Central Vietnam and indulged in abuses of power of the worst type, thus further damaging the reputation of the President. The excesses of Madam Ngô Đình Nhu were inexcusable in any case but it would be fair to point out that they were even more so in a society where it was accepted that a woman's place was confined to the kitchen and bedroom rather than the political arena.

Nevertheless, his presidency was coined a régime of 'government by family connections' (*Gia Đình Trị*) and the

label still sticks today, not without some justification.

Failure on the first test, of course, touched upon the subject of religion and was much more instrumental in his downfall than the second. Indeed it is objectively undeniable that, during his presidency, there were acts of discrimination against the Buddhist clergy. Despite the fact that these acts might not have received his personal approval or indeed the approval of the majority of Catholics, he could not shirk responsibility completely because, as the saying goes, the buck stops with the President.

The situation was aggravated by the massive infiltration of the Buddhist clergy by communist political activists who were extraordinarily successful in agitating the whole population into political action for the purpose of ultimate conquest of South Vietnam.

In many respects the failure of President Ngô was not only his personal failure, nor the failure of the party he led, but the failure of a generation of men and women of goodwill from all sections of the Vietnamese progressive intelligentsia of the time, to build a democratic South Vietnam as opposed to the communist North.

Third, at a time of political transition and turmoil, neither the President nor the LPP was skilful enough to be able to mobilise the support of the nationalist Parties who had taken refuge in the South away from communist repressions in the North. These parties, together with the Americans and the generals, were instrumental in his presidency's tragic fate.

Besides the above three tests, it would be untenable to argue the way his supporters would: that he came to power purely on his moral strength, reputation, the admiration of his then-sovereign Bảo Đại, yet not on American support. Indeed, without American backing it would be difficult to see him surviving the violent post-French transitional politics of the time. However, it would be fair to argue that although the Americans installed him as their puppet, he never intended to remain an American puppet for a long time. In fact, resistance to direct large-scale American involvement during the final

years of his presidency was a significant contributing factor in the American decision to remove him from power.

Despite all shortcomings, he still deserves an honourable place in Vietnamese history. His last struggle, against huge odds, to retain presidential authority and power displayed a great deal of courage and political conviction. This, together with the political mess that followed his demise, have left a heavy burden on the conscience of those various generals who were either directly or indirectly involved in his death.

2. The Second Republic

The military coup that toppled the Diệm régime had the support of the American administration who could not ignore the of the régime's increasing unpopularity — in particular, opposition from students and the Buddhist clergy. Further there was evidence that the Ngô family might have explored, through their French contacts, the possibility of negotiations with the communists in the North. The military coup led by General Dương Văn Minh was followed by other counter-coups by the generals. Since the overthrow of the Ngô Đình Diệm régime of 1st November, 1963, until the coming to power in June, 1965, of the two generals Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, with the former as chairman of the National Leadership Committee (*Ủy Ban Lãnh Đạo Quốc Gia*) or Head of State, and the latter as chairman of the Central Executive Committee (*Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương*) or Prime Minister, we can list the following governments: Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ, General Nguyễn Khánh, Trần Văn Hương, Nguyễn Xuân Oánh, Phan Huy Quát and General Nguyễn Cao Kỳ.

The rivalry between Thiệu and Kỳ led to the former outmanoeuvring the latter again, according to the opponents of Thiệu, with the considerable lobbying of Cardinal Spellman who was able to win American support for Thiệu; Thiệu had by

this time become a Catholic through marriage.⁹⁸ It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of American support at this period of South Vietnamese history. It was indeed the single most important factor needed to survive politically since, at both the military and economic level, South Vietnam was totally dependent on American aid in its struggle against the communists. Thus, with the blessing of the Cardinal and the American Embassy, Thiệu was elected President of the Second Republic of South Vietnam in 1967, in an obviously-rigged election. Then he was re-elected in October, 1971, in an election in which he was the only candidate.

Under Thiệu, it was alleged that former members of the Labour And Personalist Party began to regain influence, albeit unofficially, to the extent that the régime could be termed 'A Diệm Régime Without Diệm'.⁹⁹ Corruption and nepotism again became a permanent feature of a régime which in any case had never had popular support. Meanwhile, the communists continued their strategy of infiltrating the Buddhist institutions and inciting rebellion against the régime until its total collapse in April, 1975, following American abandonment and the régime's utter inability to stand on its own after two decades of political and economic dependence on America.

However, with the benefit of hindsight and leaving aside the religious factors, if the choice were only one between Thiệu and Kỳ, then the choice of Thiệu as president might to many Vietnamese be considered much the better one, for the reason that Kỳ had always been considered an opportunist and without moral character by a sizeable portion of the population.

In addition, it would be fair to say that during Thiệu's presidency, most of the discrimination against the Buddhist clergy was terminated. As far as corruption is concerned, it would have been unstoppable regardless of who was president.

⁹⁸ *id.*, p. 410.

⁹⁹ Hoàng Linh Đỗ Mậu, *op. cit.*, p. 931.

3. The National Liberation Front

(Mặt Trận Giải Phóng Miền Nam)

In order to minimise international criticism of its interference in South Vietnam, the North established a front organisation by the well-known name of The National Liberation Front Of South Vietnam (N.L.F.). This organisation had the responsibility of presenting itself to the world as a 'genuine' South-Vietnamese popular movement against the Saigon 'puppet' régime. Indeed, on 20th December, 1960, the politburo of the Lao Động Party created the N.L.F. and placed it under the nominal leadership of a South Vietnamese lawyer Nguyễn Hữu Thọ. Thọ was also Vice-Chairman of the Committee For The Protection Of World Peace (*Saigon-Chợ Lớn Area*). As Chairman of the Front, Thọ presided over a political structure that appeared to be quite genuine, including:

As Vice-Chairmen:

- Võ Chí Công, nominally of the Revolutionary People's Party (*Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng*), another front organisation of the Lao Động Party.
- Phùng Văn Cung, Chairman of the Committee For The Protection Of World Peace (South Vietnam Chapter).
- Son Vong, leader of the Khmer Buddhists.
- I Bih, a Protestant.

As General Secretary:

Nguyễn Văn Hiếu, General Secretary of the Progressive Socialist Party (*Đảng Xã Hội Cấp Tiến*), General Secretary of the Committee For The Protection Of World Peace (South Vietnam Chapter), Vice-Chairman of the Patriotic and Democratic Journalists Friendship Society (*Hội Ái Hữu Ký Giả Ái Quốc Và Dân Chủ*).

As Committee Members:

- Trần Hữu Trang, a writer.

- Joseph Marie Hồ Huệ Bá, a Catholic priest.
- Thích Thiện Hào, a Buddhist priest.
- Nguyễn Văn Ngỗi, a Caodaiist.
- Nguyễn Ngọc Thông, a teacher.¹⁰⁰

The aim of the politburo was to project an image of a spontaneous, popular rally of the people of South Vietnam against American foreign aggression, while the real power behind this façade was really provided by high-ranking members of the Lao Động Party such as Võ Chí Công, Nguyễn Văn Linh, Trần Văn Trà, Huỳnh Tấn Phát, Huỳnh Văn Tiểng, Trần Bạch Đằng While these tactics may not have fooled all American and other Western politicians, they were able to fool some of them quite convincingly. More importantly, these tactics were able to influence the majority of the people and media of the West. As a result, the collective conscience of a generation of the human world helped create an Anti-Vietnam War Movement that finally swept the Americans from Vietnam, bringing total victory for the Lao Động Party which quickly renamed itself The Communist Party Of Vietnam and which abolished, with one stroke of a pen, the much touted N.L.F. and reunited Vietnam under the rule of a single political party.

¹⁰⁰ *Hồ Chí Minh, Ngô Đình Diệm Và Mặt Trận Giải Phóng* by Hồ Sĩ Khuê, 1992, p. 343.

C. THE VIETNAM WAR: IDEOLOGIES AND SUPERPOWERS CONFLICT

1. THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE — although strenuous — to argue, with the benefit of hindsight, that the American involvement in Vietnam in 1954 had sincere ideological justifications to the extent that the American administration, under the influence of typically American values, genuinely believed they had an international obligation to contain the scourge of communism and that their involvement had no imperialistic motives whatsoever. But the actual implementation of American involvement policies in Vietnam were so fraught with political insensitivities, single-mindedness and lack of judgment (between 1954 and 1975) that the inevitable result was a military and political capitulation in April, 1975, that was equally insensitive and unjust to the people of South Vietnam.

As France waged her war in Vietnam in 1954, she was able to convince the Americans that this war was not really colonialist in nature but rather an anti-communist struggle. To quite a significant extent this was the truth. Indeed, by 1954 France as a colonial superpower was really a shadow of her former self and she was more or less reconciled to the fact that Vietnam would become independent anyway, either within the French Union or outside of it. Further, the whole anti-colonial struggle by the Vietnamese people was hijacked by the Vietnamese communists who were much better organised as professional revolutionaries, and who had been assisted wholeheartedly by the Chinese communists ever since 1949.

In addition, by the end of the Second World War, the emergence of the communist bloc under the leadership of the former Soviet Union and the so-called free world under the leadership of the Americans was set to determine the course of world politics for the next forty years. The Americans were quick to perceive the French war in Vietnam as ideologically motivated rather than a continuation of colonial ambitions.

Further, the Americans were rightly confident that they would in due course replace the exhausted French in Vietnam anyway. Indeed in 1954 American aid to the French war effort in Vietnam topped two billion US dollars.¹⁰¹

After the French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ, the Geneva Convention and the subsequent division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel in 1954, the American administration saw South Vietnam as the front line of defence for the whole free world against communist expansion in Asia. Thus the American administration set about to run South Vietnamese politics the American way. In fact the Americans were so committed to Vietnam that, according to Richard W. Van Alstyne, the then American Secretary of State Dulles "professed a desire for a showdown, using the threat of atomic warfare to coerce the North Vietnamese into surrender. If the Chinese intervened as they had in Korea, Dulles was ready to use the atomic bomb on them too. But President Eisenhower would not embark on this crusade without a pledge of support from Britain and France and since the pledge was not forthcoming, the United States for the time accepted the de facto situation."¹⁰²

However, the U.S. is a democracy and its politics has always been subject to various lobby and interest groups. The influence of the American Catholic lobby on American Vietnam policy was instrumental in the choice of Ngô Đình Diệm as the first South Vietnamese president, bypassing much more respected native politicians and anti-French nationalist leaders who happened not to be Catholic. This was the first in a series of policy errors by the U.S. Administration in Vietnam. The Americans so far had won every conventional war since emerging as an independent nation from British rule in 1783. By the end of the Second World War, they were the most powerful nation on earth. By drastically changing the nature of U.S. commitment in Vietnam, with the despatch of the first

¹⁰¹ Robinson and Cummings, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹⁰² *The United States And East Asia* by Richard W. Van Alstyne, 1973, p. 169.

American combat troops to the coastal city of Đà Nẵng in central Vietnam in March, 1965, it was possible that the Johnson administration was confident that they would probably have been able to eradicate these N.L.F. guerrillas within a few months. Then these victorious American troops would subsequently return to American soil to a hero's welcome as defenders of the free world.

The history of U.S. involvement is of course vastly different:

- 1950: 35 American soldiers as part of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG).
- 1959: MAAG personnel up to 700.
- 1963: Military personnel up to 16,300
- 1964: The Gulf of Tonkin incident staged by the Americans, as a consequence of which the U.S. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to allow President Johnson to wage the Vietnam War without legislative supervision.
- 1965: American troops, including combat troops, reached 184,300.
- 1966: 385,300 American troops
- 1967: 485,600 American troops. With South Vietnamese and free world forces, there were now 1.3 million soldiers in South Vietnam.

The war devastated both North and South Vietnam. About 58,000 American soldiers died or were listed as missing in action. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese soldiers from both sides of the conflict were killed. About five million civilians were dead.¹⁰³ And yet the N.L.F. was not defeated. Then in April 1975, following the capitulation of the Government of South Vietnam, the last Americans were evacuated from the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon by helicopter.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Robinson and Cummings, *op. cit.*, pp 26–8.

¹⁰⁴ *id.*, p. 29.

The reasons leading to this first and spectacular military defeat for the Americans could be appraised as follows:

(a) The American political structure and the political structures of its Western allies in the Vietnam conflict are essentially democratic in nature. Thus they are open societies whose decision-making processes are subject to the influence of different political parties, pressure groups, religious organisations, the media and a multitude of other special-interest groups. Meanwhile, their adversaries, including not only Hanoi but also Communist China and all those countries that used to belong to the former Soviet bloc, were closed totalitarian societies where the decision-making process was the sole prerogative of the respective communist parties. Thus in a situation of conflict, the politics of the open societies could be manipulated by their adversaries, while the politics of the closed societies remains solidly in the hands of their effective leaders. To that extent, it is entirely legitimate to say that the Americans did not lose the war in Vietnam because American and South Vietnamese soldiers could not match their opponents in the battlefields, but they lost the war in the streets of Washington D.C., Paris, London, New York and Sydney where the vast anti-Vietnam War movement was able to sow doubt, fear and guilt in the elected politicians and in the hearts of a generation of voters.

(b) The Vietnamese nationalist ideal was never given the opportunity to mature, take root and consolidate its position in South Vietnam. Indeed while the Vietnamese communists, at their very birth, were able to benefit from the revolutionary traditions and organisational skills of the Third International, the Vietnamese nationalists had to struggle on many uncertain fronts: first emerging from a strictly Confucian monarchical system they had to find themselves a credible ideological alternative in a rapidly changing world. While they instinctively rejected the Marxist alternative they were not united as to the ideological direction of their struggle. Secondly, the organisational skills they inherited from their ancestors were only effective in the ancient world of the Far East such as dynastic

rivalries or rudimentary warfare before the advent of modern firepower. These skills were certainly no match for the French colonial administration on the one hand, and the even more superior Vietnamese communists on the other hand. Thirdly, the nationalists were basically home-grown and did not have the support of any foreign superpower. The only foreign power which lent them some support were the Chinese nationalists who were themselves driven from the mainland of China in 1949 anyway. The West by then appeared to be firmly supporting the French colonial ambitions. Meanwhile the Vietnamese communists had the complete support of the whole Soviet bloc.

Thus the Vietnamese nationalists had always been in the most unpleasant position of having to fight, at the same time, the French and the communists, and being outmanoeuvred by both of their enemies. When the French finally agreed to leave North Vietnam to the communists, the American intervention in South Vietnam, in support of the Diệm régime, effectively deprived the nationalists of their golden opportunity to consolidate their organisations, mature as modern political parties and contribute to the building of South Vietnam. They were the true inheritors of the traditional Vietnam struggling to re-define its identity in the modern world. They were the true opponents of the communist party of Vietnam. They had the courage to fight French colonial occupation. Their heroic struggle to rid Vietnam of foreign domination was recognised in Vietnamese textbooks although with great reluctance in Diệm's South and with even greater reluctance in the communist North. By yielding to Catholic pressure to support Diệm, the Americans had deprived themselves of their only chance of forming an alliance with political allies who had grassroots support and an infrastructure capable of withstanding the communist onslaught of later years. Indeed despite all their shortcomings compared to the communists, the nationalists had immense popular support. With some modernisation and fine-tuning of their organisational structures they would have been much more successful in leading South Vietnam in the context of an armed

conflict complicated by ideological overtones the likes of the Vietnam War.

(c) Deep down the Americans, despite all their lofty talk, were looking for a puppet régime in South Vietnam who would be pliant to all their policies and demands without objections. They were never looking for a true ally in an anti-communist crusade. They simply imposed their will on the Vietnamese people by sweeping aside several generations of Vietnamese nationalist heroes to install the Diêm regime in South Vietnam. When they saw that this régime could no longer survive, they threw their support behind the generals who were more amenable to their manipulations. The régime of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu was the culmination of this policy.

As a consequence, despite all their military and financial power, the Americans lost the war because they never bothered to be on the side of the Vietnamese people. They came to Vietnam with their idiosyncrasies, manipulated their puppets on the Vietnamese political stage, sent in their troops and weapons, fought their war against their enemies, lost their war, withdrew from Vietnam, had never asked and never knew what the Vietnamese people wanted or stood for in the first place. Had they done so properly, they could have found that the South Vietnamese people were worthy allies in this ideological conflict. Thus, the outcome might have been different altogether.

(d) During this lengthy conflict, it was not the South Vietnamese government but the communist government in the North that was able, not only through superior political strategy but also through the sheer force of proven history, to capture the idealism and imagination of the Vietnamese people in both North and South Vietnam. The idealism and expectations of the whole nation, however, were quickly dashed by the realities of national reunification after 1975. In the South, the Communist Party effected a systematic purge of the whole society through a vast network of repression ranging from physical elimination to torture, imprisonment and the so-called re-education camps.

The people in the South had never experienced such horrendous phenomena before and in due course one million of them fled this socialist paradise in search of freedom. In the North, the people, through their sons and daughters and relatives who had served in South Vietnam, generally came to the realisation that the Party had lied to them for many decades; that although their countrymen in the South had lived under the trash of decadent capitalism and a succession of civil and military dictatorships, the economic standards in the South were still light-years ahead of them. Furthermore, they also realised that there was less freedom under the dictatorship of the proletariat than under any other dictatorship imaginable. Nevertheless, this realisation of the people only came in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. During the length of the actual conflict, the communists in the North seemed to have occupied the high moral ground in the eyes of the electorates of all Western democracies. The communists were able to play Western politics on the West's very grounds, whereas the reverse situation was an impossibility.

Indeed the massive communist military victory in April, 1975, was really only the necessary continuation of a political and psychological victory won many years before by the Vietnamese communists.

In addition, any student of political history would acknowledge the fact that the Geneva agreement in 1954 postulated a general election to reunite the whole nation two years later. The installation of the Diêm régime and the American refusal to honour the terms of the agreement by ignoring the issue of the election (which the communists rightly expected to win) brought about justified rage within the communist ranks and a section of the people. The American excuse of course was that they were not signatories of the Agreement, and that they had higher objectives in the containment of the Red Peril.

2. THE SOVIET UNION

Vietnam, like any other Asian and African nation under occupation by a Western colonial power, had a severe crisis of identity and confidence. She had to look critically at her whole

culture throughout the length of her history in a painful, soul-searching process, to find out what was wrong with herself. She also had to look at a new culture to aspire to as a model for emulation and a new source of inspiration. The Communist Party of Vietnam to that extent is a manifestation of the Vietnamese people's desire to take on board the Marxist-Leninist ideal in their struggle to expel the French occupiers and to build a better society. Through this ideological connection, the Soviet Union came to play one of the major roles in the destiny of Vietnam. Their influence came from a number of spheres:

(a) The U.S.S.R. posed as the friend of the oppressed peoples around the world: indeed, throughout the decades spanning the years 1917 to 1985, few underdeveloped nations could escape the galvanising effect of Lenin's thesis embodied in his work, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*.¹⁰⁵ With the defeat of the Kerensky Provisional Government by the Bolsheviks in November, 1917, the Third Communist International became the godfather and financial supporter of all communist movements around the world. As early as 1917 the Soviet Of People's Commissars, under the chairmanship of Lenin, amid the turmoil of civil war, already considered their business "to come to the aid of the Left International wing of the working class movements of all countries with all possible resources, including money, quite irrespective of whether these countries were at war or in alliance with Russia, or whether they occupy a neutral position."¹⁰⁶

In Indochina, even by the mid 1940s, France was still clinging to the illusions and remains of "La Grandeur Française", and with the assistance of the British and Americans were able to restore her rule over Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The above commitment of the Third International together with Lenin's thesis was irresistible to some anti-

¹⁰⁵ Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1970.

¹⁰⁶ *Lenin*, a biography by David Shub, Mentor Books, 1948, special abridged edit., p. 166.

colonial revolutionaries in Vietnam.

(b) Throughout the Vietnam War, the role of the Soviet Union was important also in that they were considered the equal of the Americans in terms of the manufacture and supply of technologically advanced weapons to carry out the war to victory for the Vietnamese communists. This factor would act as a psychological element in the rank and file of their cadres and soldiers. Through their propaganda machine, the abilities of the Soviet Union were sometimes exaggerated to fantastic proportions, to the chagrin of the Chinese communists.

(c) Finally, the Soviet Union was also considered the model society for the Vietnamese nation to emulate. It embodied the heroic struggle of a multiplicity of nations working in harmony to achieve the perfect society where exploitation had supposedly ceased to exist. The Soviet Union had been, after all, before the advent of communism only a series of underdeveloped nationalities. Now with the Marxist-Leninist miracle, it had become a superpower on the world stage and an ideal society at the same time. For a people just emerging from colonial rule and an ancient monarchical system, Soviet society was indeed the perfect citadel of the ideal socialist humanity.

It should be noted that the power of the Soviet Union over North Vietnam was completely different from American power over South Vietnam.

First, despite the fact that the Vietnamese communists were an integral part of the Third International and had to toe their line, the indigenous party machine was a powerful, cohesive force comprising leaders and members well trained in the art of subversive activities against French occupation and against their nationalist competitors. Thus, during the Vietnam War, they were able to carry the war themselves without the direct involvement of either Soviet or Chinese troops. In this respect, they were able to claim in the eyes of the people that they were the true defenders of national sovereignty. Whereas in South Vietnam, American involvement saw the direct intervention of the White House in the elimination of the power base of all

nationalist groups to clear the way for Ngô Đình Diệm and the subsequent direct intervention of American troops. In this the Americans had made a strategic mistake. They lent cause to the North to justify their war as an anti-imperialist war. More importantly, by eliminating the power of the nationalists, they deprived South Vietnam of the wealth of political and revolutionary experience these nationalist leaders had accumulated during decades of anti-colonial struggles. The elimination of this class of nationalist leaders had such far-reaching consequences that during the whole of the Vietnam War the Americans, through their civil or military puppets, occupied the centre stage of South Vietnamese politics. The people and their true leaders were, by and large, a sideshow.

Secondly, the less than even-handed approach of the Americans *vis à vis* the native political parties and native politics in general was evidence that despite their rhetoric about defending freedom and democracy in South Vietnam, it was entirely clear that they perhaps intended to impose American values on the Vietnamese at best. At worst it was a downright new form of colonialism. Their tactics were by any objective standard undemocratic, opportunistic and certainly not in the interest of building a democratic society. They could not be considered by any stretch of the imagination as remotely partaking of any idealism during their involvement in the Vietnam War. On the other hand, although the conquest of Indochina would inevitably expand the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union, it appears to be undeniable that such a conquest was part of the socialist ideal dreamed up by Karl Marx and sharpened by Lenin. Thus throughout the entire length of the war, the idealist fervour of the communist camp as opposed to their politically demoralised enemies was one of the most potent factors in their victory equation.

3. CHINA

Like Japan and Korea, Vietnam has emerged as an independent nation from the womb of Chinese civilisation. China had been always considered the centre of the collective culture of these

countries, and she also exerted over them political influence to varying degrees, depending on various factors such as geographical distance, the relative strength of the dynasties involved and internal Chinese politics. While the Japanese, under the reign of Meiji in the latter half of the 19th century, had embarked on a course of modernisation destined to propel themselves beyond the sphere of Chinese influence, by and large Korea and Vietnam continued to regard China as the model society and the centre of political and military power of the Far East. Then, in the last fifteen years, South Korea, through courageous modernisation programmes, has appeared to have surpassed mainland China as an industrial nation and as a relatively advanced country with a democratic system of government. Meanwhile Vietnam had been reunited under communist rule and continued to reel under the disastrous weight of a largely socialist planned economy, ideologically emulating China for the sake of the survival of the current leadership.

This greater and more prolonged Vietnamese dependence on China was due, to a very large extent, to the Chinese communist victory in Mainland China in 1949. Following this victory, all the Vietnamese nationalist forces were deprived of support and training facilities provided to them in South China by the Kuomintang. Instead, the Vietnamese communists began to strategically benefit from the victory of the Maoists. They were provided with a safe sanctuary and generous weaponry in their elimination of their nationalist competitors, and in the process, they were able to take control of the agenda of the anti-colonial struggle in Vietnam against the French forces. After the division of Vietnam into two under the terms of the Geneva Convention, the remaining nationalists fled to South Vietnam where their influence was confined by American policies to the margins of South Vietnamese politics, as discussed earlier in this book.

The Vietnamese communist victory at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 was due to a significant extent to the assistance of the Chinese Communists. However, the Vietnamese, regardless of their

political persuasion, have always had certain instinctive reservations about Chinese intentions. The Communist Party of Vietnam was no exception. As soon as the anti-French war was concluded, they embarked upon reviving the Soviet influence. Thus for the entire course of the Vietnam war the Communist Party of Vietnam was able to walk a tightrope between the Soviet Union and Communist China which had already emerged as a rival of the Soviet Union for leadership of the socialist camp.

It would seem fair to say that the Vietnamese communists had cultivated their Soviet connection for the specific purpose of containing Chinese ambitions in Vietnam. Throughout history the Chinese had always been the natural enemies of the Vietnamese, and their geographical proximity was even more ominous. This policy had served the Vietnamese communists well when China, finally exasperated, decided to teach them a lesson in 1979 by staging an invasion attempt. The Chinese were easily repelled by superior Soviet weaponry used by the Vietnamese to the amazement of the Chinese themselves.

Indeed the Vietnamese people, like their Japanese and Korean counterparts, are aware of the fact that it has been extremely hazardous business to exist as an independent nation on the fringe of the Celestial Empire, especially if that nation happens to have acquired Chinese culture *in toto* or even in part. The nations of Manchuria, Tibet and part of Mongolia have been incorporated into China. The only way to avoid overbearing Chinese influence would be to become stronger than the Chinese themselves. The Japanese have passed this test brilliantly. The Koreans have taken on this challenge with great success. It is now crucial for the Vietnamese to shed the burden of communism as quickly as possible to embark on a necessary journey to excel the Celestial Empire, for on this very excellence depends the sovereign integrity of the Vietnamese people.

4. FRANCE

By the end of the 19th century, all non-industrialised nations in Africa and Asia would have expected to be conquered by a colonial master from the West. So to be conquered by — of all the colonial masters — the French colonialists of that time was not a particularly unfortunate experience. But, as a result of French exaggerated national pride and conceit, independence had to be acquired at the cost of too much unnecessary bloodshed. The cultural unity of the Vietnamese nation was torn apart by the import of alien elements of the worst type. As a result of selfish French colonial policies, Vietnam was lagging behind other colonies like Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea and Taiwan. Then last but not least, France had infected Vietnamese intellectuals with the fatal vices of their own élite — their unjustified complex of class superiority and excessive romanticism bordering on sensuality. It was these intellectuals, trained by the French to assist them in maintaining French power over the rest of the people, whose loyalty to their colonial masters ensured their social and economic privileges, whose lack of moral integrity and patriotism could be matched only by their greed, who were to corrupt the society and whole generations of Vietnamese youth. It was as though the French colonialists had, by design in their calculating minds, infected the local intellectuals with a generous dose of poison in order to sap their energy, thereby diminishing the strength of local resistance to French occupation. To correct these errors and repair the damage to the nation, Vietnam needs nothing less than the creation of a whole new generation of leaders with authentic national cultural values and the moral fibres of the Vietnamese people of the Trần and Lý dynasties.

5. THE VATICAN

With the arrival in Vietnam of the French rulers, another great religion also came to have a significant influence on the fate of the Vietnamese people: Christianity — or more specifically, Catholicism.

The Christian religion as founded by Jesus Christ was undoubtedly a revolution of major proportions against the religious conservatism and institutionalised corruption of his time. His Sermon On The Mount shattered the last remnants of constraints on the concept of God as the sole property of the Jewish people and brought God's love and grace to the whole of humanity without national or racial frontiers. His ideal found a ready audience in all men of goodwill and inspired one of the most powerful, if not *the* most powerful altruistic movements known to man. In time his religion, like any other religion, split into various denominations: Catholicism, numerous Protestant sub-denominations and the Orthodox church.

The contributions of Christianity and especially of the Catholic Church to human civilisation are vast and manifold indeed and go beyond the scope of this book. Suffice it to say that, through the Roman Catholic Church, the crucial concepts of the equality of all men before God and before the law have survived the ruins of the Roman Empire in order to make the most positive contribution to the foundation of the modern legal system that all democratic nations nowadays enjoy. This religion is totally different from the traditional Vietnamese religions but, precisely because of this difference, it has brought to the Vietnamese people a new theological perspective to enrich its culture. With the opening of Vietnam to Western influence, its potential contribution would be expected to increase.

The Roman Catholic Church was and still remains the most powerful socio-political institution in the world despite the fact that it is first and foremost a religious institution. Notwithstanding the relatively small number of Catholics in Vietnam, the influence of the Vatican on Vietnamese politics has been nothing short of overwhelming. Its power and influence have come from various religious and historical factors which straddle the whole extent of Western civilisation. Following are the main ones:

(a) The internal discipline of the church on both the spiritual and organisational fronts has effectively made the church into a

political instrument *par excellence* against which few human instruments could be compared. On the spiritual side, faith and unshakeable loyalty to God is the basis of salvation. On the organisational side, the Vatican is the only representative of God on earth and has the authority to arbitrate even on the ultimate issue of redemption in the name of God. Indeed, according to Matthew (16:18-19), Jesus said:

“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”¹⁰⁷

On the basis that the Church was founded in Rome, it has been held in the Christian faith for a long time that the Bishop of Rome should be the Holy Father of the whole of Christianity, thus considerably consolidating the authority of the Vatican. This position was of course disputed by the Protestants and the Orthodox Church. However, in nations in Europe the influence of the Vatican was still immense. Even in traditionally Protestant nations of modern time, due to the increasing number of Catholics in their constituencies, politicians are increasingly more aware of the wishes of the Church. Thus, through its American branch, the Vatican was able to influence American policies in Vietnam.

(b) During the Middle Ages, the advances of science through the rediscovery of the thoughts of Greek philosophers and scientists before the advent of Christianity has lifted Western civilisation way above the rest of the human world in terms of science, technology and democracy. At first, the Vatican fiercely suppressed any challenge to the words of the Bible: thus the creation of so many tribunals or inquisitions against

¹⁰⁷ *Holy Bible, New Testament, New King James Version.*

thinkers and scientists of the Renaissance. However its position gradually softened in the face of the inevitable advances of science. Indeed, the Vatican benefited considerably from the advances of science and technology in the West. The Church began to play an important role in the political decisions of the Western nations in their feverish conquests for colonies in Asia and Africa. In the case of Vietnam, the French invaded on the pretext that they wanted to protect the French Catholic priests from persecution by the Vietnamese imperial authorities. And the Jesuit missionaries were relentless in pursuing their evangelising zeal in order to bring Christian civilisation to an otherwise, in their eyes, barbaric world. In the eyes of some of the bewildered local population of Vietnam of the time, the invincibility of French firepower, the helplessness of their own imperial army and most importantly the seemingly vast scientific knowledge of these French Jesuits were a sure sign that these white men must be in possession of the ultimate truth.

(c) The Catholic church, since its foundation with Saint Peter, has always followed a pattern of development characterised by social and political suppression by the authorities and martyrdom by various members of the church followed by final and complete victory of the church over the same authorities which used to suppress it with ferocity. This pattern has occurred since the time of the Roman Empire. Thus, besides the consolidation of its faith, the church has inevitably acquired a vast body of knowledge in matters of political survival, tactics and strategy unmatched by any institution, religious or temporal, anywhere in the world. The Vietnamese Catholic Church in particular had survived persecutions of McCarthyist proportions before the French occupation of Vietnam.

This vast body of political wisdom has served it well at critical points in human history such as: the transitional period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the new political order that followed in Europe; the great Reformation that ensured the survival of the Church in the aftermath of the Protestant revolution; and the conquest of the whole of Latin America, The Phillipines and most of Africa. In the case of

Vietnam, despite the fact that this country had had a very well-established cultural and spiritual tradition for thousands of years, and despite the relatively small number of Catholic followers in the population, the immense power of the Catholic church during the entire period of Vietnamese modern history ranging from the French occupation (1884) to the fall of the Republic of Vietnam or South Vietnam (1975) was a clear testimony to the political skills of the Roman Catholic Church. Needless to say, the Church continues to wield considerable influence today and will no doubt play an important part in Vietnamese politics in the future.

In addition, the Catholic community in Vietnam has made contributions in the fields of contemporary arts, culture and education that far outweigh their numbers. The reason seems to be that they generally inhabit the urban areas of Vietnam more easily accessible to French and other Western influence. With the exception of a few exclusively Catholic villages, most of the Vietnamese population has been located in rural areas and secluded from Western culture and influence until fairly recently in the nation's history. The French Catholic priests also had established in Vietnam an excellent infrastructure of modern education enabling the Vietnamese Catholics to acquire a level of education more attuned to modern arts, culture and public administration. Many great names such as Trương Vĩnh Ký (writer), Hàn Mặc Tử (poet), Lương Kim Định (philosopher and educator), Thanh Lăng (writer and educator) and hundreds of other outstanding citizens are Catholics. And not all of them agreed with the policies of the Diệm régime. Indeed, during the height of the suppression of the Buddhist clergy in 1963, no less than the Archbishop of Saigon, Nguyễn Văn Bình, circulated an open letter protesting in no uncertain terms against such policies. This appeared to be an indication that the majority of Vietnamese Catholics, when the chips are down, will not support any policies that would set Vietnamese against Vietnamese, or that would hurt the national interest. Many other prominent Catholics and even a member of the immediate family of Madame Ngô Đình Nhu, in the person of her own

father Mr Trần Văn Chương (who left his posting as Ambassador to Washington in protest) openly vented their disagreement and suffered the consequences.

6. JAPAN

In December, 1852, it was reported in *The Presbyterian Review* in The United States that "Christian civilisation and commerce has [sic] closed upon the Japanese Empire on both sides. It lies between the faces of the two great commercial millstones of the world."¹⁰⁸ Then in 1854 Commodore Perry, on behalf of the Americans, extracted the first trade treaties with the Japanese, through the force of arms. With the Meiji restoration in 1868 Japan began to modernise herself. While continuing to restrict the influence of Christianity in Japan, she adopted Western technology, science and commerce. The decisive victory of the Japanese over the Russians during the 1905 Russo-Japanese naval war elevated Japan to the position of undisputed leader of the nations of the Far East and a source of inspiration for them all, the Vietnamese included. They would very soon be deeply disappointed. Japan proved to be also an imperialist power of the worst type to their Asian brothers. Their attempt to divide China and annex Manchuria, their cruel colonial ambitions in Korea and Vietnam left deep legacies of bitterness and mistrust in the minds of their victims.

However all that, when put into perspective, would not be sufficient to deny the Japanese an extremely important and constructive role in the destiny of the other three nations that happen to revolve in the same cultural orbit as Japan: China, Korea and Vietnam.

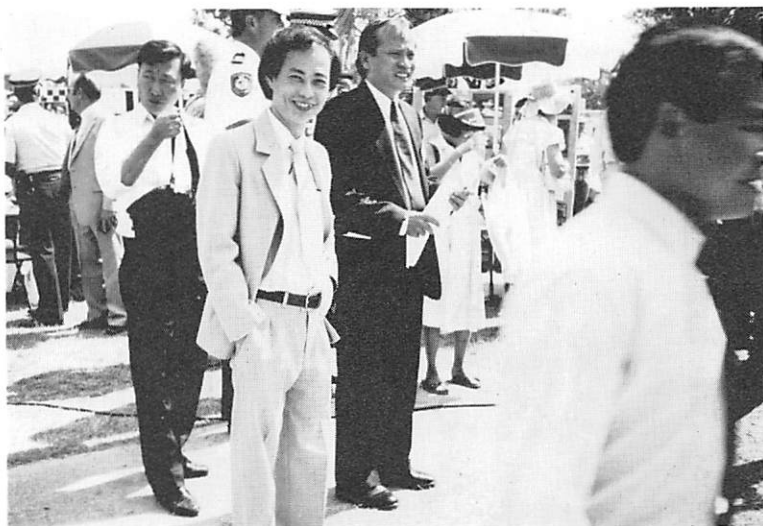
The following might be the main reasons relating to Vietnam: firstly, the influence of Japan as a military force in Vietnam was comparatively minor due to the very brief period of Japanese occupation in World War II. Indeed when Hitler conquered France in 1940, although Japan started to

¹⁰⁸ Richard W. Van Alstyne, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

successfully scare the French colonial administration into submission almost immediately, they waited until 9th March, 1945, to take over Indochina formally from the French. They officially surrendered on 15th August of the same year and handed power over to Bảo Đại, who abdicated on 25th August under pressure from the communists. Thus, to Vietnam, Japan remains by and large an Oriental power that defeated the French colonial force and restored faith in the Orient. The Vietnamese have none of the immense bitterness and mistrust their Korean and Chinese counterparts feel after lengthy periods of subjugation under the steely sword of the Samurai.

Second, the Japanese socio-economic development model is largely the result of grafting Western technology onto basically a Confucian-Taoist and Buddhist society together with some elements of native Shintoism. Thus the application of the Japanese model of economic development would minimise the degree of socio-economic dislocation and ensure the type of cultural continuity necessary for ultimate political stability in Vietnam.

Thirdly, Japan is and will remain for a long time to come the most dynamic economic powerhouse in the world. More specifically, she is the economic leader of the Far East as long as mainland China, despite some spectacular performances in some coastal and urban regions, is by and large still struggling with developmental problems and the shackles of a command economy. Japanese investments and technological know-how are extremely significant factors for economic growth in Vietnam in a world where capital and technology have become so competitive. There are signs that the Vietnamese current leadership has accepted the fact that Japan and to a lesser extent Taiwan (the other economic miracle in the same culture) will play major roles in the economic equation in Vietnam.



The author (centre) together with Mr Nhất Giang, editor of *The Sunrise*, Vietnamese daily newspaper (L) and the president of the Vietnamese Community, Mr Cương Võ (R), during the 1993 Vietnamese New Year celebrations.



The author (second from L) and the former president of the Vietnamese Community (Dr Bùi Trọng Cường) at a press conference before Parliament House, Canberra.



The author (L) at a demonstration for human rights and democracy before the Vietnamese Communist Embassy in Canberra.

V. A NATION RE-UNITED

A. THE CONQUEST OF SOUTH VIETNAM

PRESIDENT NIXON WAS ELECTED on a platform of "Peace With Honor" and the Vietnamisation of the Vietnam War was a natural consequence of that position. During a summit between Nixon and Thiệu on 8th June, 1969, at Midway, a gradual withdrawal of American troops and a gradual increase in South Vietnamese troops were agreed to. Under the recommendation of General Abrams, the U.S. Defence Department agreed to an increase in South Vietnamese troops up to 992,837 and police personnel to 122,200. Then in June, 1970, it was agreed the number of troops should be increased to 1,100,000 in the 1972 financial year.¹⁰⁹

The withdrawal of U.S. troops took place as follows:

- August 1969: 25,000 American troops left Vietnam soil.
- End of 1969: There were only 475,000 American troops left in Vietnam.
- May 1971: There were only 180,000 American soldiers left in Vietnam.
- In 1972 there remained only 60,000 American troops under General Abrams in Vietnam.¹¹⁰

The next natural step in the new American position was to force the Thiệu régime to sign the Paris Agreement on 27th January, 1973, despite initially resolute resistance from the Thiệu government. In a nutshell, the 1973 Paris Agreement included the following contents:

¹⁰⁹ Chính Đạo, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

¹¹⁰ *id.*, p. 78.

(a) The Americans to withdraw their troops from Vietnam within 60 days on the condition that all American prisoners of war were returned.

(b) Both the South Vietnamese Government and the Provisional Government of South Vietnam (the front organisation of the N.L.F.) to maintain separate governments and separate armies. Both parties, together with neutral political forces, to create a National Council For Reconciliation in order to determine the future political régime of South Vietnam.

(c) The Armies of both sides will cease fire while remaining on the territories actually occupied by each.

(d) The ceasefire will be supervised by an international committee comprising Poland, Hungary, Indonesia and Canada.

(e) The four sides involved in the war — the U.S.A., the Republic of Vietnam, The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Provisional Government of South Vietnam will establish a Joint Military Committee located at Tân Sơn Nhất and with offices at certain other locations. After 60 days, this Committee will replace the Joint Military Committee between the Republic of Vietnam and the Provisional Government of South Vietnam.

(f) The U.S.A. promises to provide economic aid for the reconstruction of the whole of Indochina up to \$7.5 billion. Hanoi will receive \$3.25 billion.

The 1973 Paris agreement was a clear victory for the communist side. The Provisional Government of South Vietnam was recognised as the equal of the the South Vietnamese Government. At the same time as trying to secure the withdrawal of American troops from the South, in the first nine months of the 1973 year Hanoi moved equipment and weapons — amounting to four times the amount for the whole of 1972 — into the South. By February, 1975, Hanoi had added 264,000 North Vietnamese troops to its contingent in the South.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ *id.*, p. 141.

On the South Vietnamese side, the main supporter of the Thiệu régime, President Nixon, under pressure from the Water-gate crisis, resigned. Further, the American economy suffered significantly from the oil crisis. The U.S.A. was ready to abandon the South. The promise of American intervention as per the 1973 Paris Agreement in the case of violation by the communist side was improbable to say the least. In addition, after years of dependency on the Americans, the South Vietnamese army was clearly demoralised at the American withdrawal. There were numerous defections affecting troops numbers. Meanwhile in Hanoi, the 23rd Congress of the Central Committee of the Labour Party met on 18th December, 1974, at the request of the Party boss of the South, Phạm Hùng, and General Trần Văn Trà, commander of the Southern Plains Area. A general offensive was decided under the generalship of Văn Tiến Dũng. The results went far beyond the expectations of the Central Committee. Indeed, complete and total military victory was achieved within a few months leading to incredible euphoria within the ranks of the Vietnamese communists who had been planning this event for decades, ever since the Geneva Convention in 1954.¹¹²

At the Palace of Independence on that fateful morning of 11th March, 1975, Thiệu and four of his most loyal lieutenants: Generals Khiêm (Prime Minister), Viên (General Chief of Staff) and Quang (Military and Security Adviser at the presidential palace) met to discuss the military situation. Thiệu outlined his decision to abandon the highland provinces of Kontum, Pleiku and Phú Bồn in the Strategic Military Zones I and II with a view towards concentrating on the more populated coastal areas of central Vietnam. His decision was not opposed by any of the participants.¹¹³ As soon as it was implemented, the whole military and administrative structures of these two military zones collapsed, causing an unprecedented avalanche and the doom of the whole defence position of the South.

¹¹² *id.*, pp 143–9.

¹¹³ *id.*, pp 207–14.

Indeed the soldiers of the demoralised army of the South, since the withdrawal from the central highlands, were convinced the Americans had already decided to abandon the South; that there was no more hope of defending it; and the safety of members of their families was now paramount. The combination of troops deserting from the ranks to evacuate their families from the abandoned areas, together with the populace voting against the communists with its feet, effectively broke the backbone of the South Vietnamese military defence.

It is true that, with the 1973 Paris Agreement, the military position of the South was significantly weakened and its political standing in the eyes of the world was somewhat diminished. However, its administrative structure was still viable, its political institutions were intact and its military force was holding together well. It would have taken several more years for the North to be able to achieve victory, but for the following combination of factors:

- (a) The tragic and foolish miscalculation of Thiệu in ordering the so-called tactical withdrawal from the central highlands, effectively abandoning strategic provinces and populations and demoralising the fighting spirit of the otherwise quite valiant armed forces of the South.
- (b) The Watergate crisis paralysing the will and power of the American executive *vis à vis* an American legislature bent on peace at any cost.
- (c) The suffering of the American people due to the depth of the oil shock orchestrated by the oil-producing nations of the Middle East awakened to the realisation of their power and stranglehold on their former colonial masters.

It is possible to conceive of a situation where, had these factors not come onto the scene; had the American executive been firmer in carrying out its commitment to the Vietnamisation process; had the South Vietnamese troops held on a while longer; had the American economy been performing better,

then the 1985 malaise in the Soviet empire under Gorbachev could have overtaken the state of the relative positions of various parties in Vietnam — a totally different picture could have emerged.

Be that as it may, on 18th April, 1975, the Defense Committee of the U.S. Senate voted not to increase aid to the armed forces of South Vietnam. At the same time the Senate's International Relations Committee also voted to allow President Ford to use the U.S. Army to evacuate American citizens from Vietnam.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, the military pressure from communist troops around Saigon was overwhelming.

In my opinion, the last desperate attempts by Martin, the then American Ambassador to South Vietnam, and French Ambassador Merillon, to stall the inevitable conquest of the South by force of arms, were merely the product of the naïveté of American foreign policy and ill-timed French delusions of grandeur. Indeed, by then nothing could save the South. The departure of Thiệu from the presidency on 21st April, 1975, and the hasty and farcical inauguration of General Dương Văn Minh as president in the hope that he was a more amenable figure to the communists, were all wishful thinking. The most tragic history was in the making and these feeble manoeuvres would soon be dashed.

On 30th April, 1975, General Minh declared an unconditional surrender and called on all units of the South Vietnamese army to drop their weapons.

¹¹⁴ *Ngày Cuối Cùng Của Việt Nam Cộng Hòa* by Phạm Nguyễn, publ. in *Nguyệt San Ngày Mới*, April 1993, p. 7.

B. THE TRAGEDY OF THE BOAT PEOPLE

SOON AFTER APRIL 1975, motivated by an immense sense of pride and zeal in the superiority of the communist ideal, the victors inflicted on the people of the South such a vigorous dose of Marxist re-education, collectivisation and an anti-private ownership campaign that purged all the echelons of society and brought the economy to its knees. The new government brought about to the people of the South a degree of intrusion into their personal lives unknown to them before. Most were stunned by the shock of this Marxist experience, including those who had spent their time, money and even risked their lives to support the then still clandestine communist insurgents before their final victory in 1975. Disillusioned and frightened they left the country in droves and started what became known as the phenomenon of the boat people. Indeed, it was only a trickle in 1975, then "by 1977 it became a flow — 21,276; by the end of 1978, a flood — 106,489; and in the first six months of 1979 a torrent — 166,604".¹¹⁵

From 1975 until March, 1993, 701,442 Vietnamese boat refugees and 36,084 Vietnamese land refugees had been allowed to resettle in a third country. In addition, there were 390,066 Vietnamese departing Vietnam under orderly departure programmes (O.D.P.), besides tens of thousands of others who left that country under special bilateral programmes assisted by I.O.M.¹¹⁶

Up to the end of March, 1993, the resettlement distribution was as shown in the table opposite:

¹¹⁵ *The Boat People — An Age Investigation* with Bruce Grant, 1979, p. 54.

¹¹⁶ Statistics and data for tables courtesy U.N.H.C.R. Resettlement Section.

Receiving countries	Boat people	Land people	O.D.P.	Total
Australia	103 712	2 139	39 718	145 569
Belgium	1 725	323	3 096	5 144
Canada	96 866	2 883	44 815	144 564
Denmark	4 455	117	2 058	6 630
Finland	1 347	0	539	1 886
France	21 276	5 569	18 917	45 762
Germany	15 462	1 360	11 300	28 122
Japan	5 835	56	1 059	6 950
Netherlands	7 203	234	1 659	9 096
New Zealand	4 314	114	964	5 392
Norway	5 838	118	3 453	9 409
Sweden	5 592	163	2 853	8 608
Switzerland	5 702	426	944	7 072
U.K.	18 546	96	4 564	23 206
U.S.A.	396 789	21 841	251 182	669 812
Others	6 780	645	2 945	10 370
TOTAL	701 442	36 084	390 066	1 127 592

Including Laotians and Cambodian refugees, the number of Indochinese fleeing from their respective communist régimes were 1,669,459 as at the end of March, 1993, whether by boat, land or O.D.P.

In percentage terms, the distribution of Vietnamese worldwide is as follows:

Receiving country	Boat people	Land people	O.D.P.	Total
Australia	14.8	5.9	10.2	12.9
Belgium	0.2	0.9	0.8	0.5
Canada	13.8	8.0	11.5	12.8
Denmark	0.6	0.3	0.5	0.6
Finland	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.6
France	3.0	15.4	4.8	4.1
Germany	2.2	3.8	2.9	2.5
Japan	0.8	0.2	0.3	0.6
Netherlands	1.0	0.6	0.4	0.8
New Zealand	0.6	0.3	0.2	0.5
Norway	0.8	0.3	0.9	0.8
Sweden	0.8	0.5	0.7	0.7
Switzerland	0.8	1.2	0.2	0.6
U.K.	2.6	0.3	1.2	2.1
U.S.A.	56.6	60.5	64.4	59.4
Others	1.0	1.8	0.8	0.9
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The distribution of the number of Vietnamese refugees taken by each country per head of population based on 1985 population estimates is shown in the table opposite.

Receiving country	Refugee numbers	Population estimate (mill.) (1985)	No. of refugees per million
Australia	145 569	15.7	9 272
Canada	144 564	25.3	5 714
U.S.A.	669 812	239.2	2 800
Norway	9 409	4.1	2 295
New Zealand	5 392	3.2	1 685
Denmark	6 630	5.1	1 300
Switzerland	7 072	6.3	1 123
Sweden	8 608	8.3	1 037
France	45 762	54.6	838
Netherlands	9 096	14.4	632
Belgium	5 144	9.9	520
Germany (West)	28 122	61.0	461
U.K.	23 206	56.1	414
Finland	1 886	4.9	385
Japan	6 950	120.7	58

It has been estimated that about one-quarter of the people who escaped from Vietnam in tiny, unseaworthy vessels may have perished. Many were terrorised by Thai pirates who not only robbed them of all their possessions but also raped the women and under-aged children. The refugees at first were looked upon with sympathy by the world until about 1989 when the world entered a period of economic stagnation and their compassion diminished.

Indeed, in that year over seventy nations signed a treaty among themselves with two aims: on the one hand, to resolve the problem of the boat people currently in refugee camps in times of economic recession; and on the other hand, to give a strong warning to Vietnamese still aspiring to freedom to give up any such aspiration because the free world could no longer afford to help. The treaty is called the Comprehensive Action Plan (C.P.A.).

As a consequence, the flow of refugees was drastically reduced. As of 31st March, 1993, there was a total of 125,000 Indochinese refugees in U.N.H.C.R. camps, still to be re-settled. The majority of them are Vietnamese.

Of these people, 83,537 are by boat and 41,493 are by land. They are yet to be re-settled following an extremely tough and, by any standards, unfair screening process to determine whether they are genuine political refugees or merely 'economic refugees'.

As of 31st March, 1993, according to the U.N.H.C.R. these stranded refugees were distributed as follows in various transit camps:

• Thailand:	Boat/Vietnamese	9 390
	Land/Cambodian	567
	Land/Vietnamese	2 250
	Land/Laotian	38 676
• Hong Kong:		43 403
• Indonesia:	Vietnamese	13 773
	Cambodian	550
• Malaysia:	Vietnamese	9 482
	Cambodian	42
• Phillipines:	Vietnamese	5 160
	Cambodian	1
	PRPC Bataan	5 007
	PRTC Bataan	1 053
• Japan:		576
• Singapore:		94
• Macau:		11
• Republic Of Korea:		2

The plight of the boat people is perhaps best illustrated by the most popular form of Vietnamese literature: that is, poetry. The following poem, entitled *A Prayer for Land*, was written by an unknown Vietnamese at a refugee camp in 1978.

Lost in the tempest
 Out on the open sea
 Our small boats drift.
 We seek for land
 During endless days and endless nights.
 We are the foam
 Floating on the vast ocean.
 We are the dust
 Wandering in endless space.
 Our cries are lost
 In the howling wind.
 Without food, without water
 Our children lie exhausted
 Until they cry no more.
 We thirst for land
 But are turned back from every shore.
 Our distress signals rise and rise again
 But the passing ships do not stop.
 How many boats have perished?
 How many families lie beneath the waves?
 Lord Jesus, do you hear the prayer of our flesh?
 Lord Buddha, do you hear our voice
 From the abyss of death?
 O solid shore,
 We long for you!

We pray for mankind to be present today!
 We pray for land to stretch its arms to us!
 We pray that hope be given us
 Today, from any land.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Bruce Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

The U.N.H.C.R. itself has been recently accused of mistreating refugees with a view towards forcing them to go back to Vietnam against their will. The C.P.A. was accused of being used as a convenient means to get rid of the boat people at all costs. The following cases of suicides are provided by a U.S.-based organisation named "Boat People S.O.S." In an appeal dated 20th March 1993, they are by and large a reflection against the extremely unfair and arbitrary method of screening refugees in order to classify them as either political or economic refugees. If they are 'screened in' they are 'political refugees' and will be resettled. If they are 'screened out', they are 'economic refugees' and will eventually be repatriated:

- 23rd February 1990 — Whitehead Detention Centre, Hong Kong: Nguyen Van Hai hanged himself.
Four men slashed their stomachs.
- 19th November 1990 — Washington D.C.: Nguyen Kim Bang immolated himself.
- 25th November 1990 — Pulau Bidong, Malaysia: Lam Van Hoang, whose sister was raped and killed together with 17 other women, committed suicide.
Ms Vi Thi Thuy Diem attempted suicide.
- 30th August 1991 — Galang, Indonesia: Ms Trinh Kim Huong immolated herself.
- 14th December 1991 — Whitehead Detention Centre, Hong Kong: Seven people immolated themselves.
- 31st July 1992 — Kai Tac Airport, Hong Kong: One boat person slashed his stomach in protest against forced repatriation.
- 27th August 1992 — Galang, Indonesia: Trinh Anh Huy immolated himself.
- 9th September 1992: Nguyen Van Minh, ex-officer in the RVN, attempted suicide because his son was screened out while he was screened in. After hospital release, he hanged himself on 10th October.

- 15 September 1992: Huynh Van Gioi, Pham Quoc Thang and Dinh Quang Thuc slashed themselves.
Another person drank toxic chemicals to commit suicide.
- 3rd December 1992: Ms Tran Thi Thuy An set herself and her son on fire. Her son died on the spot. She died one week later.
- 11th November 1992 — Sikiew, Thailand: Ms Hoang Thi Thu Cuc who had survived, together with eight others, a sea ordeal in which 10 others had died — hanged herself.

Thus refugees in various camps have to face a situation where the U.N. is no longer able or willing to look after their case in a humane manner for a number of reasons. First, the U.N. have other commitments which are considered more pressing such as Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kurdistan and the peace mission in Cambodia itself. Secondly, Western nations, under intense diplomatic offensives on the part of the Vietnamese communist government, are now of the opinion that it would be safe for refugees to come back to Vietnam without retribution from the government. The third reason is the flow of refugees who had been resettled but who now return to Vietnam to visit relatives and their friends without major difficulties. This really deprives them of their refugee status since there appears to be no more likelihood of persecution. Thus, these ex-refugees become the perpetrators of the continuing tragedy of their own kind, still stranded in the various scanty camps across South-East Asia. And last but not least is the fact that the communist leadership in Vietnam has decided to open the country to the market economy, more for the sake of the survival of the Party than anything else. However, Western nations are looking at Vietnam now as a potential market of seventy million people whose economy is still in poor shape but whose population is skilled and well-educated, thus definitely a market with a future. As a consequence their political convictions gradually give way to economic and more pragmatic considerations and trade with Vietnam now becomes permissible. This further erodes the rationale of the refugee status of the boat people.

C. SOUTH VIETNAM: THE MARXIST LENINIST RE-EDUCATION

SINCE 1954 THE PEOPLE of North Vietnam have undergone unimaginable sacrifices under relentless propaganda from the party machine in order to win the war in South Vietnam. In the minds of the people in the North, their compatriots in the South must be living in hell and abject poverty due to the cruel exploitation of the imperialist Americans and their lackeys in Saigon. So much so that immediately after 30th April, 1975, many North Vietnamese with relatives in the South, despite their own economic deprivation, had to travel from Hanoi to Saigon, carrying with them a few pounds of coarse rice to the assistance of their supposedly famished relatives.

However, when they were on the doorsteps of the address of their loved ones they could not believe their eyes. For, despite the ravages of war, the trauma of defeat and the trash of capitalism, the conditions of life in the South were still vastly superior to the socialist North. The rice in the South was finer, the accommodation was more modern and people were generally happier than the party would have them believe.

Nevertheless, the party was then able to argue that socialism was still vastly superior to capitalism. The difference in living standards was mainly due to the much greater sacrifice in the North in this lengthy struggle to liberate the country and regain independence. Thus upon this immovable conviction on the superiority of the socialist ideal, the whole party machine launched in the South a vast campaign to re-educate the whole population along Marxist lines.

To achieve this objective, a comprehensive strategy was devised and methodically implemented. The various steps of this strategy was described as follows by Dr Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến in a speech during a conference of ex-political prisoners and victims of communism, in Cabramatta, N.S.W., Australia on 23rd May 1993:

1. Re-education of former military and administrative officers of the former Republic of Vietnam

After their military victory in South Vietnam in April, 1975, one of the remaining worries of the communist leadership was how to control the vast number of military officers and civil servants of the former South Vietnamese government. By then they had had in their custody no more than ten percent of these officers. The remainder were scattered and in hiding. It would be an impossible task to identify and arrest them all. The Southern Command of the communist troops under General Trần Văn Trà met urgently and came to one of the most daring decisions of the war: namely to release unconditionally and immediately all military and civil officers arrested without distinction as to ranks or status. These officers unwittingly became the most effective propaganda machine on the 'generosity and humaneness' of the new government. Thus when the new government called upon all former officers of the South to report themselves for re-education, officially "for a duration of one month for officers from the rank of major up and 10 days for lower-ranks officers", 90 percent of them fell into the trap. The real duration of these now notorious re-education sessions is years, and for some people decades, in sub-standard conditions that defy all imagination. A large number of inmates were executed or died of hardship or became permanently incapacitated.

2. The anti-capitalist campaign in 1976

This was the slogan used by the government to cover the confiscation of the private properties of wealthy citizens. In his book *Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh 10 năm*, the then party boss in the South reported that in 1976, in Saigon alone, 230 private assets, 400 factories and 14,000 artisan enterprises were confiscated. The total of assets and cash confiscated was 19 billion Hanoi Dong of that time.

3. The New Economic Zones

In the two years from 1975 to 1976, the new régime forced 400,000 residents of Saigon, especially those connected with the former régime or 'wealthy capitalists', to move to so-called New Economic Zones in extremely remote, unexploited and unsanitary areas on the pretext of reducing the population density of Saigon. However the real reason was to be able to confiscate their properties and use their labour to work on virgin land. Further, another reason was to wage a class war on the rich and potential political opponents.

4. The policy of changing currencies

This trick was applied several times. The first time was in 1976 and was very successful on the part of the régime because the people were unaware. Indeed without prior notice, the régime announced that each registered family could exchange the currencies in its possession for a limited amount of new currencies. Any leftovers were worthless. Thus many families were suddenly impoverished overnight. However, in subsequent times the tactics applied were much less successful because the people were more aware of possible tricks and had converted all their possessions into gold, goods or foreign currencies, thus avoiding government tricks but at the same time bringing the already weak economy to its knees.

5. Collectivisation of land

The peasants were forced to abandon ownership of their land and enter into agricultural cooperatives. The effective tax in kind on the cooperatives was so prohibitive that, after tax, a peasant had virtually nothing left for his family. Thus apathy and collective non-cooperation were widespread. Famine, which had been unknown in the South, became the norm.

6. The semi-official waves of refugees exodus (*Vượt Biên Bán Chính Thức*)

From 1977 the relationship between the two socialist brothers China and Vietnam began to deteriorate until it reached its

nadir in 1979 when Deng Xiao Ping decided to teach Vietnam a lesson, with disastrous consequences for the Chinese troops. Thus during the period between 1977 and 1979 Vietnamese of ethnic Chinese origin were looked upon by the régime as possible traitors and spies for the Chinese government. Accordingly, the régime implemented a policy of exporting Chinese refugees on semi-official trips from Vietnam. The aims were twofold: first to rid the country of potential traitors, and second to confiscate their properties. In general each refugee had to pay to the police anything from six to 15 taels of gold per head. Hundreds of thousands were exported as refugees that way. Further the régime saw fit to infiltrate their own agents among these refugees in order to spy on the conduct of Vietnamese people overseas.

7. *Glasnost and perestroika*

The above policies in due course wrought extreme havoc on the economy; the winds of change with the Gorbachev era started to blow in Vietnam as well. Thus the 6th Party Congress in December, 1986, decided to adopt a limited version of Soviet-style openness and restructuring. The more liberal Nguyễn Văn Linh was elected General Secretary. The régime then started to return rice fields to individual peasants, allow free trade, encourage foreign investments, allow ex-refugees to visit relatives in Vietnam and people in Vietnam to go overseas to visit relatives. However, human rights are still not respected. These changes are by and large cosmetic in nature in order to give the régime more breathing space to survive.

8. The "Back To Visit Vietnam" movement

Faced with the U.S. diplomatic and trade embargo as well as extremely difficult economic circumstances of their own making, the party since 1986 took a brave new turn to survive. It officially started a campaign to woo back to Vietnam refugees living overseas whom they had labelled "reactionaries, prostitutes, drug addicts and undesirable elements of the former corrupt capitalist régime". These refugees are now lovingly

called "patriotic Vietnamese overseas". The campaign proved to be an outstanding success. Most Vietnamese overseas have close relatives still living in Vietnam and the desire to visit family is strong in our tradition. The aim of the Party appears to be fourfold in this campaign:

(a) To boost the amount of foreign currency invested in Vietnam: indeed, Vietnamese overseas alone must have brought back to the country hundreds of millions of dollars to revive the economy.

(b) To destroy the *raison d'être* of the refugees still stranded in refugee camps throughout South-East Asia. For a free world bent on solving more immediate economic problems, this is a good excuse to label refugees 'economic' and not 'political', and refuse to offer them asylum.

(c) To weaken the anti-communist determination of Vietnamese overseas, since most of those who had visited Vietnam would henceforth be more careful in their activities overseas for fear of reprisals — on themselves on their next trips, or on their relatives still inside.

(d) To show to the world a more human face so as to be in a position to call for more foreign aid and to call on the Americans to lift the trade embargo that was hurting the economy.

According to the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 20th May, 1993, during the 1992 year alone 15,000 Vietnamese in Australia went back to visit Vietnam.

(e) The promotion of the concept of 'National reconciliation' overseas. The rationale of this concept could be summarised in a nutshell as follows: there is no more point in fighting the communist government. We have more pressing economic problems. We should join forces with the communist government to build a more prosperous Vietnam. Such concepts as human rights or multi-party democracy are luxuries that we cannot yet afford.

Of course, promoters of this concept are by and large members of the Party planted among the refugees for spying and propaganda purposes, coupled with some sympathisers bent on

earning favour with the government for personal gain. They conveniently forget the fact that such a rationale would ensure a one-party dictatorship and a level of incompetency and corruption that would severely limit the economic development of Vietnam. On the political front this would result in prolonging unnecessarily the life of a party that no longer has the *raison d'être* nor imagination to serve the people.

(f) Some limited degree of cultural and artistic freedom was now allowed — however, with strict limitations: artists and writers are allowed to criticise shortcomings of individual party members that are “in violation of the spirit of party policies”. In other words the party admits only that its members may be wrong; *it* is not. Further, despite the sometimes vociferous criticisms, one may notice that these never attack the one-party system or the supremacy of the Party. Thus this whole campaign is being skilfully orchestrated by the Party itself.

(g) Some political opposition was also orchestrated by such personalities as the following:

- Trần Xuân Bá — an expelled member of the Central Committee of the Party;
- Nguyễn Hộ, Tạ Bá Tòng — *Câu Lạc Bộ những người kháng chiến cũ* or Club of ex-Freedom Fighters.
- Bùi Tín who stirred up a lot of discussion overseas with his well-known 12-point open submission for reform;

and a cohort of other so-called intellectuals. However they all agree on the supremacy of the Party despite its admitted shortcomings.

The above is by and large Dr Nguyễn's analysis. It would be fair to add that Vietnam as a whole — South Vietnam in particular — has been fortunate in that the Communist ideology lost steam in the early '80s and totally collapsed by the end of that decade. The Communist Party of Vietnam is still in power in Vietnam only because of the following factors:

- It still controls the police and the army.

- The Nationalist opposition had been decimated by the communists in the North and by the French-, then American-supported Diệm régime in the South. They are regrouping but still quite weak.
- The various flexible and pragmatic policies of the Communist Party on the economic and propaganda fronts to prolong its survival.

From a strategic point of view the end of the party's power is only a matter of time because it has lost its ideals, mystique and absolute control. In orthodox Bolshevik tradition, it never had nor did it ever need popular support to stay in power. Furthermore, its ideal is not only outdated but also totally in conflict with the spirit of the three traditional religious and cultural tenets of Vietnam: Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. It would be difficult indeed to envisage a major role for the party in the Vietnam of the future unless it were to undergo a radical metamorphosis into a socialist party of the Western democratic type, the likes of the Socialist Party in France and Japan, or the Labor Party in Australia, Great Britain and New Zealand. The time for performing this miracle is rapidly running out for the Communist Party of Vietnam.

The author applied to sponsor his parents and five brothers and sisters to Australia and the application was approved by the Australian Government in 1984. However, their exit visas were refused by the Vietnamese Government and no reasons were given by them.

The letter on the opposite page, dated 27th October, 1988, shed light finally on the reasons. The said letter appears to seek to apply pressure on the author to cease his human rights activities, and possibly later to work for the Vietnamese communist government by spying on individuals and organisations in the Vietnamese community in Australia. The letter was referred to the Australian Government by the author but no action was taken by them.

[English translation overleaf, pp 144 –145]

ĐẠI SỨ QUÁN CHXHCN VIỆT NAM
TẠI AUSTRALIA

CỘNG HÒA XÃ HỘI CHỦ NGHĨA VIỆT NAM
Độc lập - Tự do - Hạnh phúc

Canberra, ngày 27 tháng 10 năm 1988

Kính gửi: ông Đào Tăng Đĩnh,
77 Lê Hồng Phong, Nha Trang
Phu Khanh.

Đại sứ quán Cộng hòa XHCN Việt Nam tại Australia đã nhận được thư ngày 10/10/1988 của ông xin xuất cảnh sang Úc đoàn tụ với con trai ông là Đào Tăng Đức. Về việc này, chúng tôi xin trả lời như sau:

1/ Nhà nước ta có chính sách hết sức rộng rãi và nhân đạo trong việc giải quyết các trường hợp xin xuất cảnh đoàn tụ gia đình hoặc vì lý do nhân đạo, đồng thời chính sách đó cũng chỉ rõ 4 trường hợp chưa được xét cho xuất cảnh. Một trong những trường hợp đó là: "... những người xin đoàn tụ với thân nhân ở nước ngoài đang có những hoạt động chống lại nước Cộng hòa XHCN Việt Nam..."

2/ Nhưng rất đáng tiếc là con trai ông là Đào Tăng Đức trong thời gian qua và hiện nay đã không ngừng tham gia vào những hoạt động chống phá lại đất nước Việt Nam, làm tổn thương đến thanh danh của người Việt ở nước ngoài (xin gửi kèm theo đây ảnh về con ông trong cuộc biểu tình trước Đại sứ quán ta tại Úc ngày 30/4/1988 vừa qua).

3/ Chúng tôi rất thông cảm với nguyện vọng xin xuất cảnh đoàn tụ gia đình của ông. Để nguyện vọng đó sớm được thực hiện, ông nên viết thư hoặc điện thoại cho con trai ông đến Sứ quán Việt Nam tại Canberra trình bày nguyện vọng và cam kết chấm dứt các hành động chống lại, từ bỏ các chức vụ trong các hội đoàn phản động chống lại đất nước Việt Nam. Sau khi lời cam kết đó đã được chứng minh bằng việc làm thực tế, chúng tôi sẽ xem xét và đề nghị các cơ quan hữu quan trong nước giải quyết cho ông và gia đình được xuất cảnh theo đúng chính sách hiện hành của Nhà nước Việt Nam.

Nhân dịp này, chúng tôi xin gửi tới ông lời chia buồn về việc bà Nguyễn thị Cẩm đã mất. Xin chúc ông và gia đình mạnh khỏe.

T/M ĐẠI SỨ QUÁN VIỆT NAM TẠI UC
Bí thư thứ nhất



Đo Ngọc An.

[Translation from Vietnamese]

GREAT EMBASSY OF THE SOCIALIST SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM
REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM IN AUSTRALIA Independence—Freedom—Happiness

CANBERRA, 27/10/1988

To: Mr. DAO TANG DINH
77 Le Hong Phong St,
NHA TRANG - PHU KHANH

The Great Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in Australia has received your letter of 10/10/1988 applying for exit visa(s) in order to be reunited with your son DAO TANG DUC. On this matter, We reply as follows:

- 1— Our government has an extremely humane and generous policy in resolving applications for exit visas for family reunion or for humanitarian reasons. At the same time, this policy also spells out 4 cases where favourable consideration has not yet been granted. One of these cases is: "... Those who apply for family reunion with relatives overseas, with activities against the Socialist Republic Of Vietnam ..."
- 2— Regrettably your son Dao Tang Duc in the past and presently has not ceased to be involved in activities hostile to the Vietnamese nation, injuring the reputation of Vietnamese nationals overseas (We enclose picture(s) of your son in a demonstration before the Great Embassy in Australia on the last 30/4/1988).
- 3— We are very sympathetic with your aspirations to emigrate for family reunion. In order that these aspirations could be soon fulfilled, you should write or telephone your son requesting him to report to the

Vietnamese Embassy in Canberra, submitting his aspirations and covenanting to terminate all sinful activities, resigning all positions in reactionary organisations hostile to the Vietnamese nation. When this covenant has been evidenced by deed, We shall consider and make submissions to the responsible organisations in Vietnam to resolve your case and the case of your family to be granted exit visas in accordance with the current policy of the government of Vietnam.

We would like to take this opportunity to offer our condolences about the death of (your wife) Mrs. NGUYEN THI CAM.

We wish you and your family good health.

On behalf of the Great Embassy of Vietnam in Australia.
First Secretary,

DO NGOC AN

(signed & sealed)

VI THE CONTINUED STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

A. THE DEGRADATION OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF VIETNAM

SINCE THE FALL OF the Republic of Vietnam (The South), the rank and file of the Communist Party have undergone experiences beyond the control of the propaganda machine of the party. They have seen with their own eyes the relative prosperity their kinsmen or compatriots in the South are enjoying thanks to the trash of capitalism. Meanwhile the standard of living in the socialist haven in the North was definitely inferior. Then came the collapse of the whole socialist system in Eastern Europe and in particular the Soviet Union. Indeed, the party could have probably maintained at least a pretence of idealism with the Gorbachev concepts of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* in 1985, even with the abolition of the dictatorship of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the Soviet constitution in December 1988 (although it made it quite clear that it would never allow this to happen in Vietnam, given the different 'objective' conditions in each society), or the rather free (in communist terms) elections in the Soviet Union in 1989. However, the failed *coup d'état* on 15th August, 1991, by the conservatives within the ranks of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union against Gorbachev, the subsequent demise of the Soviet Party and the further collapse of the Soviet Union itself were really the last straw for the Communist Party of Vietnam. From now on the party cannot lay claim to any idealism with the least modicum of credibility since, even in the eyes of the most illiterate Vietnamese peasant and in the eyes of the most fanatic cadre, socialism is already dead.

As a natural consequence, the whole morale of all echelons of the party is in tatters. Indeed in Vietnam, only a pretence by the party is surviving. This phenomenon is reflected in the ever-decreasing numbers of young people joining the party:

- 1987: 100 000 new members.
- 1988: 80 000 new members.
- 1989: 66 000 new members.
- 1990: 49 000 new members.
- 1991: 36 000 new members.¹¹⁸

The official youth newspaper published in Hồ Chí Minh City reported:

“According to the statistics of the city’s youth organisation: 70% of the organisation’s cadres have lost zeal. Those cadres consider the organisation’s activities as a burden they have to carry.”¹¹⁹

The administration is heavily afflicted with corruption. Even the then Acting Prime Minister Phan Thế Khải had to acknowledge this problem in his official report. Indeed he pointed out that for the month of March, 1993, alone there were 5,439 instances of corruption. He further pointed out the fact that The Central Investigation Committee (*Ủy Ban Điều Tra Trung Ương*) and the People’s Inspectorate (*Viện Kiểm Soát Nhân Dân*) were both ineffective because their members were also corrupt.¹²⁰

It would be entirely fair to conclude that the Communist Party has no more future in Vietnam. However that is not the same as saying that it is no longer an effective ruling power. Although they have completely lost the fire of idealism, they have very quickly replaced it with the equally if not more powerful urges for greed and self-interest. Especially the new recruits have this on their minds.

¹¹⁸ *Sàigòn Giải Phóng*, 18th and 19th August, 1992, as quoted by Phạm Văn Lưu in *Ước Vọng Xây Dựng Tổ Quốc Việt Nam*, *Nguyệt San Ngày Mới*, April, 1993, p. 27.

¹¹⁹ *Tuổi Trẻ*, 13th October 1992.

¹²⁰ *Tiếng Nói Người Việt*, 15th July, 1993, p. 17.

For indeed it *is* the effective ruling power so long as it can control the army and police force, and as long as there is no credible opposition forces inside or outside Vietnam. Thus in order to assess the political situation objectively we should evaluate the forces of opposition to the communist régime.

B. AN EVALUATION OF THE FORCES OF OPPOSITION

FROM 1954, WHEN THE Vietnamese communists took over power in what was known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), in typical Leninist tradition all political opposition was effectively silenced. Meanwhile, in what was known as the Republic of Vietnam (or South Vietnam) another dictatorship, in this case a right-wing Catholic minority dictatorship which initially had the support of the Americans, was subsequently overthrown by the generals in alliance with a popular Buddhist uprising and with American approval. The forces of opposition did not have favourable conditions for developing either their organisations or the democratic ideal in South Vietnam. The paucity of political opposition in the South and the total absence of opposition in the North have been mentioned in Chapter IV of this book.

Before effecting an evaluation of the forces of opposition, it is necessary to describe the opposition groups since the fall of South Vietnam in 1975.

The following are the political groups opposed to the communist régime originating by and large outside Vietnam:¹²¹

1. The Alliance For Democracy In Vietnam (Liên Minh Dân Chủ Việt Nam)

The Alliance was founded on 1st January, 1981, in the U.S.A. with the proclamation of The Manifesto for the People, Freedom, Independence, Peace, Neutrality (*Tuyên Ngôn Dân Bản, Tự Do, Độc Lập, Hòa Bình, Trung Lập*). The manifesto was signed by Messrs Trần Văn Đỗ, Nguyễn Ngọc Huy, Vũ

¹²¹ As enumerated in a pamphlet entitled *Các Đoàn Thể Đấu Tranh Tại Hải Ngoại*, or "Political Organisations Overseas", published by the Political and Training Department of the Vietnam Restoration Party (Tổ Chức Phục Hưng Việt Nam).

Quốc Thúc, Chung Tấn Cang, Trần Văn Nhứt and Nguyễn Phục Việt. The Alliance is generally considered a front organisation for the New Great Viet Party (*Tân Đại Việt*). However since the party has ceased to operate as an organised political party, it would be more accurate to consider the Alliance as the successor to the heritage of the New Great Viet Party.

The Alliance has operative cells in major states in the U.S.A., Europe, Australia and Canada. The major task of the Alliance seems to be on the formation of the International Committee for a Free Vietnam which was established in December, 1986, with the considerable support of quite prominent Western politicians.

2. The Overseas Alliance For The National Restoration Of Vietnam

(Liên Minh Hải Ngoại Phục Quốc Việt Nam)

The Alliance was initially conceived on or about 1977, but not until 30th December, 1979, was an official manifesto and a constitution proclaimed at an annual general meeting. The main figures behind the founding of the Alliance were Messrs Việt Định Phương, Nguyễn Văn Nghi and Tô Văn. The main support group was the Overseas Ex-Servicemen's Forces (*Lực Lượng Quân Nhân Hải Ngoại*) under the leadership of Mr Lục Phương Ninh.

The Alliance stood for democracy, neutrality and organising armed uprising against the communist government inside Vietnam. However, only one year after its first annual general meeting, due to internal dissensions, the Alliance ceased to effectively exist as an organisation.

3. The Free Vietnamese Organisation

(Tổ Chức Người Việt Tự Do)

The organisation was founded in 1975 by a group of Vietnamese overseas students in Japan. They were first known to the world in a press conference in Tokyo on 28th May, 1975.

They were noted for their effort to establish a system of Vietnamese thoughts and ideals known as *Hệ Tư Tưởng Việt Đạo Nhân Bản* which incorporated modern Western values and traditional Vietnamese culture.

The organisation completed ten international press conferences, forty demonstrations before the Vietnamese communist embassy and one hundred political seminars. Then on 3rd October, 1981, it voluntarily disbanded itself to merge with The United Front For The National Liberation Of Vietnam (*Mặt Trận Quốc Gia Thống Nhất Giải Phóng Việt Nam*).

4. The United Front For The National Liberation Of Vietnam

(*Mặt Trận Quốc Gia Thống Nhất Giải Phóng Việt Nam*)

The United Front was established on 13th June, 1981, to represent three political groups: The Free Vietnamese Organisation, The Vietnam Restoration Party (*Tổ Chức Phục Hưng Việt Nam*) and The Vietnamese Soldiers and People's Force (*Lực Lượng Quân Dân Việt Nam*).

Vice-Admiral Hoàng Cơ Minh was appointed leader of the United Front. However, The Vietnam Restoration Party had withdrawn from the United Front by the end of 1981.

On 3rd April, 1982, a front organisation for the United Front was created by the name of National Support Movement (*Phong Trào Quốc Gia Yểm Trợ Kháng Chiến*) under the leadership of Mr Phạm Ngọc Lũy. The United Front advocated armed struggle both from bases in Thailand and inside Vietnam.

However, by the end of 1984 there was a split between the Movement and The Front. In 1984, Vice-Admiral Hoàng was reported as having been killed during an attempt to lead an armed contingent back to Vietnam. His death has not, even today, been confirmed by the Front.

5. The United Front Of Patriotic Forces For The Liberation Of Vietnam.

(Mặt Trận Thống Nhất Các Lực Lượng Yêu Nước Giải Phóng Việt Nam)

The Front was founded immediately after the fall of South Vietnam on 30th April, 1975, in the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam by Buddhist, Catholic, Caodaiist and Hòa Hảo religious forces, youth, anti-communist students, and a number of former officers of the then Republic of Vietnam. The original name of the front was The United Front of Patriotic Forces for the Liberation of South Vietnam.

The Front appeared to have the support of Communist China. Its aim was to organise armed rebellion inside Vietnam and international support outside Vietnam. It was successful in mustering significant military forces inside Vietnam. The identity of its leadership has been kept secret for security reasons since they operated inside Vietnam. Its best known leader was Mr Lê Quốc Túy, the co-chairman in charge of External Affairs who was resident in France.

On or about December, 1984, the Vietnamese communists arrested a significant number of high-ranking members of the Front and confiscated a large quantity of weapons. This event considerably weakened the Front. Realising the threat from the Front, the Vietnamese communists openly executed three Front members arrested for their activities: Hồ Thái Bạch, Lê Quốc Quân and Trần Văn Bá in January, 1986.

With the death of Lê Quốc Túy in France in 1987, the Front gradually lost most of its influence.

6. The Vietnamese Soldiers And People's Force (Lực Lượng Quân Dân Việt Nam)

On the Đống Đa commemoration day, 1977, in the town of Encinitas, north of San Diego, California, 102 ex-servicemen of the former Republic of Vietnam established the Vietnamese Overseas Soldiers Force (*Lực Lượng Quân Nhân Việt Nam Hải*

Ngoại). The first general meeting was held on 30th April, 1977.

By July 1983, the organisation claimed it had infiltrated members back to Vietnam and established The Vietnam Revolutionary Peoples Movement (*Phong Trào Dân Tộc Cách Mạng Việt Nam*) comprising: Inside Vietnam, The Thăng Long organisation, The People's Self Determination Front (*Mặt Trận Dân Tộc Tự Quyết*), the Liên Hữu group, The Free Vietnam Force (*Lực Lượng Việt Nam Tự Do*) and, outside Vietnam, The Vietnamese Overseas Soldiers Force and the Democracy Committee in Europe (*Ủy Ban Dân Chủ Âu Châu*).

On 23rd December, 1979, at its second annual general meeting, the Force changed its name to The Vietnamese Soldiers' And People's Force with General Nguyễn Chánh Thi as Chairman of the Leadership Council, Vice-Admiral Hoàng Cơ Minh and Lieutenant Colonel Lục Phương Ninh as Commander and Deputy Commander.

The platform of the Force was to resort to armed struggle and diplomacy to overthrow the communist government in Vietnam in order to establish democracy.

However in August 1981, General Nguyễn Chánh Thi disbanded the Force so that its members could join the United Front for the National Liberation of Vietnam. This move was considered illegal by some members of the Force under Lục Phương Ninh who carried on under the name of the Force. But it continued only in name and had lost most of its real strength.

7. The National People's Revolutionary Organisation For The Liberation Of Vietnam (Tổ Chức Cách Mạng Dân Tộc Quốc Gia Giải Phóng Việt Nam)

This organisation was founded by the former President of South Vietnam, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, on or about 1980. Its existence was only officially declared by Nguyễn Văn Thiệu on 22nd November, 1986. The organisation appears to promote armed struggle against the communist régime inside Vietnam and

diplomatic pressure outside Vietnam. The organisation is centred on the person of Mr Thiệu and does not have much support among the Vietnamese people either overseas or inside Vietnam. On 10th December, 1986, on the occasion of Human Rights Day, Professor Vũ Quốc Thúc, a supporter of the former president, established the Vietnamese Lawyers' Campaign Committee for the Restoration of the 1973 Paris Agreement (*Ủy Ban Luật Gia Việt Nam Vận Động Văn Hồi Hiệp Định Paris 1973*), claiming the continued legal existence of the state of South Vietnam and that Mr Thiệu was legally its representative. The committee does not seem to have had much success or to be able to raise much concern, either within the Vietnamese community overseas or inside Vietnam, or in the international community.

8. The All Vietnam Nationalist Alliance (Liên Minh Toàn Dân Quốc Gia Việt Nam)

The Alliance was founded in Australia on 1st December, 1986, by Trần Văn Lắm, former Minister for Foreign Affairs in the then Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). Its aim was to unite all groups and political parties in order to fight the communist government. The Alliance appears to have set its aim too high, although it does not have the best quality leadership nor the popular support. To date, the Alliance continues to exist in name only.

9. The Free Vietnam Front (Mặt Trận Việt Nam Tự Do)

The Front was founded by the well-known Vietnamese politician Hà Thúc Ký and members of the faction of the Great Viet Party in central Vietnam. Its aim was to overthrow the communist government and establish democracy in Vietnam. The Front does not pay a lot of attention to activities outside of Vietnam but instead focuses its attention on organising opposition inside.

10. The Vietnamese National Revolutionary Youth Movement

(Phong Trào Thanh Niên Cách Mạng Dân Tộc Việt)

The Movement was conceived on or about September, 1979, by about 40 young intellectuals in Santa Ana and officially founded on 1st January, 1980, at its second general meeting in Washington. Its aims were humanism (*Tinh thần nhân chủ*), anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, anti-militarism, co-operation with repentant communists, and democracy. The Movement ceased to operate effectively within a year of its foundation due to the lack of political experience and organisational skills of its members and leadership. Too many of its members indulged in useless theory rather than practice and caused the decline of the movement.

11. The People And Soldiers' Supporting Force For The Restoration Of Vietnam

(Lượng Dân Quân Yểm Trợ Phục Quốc Việt Nam)

The Force was founded by Colonel Võ Đại Tôn in 1981. Originally, prior to 1981, Mr Võ was head of the Australian Chapter of the Overseas Alliance for the National Restoration of Vietnam. However due to internal dissension within the Alliance, the Australian Chapter seceded and, under the leadership of Võ Đại Tôn, founded the Force. At the same time, with the assistance of Việt Định Phương he also founded the Vietnamese Restoration Volunteer Group Overseas (*Chi Nguyên Đoàn Hải Ngoại Phục Quốc Việt Nam*) with the aim of returning to Vietnam from overseas to organise resistance.

On or about November 1981, during his attempt to re-enter Vietnam, he was arrested by the communist forces. On 14th July, 1982, he was presented at a press conference in Hanoi by the communists with the aim of alleging that the U.S.A., Thailand and China had supported him. However Mr Võ declared: "I maintain my political stand which is to fight for freedom and am prepared to accept any sentence imposed."

He was imprisoned until 1992 when, upon the intervention of the Australian Government, he was released and returned to Australia. The volunteer group has ceased to exist due to internal friction between Việt Định Phương and Lê Thiết Trụ. The Force still operates in Australia but Mr Võ is no longer its leader.

12. The Vietnamese Revolutionary Alliance of Political Parties

(Liên Đảng Cách Mạng Việt Nam)

After one year of unofficial activities, the Alliance was made public in a press announcement on 29th December, 1986. The Alliance comprised The Vietnamese Nationalist Party. The Nationalist Restoration Group (*Khối Dân Tộc Phục Quốc*) founded by Mr Trần Văn Tuyên, a lawyer and three other political parties.

Each party joining the Alliance still keeps its independence and identity except in the areas of external affairs, finance, propaganda and military matters. Mr Cao Thế Dung was appointed Chairman of the Central Supervisory Council (*Hội Đồng Giám Nghị Trung Ương*) and General Nguyễn Văn Chức, Chairman of the Military Commission (*Quân Ủy Hội*). The Alliance appears to have been able to establish certain minor garrisons at the Thai/Lao and Thai/ Cambodian border areas.

13. The Vietnam Restoration Party

(Tổ Chức Phục Hưng Việt Nam)

According to Party records, the Party was founded on 23rd December, 1978, in Los Angeles, California, and its operations both inside and outside of Vietnam had been kept secret until the party officially announced its existence in a coming-out ceremony on 23rd March, 1991, in Washington D.C., and on 24th March, 1991, in Little Saigon, California. The founding

chairman of the Leadership Council of the Party was Trần Văn Sơn, an ex-congressman of the then Republic of Vietnam. Its current chairman is Trần Trọng Ngà (otherwise known as Trần Quốc Bảo), an ex-officer of the then Republic of Vietnam. The Party is characterised by the youthfulness of its leaders and membership. The democratic principle is enshrined in the Party's constitution and general elections of all leadership positions have been held every two years.

The political platform of the Party is the creation of multi-party democracy in Vietnam through popular uprisings inside Vietnam and organising large-scale support for democracy and human rights from the international community outside of Vietnam.

The Party has operative infrastructures in states in the U.S.A., Canada, Australia, Europe and South-East Asia.

The Federation Of Young Vietnamese Volunteers (*Tổng Đoàn Thanh Niên Phục Hưng Việt Nam*) founded on 1st June, 1979, is the front organisation of the Party.

In order to further its aims the party actively promoted the concept of free elections for Vietnam under the auspices of the United Nations. It also sponsored the establishment of The Voice Of Freedom From Moscow (Radio Irina) and directly organised a radio programme called *The Forum For Democracy* from the USA in order to spread the democratic ideal to Vietnam. The official voice of the Party has been through its newsletter *The Vietnam Vision*.

The above account would not be complete without a mention of the fact that in August, 1993, Colonel Võ Đại Tôn ceased to be the head of the People and Soldiers' Supporting Force for the Restoration of Vietnam and founded a new group under the name of Alliance for the Glorious Restoration of Vietnam (*Liên Minh Quang Phục Việt Nam*).

Further, two well-known figures from inside Vietnam opposing the communist régime are: Dr Nguyễn Đan Quế (head of

the *Cao Trào Nhân Bản* or Humanist Movement) and Professor Đoàn Viết Hoạt (head of the *Diễn Đàn Tự Do* or Freedom Forum). The real strength and depth of organisation of both groups are yet to be evaluated.



We now turn to a critical analysis of the nature and effectiveness of all non-communist political parties and organisations including the modern political parties mentioned in Chapter III of this book. This analysis seems necessary in the context of any study of the development of democracy in Vietnam. Furthermore the analysis must touch on the whole life span of Vietnamese culture because the nature of political action in fact is a reflection of the Vietnamese nation's cultural heritage to a quite significant extent.

In Chapter II the positive aspects of Vietnamese cultural heritage has been described. It is now time to discuss some of its shortcomings throughout the span of history:

(a) Individualistic heroicism

(Anh hùng cá nhân chủ nghĩa)

The period of northern (or Chinese) domination (111 B.C.—939 A.D.) no doubt has considerably enriched the Vietnamese culture. It has however infused our culture with the extremely rigid and conservative Confucian values of the Song dynasty in China (*Tống Nho*) imposing an unnecessary burden on social mobility and socio-economic reforms; at the time of colonial conquests by the Western powers this conservatism played a crucial role in provoking their imperialist greed and evangelical fervour.

Further, during this period of history Vietnamese of all social strata were deeply influenced by an excessive and unjustified worship of the concept of '*Danh*'. This concept could be

generally translated as roughly the equivalent of the Western concept of 'Fame' or 'The Good Name'. Indeed the whole society was, and is still, littered with popular sayings such as:

- "When a tiger dies its skin is left behind, when a man dies he leaves his fame behind" (*Cọp chết để da, người ta chết để tiếng*).
- "To leave one's good name to generations to come" (*Lưu danh hậu thế*).
- "It is better to die than to have one's name blemished" (*Thà chết còn hơn bị ô danh*).

This is partly the reason that the Chinese and Vietnamese are well-known in the West for being ready to pay any cost in order to avoid losing face. At the other extreme it imposes, in typically chauvinist fashion on the male half of the society, a duty to all their ancestors to seek for fame and social recognition of their name and thus the name of the family.

Indeed the following verses by one of the most respected mandarin poets Nguyễn Công Trứ says it all:

Đã mang tiếng ở trong trời đất
 Phải có danh gì với núi sông
 (Having been born within heaven and earth
 One should achieve fame in one's country)

While the search for fame and recognition is no doubt a human affair and not necessarily a Vietnamese sin, the concept of 'Danh' in Vietnamese culture goes much deeper than a naturally human desire for fame. It represents a desire to seek fame at any cost, even at the expense of moral values and the interests of the many. When members of a political party are afflicted by this concept of 'Danh' it becomes an incurable disease, crippling the party and causing major problems to the success of its operations.

From this excessive concern about one's fame, the phenomenal disease of individualistic heroicism (*anh hùng cá nhân chủ nghĩa*) was born.

Political parties or organisations stricken with this condition have among their members individuals who regard their personal fame or the reputation of their political factions much more important than the success of the common cause.

Individualistic heroicism generally leads to conduct that is courageous and daring but totally lacking in tactical or strategic values and harmful to the common cause. It also leads to self-indulgence in one's reputation, factionalism, and lack of introspection to improve one's performance in order to live up to the objective political demands of the time.

Furthermore, political parties affected by this disease tend to promote heroic myths about their leaders, with the express approval of these leaders themselves. Because they place too much emphasis on the creation of myths, they have neglected the two most important tasks for political parties to succeed: the political training of members and the creation of infrastructures. These political parties thus believe that they could project certain illusions about their leaders and, through the personalities of these leaders, wrest control of the political heights without the need for any achievement of substance whatsoever.

(b) Political romanticism

(Lãng mạn chính trị chủ nghĩa)

The period of French domination (1884–1954) left a deep scar on the Vietnamese people. Indeed by the end of the 19th century, when realising that their heroic swordsmen were no match for French guns and modern artillery, the imperial court, the scholars and the whole people were rudely awakened to a new reality: the power and violence of a foreign nation outside the orbit of Chinese civilisation. Almost a century of French domination did not, of course, take place without fierce resistance from the Vietnamese on both the military and cultural fronts. However, as the famous French poet La Fontaine observed, “right equals might” (*la raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure*). In the deep recesses of the mind of the populace, serious doubts arose as to the worth and validity of the

traditional Oriental culture, including the traditional religions. Thus were born in some sections of the people, and especially in the intellectual class who were closest to the French conquerors, an incurable sense of national self-alienation (*tinh thần vong bản*) and an uncritical devotion to all things from the West (*Vọng ngoại theo tây phương*). These new intellectuals were influenced in their thinking by two principal groups of Western thinkers:

- The thoughts of the thinkers and writers of the 'age of enlightenment' in France, precursors of diverse socio-political-cultural theories of our time such as Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, Victor Hugo, Lamartine ...
- Dialectical materialism (a reverse manifestation of Hegelian dialectics) which forms the essence of Marxism-Leninism.

The vast majority of non-communist political thinkers and leaders belong to the group of intellectuals influenced by the above French writers. These Vietnamese leaders considered it their responsibility on the one hand to fight the French colonial power in order to restore independence to Vietnam and on the other hand to modernise the Vietnamese society by freeing it from what they considered the too-antiquated and restrictive Confucian morality of the time. The romantic sociology and pedagogy of Jean Jacques Rousseau, the idealistic political thoughts of Montesquieu as codified in his famous book *Ésprit Des Lois* ("Spirit Of Laws"), the lyrics of the verses of Lamartine and Verlaine and of a whole generation of French romantic writers now replaced Confucian values in the minds of these political leaders-cum-writers as the guiding light of their political action and artistic creativeness. Indeed while the Vietnamese nation's sovereignty was violated by the French colonial power, these Vietnamese intellectuals adopted French romanticism as their new morality.

In consequence, non-communist political organisations were never able to transcend the level of amateurishness that characterised their leaders and membership in order to become professional political organisations the like of the Third

International created by Lenin. The political romanticism of these non-communist political parties propelled them into bold revolutionary action, led not by the cool analytical faculties of the mind but unfortunately by the idealism and romanticism of their guiding gods, by their hearts ever-ready to vibrate in sympathy with romantic freedom, love, tears, broken dreams, and the whole gamut of human feelings and emotions that were totally anathema to effective political survival.

It appears now easy to understand why, on the one hand, these non-communist political parties were unable to stand up to the much better-armed and realistic French colonial administration, on the other being no match whatsoever for the very professional Communist Party of Vietnam, the standard-bearer of Leninism in the whole of South-East Asia under the leadership of one of the most skilful political survivors of the 20th century, Hồ Chí Minh.

(c) Political opportunism

(Chính trị cơ hội chủ nghĩa)

The period in South Vietnam from 1954 to 1975 constitutes an episode in history worth special attention. Indeed the crudeness of superpower politics is fully displayed here. The American government, under considerable lobbying pressure from the Roman Catholic Church led by Cardinal Spellman, Head Chaplain of the U.S. Army, decided that, with the French departure from Vietnam as the result of the Geneva Convention there should be a Catholic president in South Vietnam, on the assumption that only a Catholic president would be able to contain the communist peril from the North. Thus, on that assumption, Ngô Đình Diệm, a mandarin of the Nguyễn dynasty and himself of the catholic faith, was propelled into power. With the support of the two greatest superpowers of the modern world, one on the temporal side and the other on the spiritual side, Mr Ngô became President of the Republic of Vietnam.

Under the Geneva Agreement, elections should have been held in 1956 in the whole country to reunify Vietnam. They

were never held because the Americans feared a communist victory.¹²² An obvious victory by Hồ Chí Minh would of course have removed Ngô Đình Diệm from power and laid waste to the American strategy of containment of communist influence in South-East Asia.

Thus in one single move the Americans pushed into political oblivion, through their political and economic intervention, a generation of genuinely patriotic anti-colonial political leaders the like of Nguyễn Tường Tam, Vũ Hồng Khanh, Trương Tử Anh, Huỳnh Phú Sổ and numerous other leaders who had both popular support and organisational support, whose considerable anti-colonial past and lengthy terms of imprisonment in French gaols proved their political standing in the eyes of all Vietnamese. The new administration of course denied them a share in the leadership of the new nation.

Although the vast majority of Vietnamese adhere to the three religions of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, the influence of Buddhism as a religion has been much deeper in this triumvirate, in purely religious matters, while Taoism is more an artistic expression and Confucianism a code of ethics and social values. Meanwhile the Catholic population of Vietnam stands between eight to 10 percent of the population.¹²³ Thus the religious suppression of a majority by a minority, although a peaceful and non-violent majority, proved fatal to the régime.

And the Communist Party of Vietnam was always there to exploit the political instabilities of an unpopular government. The communist strategy was based by and large on two main themes: the presence of American troops in the South was imperialist in nature, and the suppression of the Buddhist population by the Catholic régime was also imperialist in nature since Buddhism has been part of the Vietnamese culture for almost two thousand years.

The latter theme resulted in a massive programme of infiltra-

¹²² N.K. Meaney, ed., *The West and the World*, Vol. 2, 1986, Science Press, p. 217.

¹²³ Robinson and Cummings, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

tion of the Buddhist Sangha by the communists for political purposes. Both themes homed on one single aim: to whip up the patriotic and anti-colonialist sentiments of a proud but unfortunate people caught in the wave of colonial conquests by the Western powers since the end of the 19th century and never truly independent of Western intrigues and manipulations.

Conscious of the imminent fall of the régime of Ngô Đình Diệm, both American Presidents Kennedy and Johnson opted for the use of the then South Vietnamese armed forces to restore political stability and to stop the communist expansion. The death of Diệm was followed by a massive infusion of American cash and troops into South Vietnam. The degree of corruption among the military and political leaders which ensued was of monumental proportions.

A second Catholic President by the name of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu was also installed in South Vietnam, again with the assistance of the Americans and Cardinal Spellman. Thus there developed in the South a situation where the political and military leadership was engulfed in corruption, nepotism and chronic incompetence on the one hand, while the people no longer had any trust in the authority of the government in Saigon, on the other. All this during a period of time when the war was raging at the doorstep of every Vietnamese; in consequence, within the leadership a pessimism and sense of impending doom led necessarily to political opportunism and short-term gains. Since moral values no longer existed, the necessity to "grab whatever you can and run before disaster comes" characterised South Vietnamese politics of the time.

After the fall of South Vietnam in April, 1975, political opportunism continues to poison the various anti-communist groups formed by Vietnamese overseas. The main common features of these groups are:

- Speedy organisational growth and expansion followed by an equally sudden demise of the total organisation.
- Totally lack of infrastructure.
- Lack of policy coherence.
- Absence of clear political platform or objectives.

Leaders of these groups have shown a tendency to exaggerate the real strength and achievements of their groups in order to gain short-term popular support, including financial support.

(d) Political negativism

(Chính trị yếu thế chủ nghĩa)

The people of the North since 1954 and the people of the South since 1975 saw the strange phenomenon of a dictatorship of the proletariat installed in their respective half of the country. From the lengthy Chinese occupation to the more recent French domination, Vietnamese men and women had never experienced a nightmare that could remotely approximate to the terror of the Stalinist version of the Third Communist International. During the Chinese and French occupations, the foreigners only ruled the country at the level of the superstructure, such as the institutions of the army, the central and provincial governments ... but their villages and their minds still enjoyed a certain degree of freedom.

However under the dictatorship of the proletariat, not only their villages, but also the quantity of food they ate and the inner thoughts of their minds were the subjects of strenuous control of the party machine.

In the history of the nation, no dictatorship could be compared to the dictatorship of the proletariat in terms of its total and systematic domination of men and society. Because of this totalitarian feature of the régime all opposition became pointless and hopeless. The individuals in society became mere slaves surviving from day to day, terrified by the awesome power of the Party and its apparently infinite capacity to discover subversion through a comprehensive net of spies and secret police and the ensuing inhuman punitive measures. Thus in the deep recesses of the Vietnamese people's psyche was born a profound crisis of faith in the future, defeatism and political negativism of the worst type.

Political negativism by and large affected many anti-communist groups until the advent of the crumbling of the

communist empire throughout the world in the late 1980s.

The above mentioned four shortcomings (individualistic heroicism, political romanticism, political opportunism and political negativism) still continue to affect to varying degrees the many non-communist organisations both inside and outside Vietnam.

C. A CRITIQUE OF THE 1992 CONSTITUTION OF THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

IN APRIL 1992, the communist régime in Vietnam, amidst a great deal of fanfare and propaganda, proclaimed a revised constitution heralded as "the most democratic constitution in the history of Vietnam." On 19th July, 1992, a new National Congress was elected pursuant to the 1992 Constitution. This constitution is supposed to lend the régime a civilised face in its endeavour to woo international support so as to revive the disastrous performance of the socialist economic policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

Unfortunately, a close analysis of the revised constitution shows that the Communist Party, although deprived of its idealism, still retains jealously the reins of power albeit this time solely in order to consolidate the privileges of a conservative ruling class in the most reactionary sense of the word, in the tradition of the well-known South American juntas of the past.

Indeed, the 1992 Constitution appears to have the following objectives:

(a) To create a constitution having a most unnecessarily complex power structure, but under the absolute control of the Party, so as to divide power among different factions led by various faction bosses with the aim of appeasing all sections of the Party in order to avoid internal division and prolong the survival of the Party at a time of political uncertainty of the whole international communist movement.

(b) Following a stroke of creative genius only appreciated by the communists themselves, one that no sensible lawyer in the civilised world could comprehend, the Communist Party gave birth to the new concept of 'the socialist rule of law' (*Pháp chế xã hội chủ nghĩa*) to become the foundation of the new

constitution (Clause 12). Since the concept of the socialist rule of law is so creative, it follows that it should be different from and superior to all other concepts of the rule of law observed by any other nation in the world. Thus it enables the Communist Party and all its front organisations (especially the Patriotic Front) to act outside the confines of the law as such. In this respect, lawyers of countries that do not have the benefit of the socialist rule of law would tend to conclude that it seems to have all the characteristics of the law of the jungle, where the law is merely the manifestation of the will of the Party or individuals holding crude power.

(c) To liberalise within strict limits the right to private ownership in order to allow some wealth creation in the subjective belief that Vietnamese are intrinsically different from the rest of the human race: that in exchange for having enough to eat, they would renounce forever all human luxuries such as dignity, human rights, civil rights and other unnecessary Western garbage. The Communist Party of Vietnam, in its infinite wisdom, is banking their future on the hope that — like the pigs and fowl in their backyards — the people, once fed, will agree to be the slaves of the Party until the ends of their lives.

Let us look in some detail at this bizarre constitution:

1. Foreword

(Lời nói đầu)

The Foreword lays down in essence the foundation of the constitution. Regrettably in an age where ideologies are relegated to the shadows of the past in favour of scientific knowledge and universal human rights, the Foreword begins with hearty praise for the Communist Party of Vietnam, the thoughts of the Venerable Leader Hồ Chí Minh and Marxism-Leninism.

The fact that the Party consciously imprisons by force the creative spirit of the Vietnamese people within the regressive

and petty confines of Marxism-Leninism, despite the fact that with the crashing-down of the international communist movement they no longer believe in communism, indicates a cynical betrayal of monumental proportions of the Vietnamese people.

This Foreword is also indicative of the fact that the current leadership of the Party possesses all the characteristics of the ruling class of an underdeveloped nation. This ruling class is extremely conservative in nature, convinced in their conscience that since they had spent their lives fighting for the Party in the past, the nation now owes them a debt and must carry them on the nation's back, at the expense of the national budget and at the expense of the future of all generations to come.

2. The political régime of the Socialist Republic Of Vietnam

This political régime is by and large outlined in Part I of the 1992 Constitution. The various clauses of this part clearly consolidate the totalitarian nature of the régime:

Clause 4: "The Communist Party of Vietnam, the vanguard of the Vietnamese proletariat, the loyal delegate of the working class, the working people and the whole nation, followers of Marxism-Leninism and the thoughts of Hồ Chí Minh, constitute the leading force of the government and the society. All party organisations operate within the constitution and the law."

Clause 9: "The Vietnamese Patriotic Front and its member organisations constitute the political bases of the people's government. The Front promotes the tradition of solidarity among all the people, increases the moral and political unity with the people, participates in the building and consolidation of the people's government. Together with the government, the Front looks after and protects the justified interests of the people, mobilises the people to effect the people's ownership, dutifully implements the constitution and the law, reviews the activities of governmental organisations, elects representatives and cadres, and government officials. The government shall

ensure the right conditions are available for the Front and its member organisations to operate effectively."

Clause 10: "The Trade Union is the political and social organisation of the working class and labourers, which, together with the government departments, economic organisations and social organisations, shall look after and protect the interests of the social organisations, shall look after and protect the interests of the cadres, labourers, officials and other workers; participate in the management of government and society, participate in inspecting, reviewing the activities of government departments, economic organisations, educates cadres, labourers, officials and other workers in building and protecting the Fatherland."

Through Clause 4 of the constitution, the party granted constitutional recognition to the one-party system. Through Clauses 9 and 10 the party sought to consolidate further its constitutional supremacy by granting power to its two main Front organisations (The Patriotic Front and the Trade Union) virtually to override all government decisions. For instance, Clause 9 gives the Patriotic Front the right to "review the activities of government departments, elected representatives." In the eyes of a reasonable man, this is clearly unacceptable because the Patriotic Front is merely an unelected tool of the Communist Party. However, under the majesty of the socialist rule of law, since in any case there is no opposition, no-one would object and thus the constitution is written and proclaimed.

Constitutional recognition of the totalitarian rule of the Communist Party of Vietnam, strange as it may appear to the rest of the civilised world, is only the natural consequence of a sociological phenomenon commonly known as the 'institutionalisation of the means' (*institutionalisation des moyens*). The party is a typical example of this phenomenon. It was, like any Communist Party in the Marxist tradition, founded with the aim of building a communist paradise in Vietnam and in the particular case of this country also to regain independence from foreign occupation. Thus the party is the means; the communist

paradise and independence are the ends. It follows that once the ends are reached, the means will be done away with or in the Marxist terminology will "wither away".

In the case of Vietnam, independence from a realistic viewpoint seems to have been achieved to the credit of the Communist Party of Vietnam (although even this would be disputed by large sections of the Vietnamese people). The remaining aim of building a communist paradise in Vietnam appears to be the only justification left for the continued existence of the Party. In this particular respect, it would be extremely unfair to expect the Vietnamese people to have faith in Marxism-Leninism when the very doctrine has clearly failed in the motherland of the communist revolutions. In addition, the Soviet Union has created in the process such massive problems as would take generations to rectify. Any ordinary Vietnamese could easily see with his own eyes the level of corruption and lack of faith in the cadres he deals with every day of his life. Thus it is undeniable that the Communist Party rank and file no longer believes in the feasibility of communist paradise.

Against that background, the hardline leadership of the party have decided to continue the process of retaining constitutional supremacy for the party. Thus their aim seems to be perfectly apparent: that is, to transform the party into an institution capable of surviving independently of the original ends or objectives of the party at its foundation.

The tragedy in Vietnam is that the party is a ruling institution without opposition. It follows that, without a system of accountability, this results in an extremely inefficient and corrupt government at both administrative and economic management levels. Since there is under this régime no possible alternative government, corruption runs totally unchecked, inefficiency worsens in all spheres of activities — ironically, in a dynamic South-East Asia where each nation is trying to catch up to the West through efficiency and competition.

In short, from the position where the party was conceived as the means *par excellence* through which the Vietnamese people overthrew French and American imperialism to restore peace,

democracy and prosperity to Vietnam, the above institutionalisation process has reversed the relationship by transforming the whole Vietnamese economic and political structure into one vast instrument to consolidate the continued hold on power of the party élite and to feed corruption within the party machine.

Thus the party has acquired a life for itself independent of its original ideals. Indeed, the spirit of the 1992 Constitution, in particular Part I (on the political régime) is clear evidence that the party has lost the capacity to objectively evaluate the legitimate demands of the time. While living in the last decade of the 20th century, when such basic concepts as human rights, democracy and pluralism were sweeping through the communist empire, they still dream about the decade of 1940s when the dictatorship of the party was unchallenged and when its word was law.

More ironically, the party's insistence on Clauses 4, 9 and 10 of the 1992 Constitution is evidence of its leader's total lack of appreciation of an essential political reality for its own survival: that is, the party can no longer control with absolute power its rank and file membership or its front organisations. The result is, on the one hand, that the party has a constitution that enshrines a Stalinist type of régime, while on the other hand the same party can no longer put into effect its much-touted totalitarianism on all facets of society because of the already vast proportion of cadres which are either corrupt or have lost faith completely in the party or its irrelevant ideals.

3. The Economic Régime

Part II of the constitution on the economic régime has certain liberal elements. However this rather limited degree of liberalism may not be sufficient to resolve the very difficult economic circumstances of an economy which has suffered decades of communist folly. Further, the constitution as a whole is still too ideologically motivated. This is no doubt a reflection of the still very solid power base of the conservatives within the party. We should also be aware of the fact that the Articles on the economic régime (15 to 29) should not be interpreted independently

of the remainder of the 1992 constitution, but as an inseparable part of the constitution, thus bound by its ideological directions. As a result, the totalitarianism in the chapter on the political régime, the lack of independence in the chapter on the judiciary (*The People's Court and The People's Inspectorate*) will negate most if not all the positive aspects of the Articles on the economy, in particular those Articles on the concepts of private ownership and the market economy.

In essence, the following Articles outline the main directions of economic reforms:

- Article 15: "The government develops a multi-sector goods economy (*kinh tế hàng hoá nhiều thành phần*) according to the market régime (*cơ chế thị trường*) with government management, in accordance with socialist directions. The multi-sector economic structure with diversified productive organisational forms and enterprises is based upon the régimes of all-people's ownership (*sở hữu toàn dân*), collective ownership (*sở hữu tập thể*), private ownership (*sở hữu tư nhân*), in which all people's ownership and collective ownership are the foundation."
- Article 18: "The government grants land to organisations and individuals for stable and long term usage. Organisations and individuals have the responsibility to protect, enrich, reasonably exploit, use land with thrift, transfer the usage of land granted by the government in accordance with law."
- Article 19: "The nationalised economic sector [shall] be consolidated and developed, especially in key branches and areas, [shall] play the leading role in the nation's economy. Nationalised economic enterprises [shall] have independence in production, doing business [to] ensure effective production and business."
- Article 20: "The collective economy, based upon the citizens' contributing their capital effort to jointly produce and do

business, is organised on the principles of voluntariness, democracy and mutual benefit. The government [shall] provide the [right] conditions to consolidate and expand the co-operative that has operated with effectiveness."

- Article 21: "The individualistic (*cá thể*), capitalistic (*tư bản*), private (*tư nhân*) economy can choose its forms of production and business organisations, can establish enterprises without restrictions on their scope of activities in the branches and professions beneficial to the livelihood of the people and the national strategy. The family economy (*kinh tế gia đình*) [shall] be encouraged to develop."

- Article 23: "The legal properties of individuals and organisations [shall] not be nationalised. In necessary cases on the grounds of national defence, security and the national interest, the government [shall] purchase or resume [these properties] by compensating the individuals or organisations in accordance with market evaluations. The procedures for purchase or resumption [shall] be defined by the law."

The above articles on the economy were perhaps the only parts of the 1992 constitution with real and substantial progress as far as reforms are concerned. However, even here it is still a case of too little and too late to fully remedy the parlous state of the economy after decades of socialist mismanagement.

When introducing the 1992 Constitution, the Party did it on the subjective assumption that by allowing a modest degree of economic liberalisation on the one hand, and by further tightening political control on the other, they will be able to release to a limited extent the creativeness of the Vietnamese people on the wealth-creation plane, stabilise and develop the economy, while preserving one-party rule in the Singaporean, Taiwanese, South Korean or Japanese styles. However, reference to these countries is only a tactical and calculated move to appease forces of opposition both inside and outside of the country and

both from Vietnamese and foreigners. More than any of their opponents, the current leadership knows that there are fundamental differences between communist Vietnam and these countries:

(a) First, as political régimes, it may be possible to argue that these countries — Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan — may not be as democratic as Western democracies. However to go as far as saying that these countries have similar political régimes to communist Vietnam is really stretching the point too much. Those countries do not have a one-party rule enshrined in their constitutions. Opposition parties are allowed to operate, and indeed one such party won the 1992 election in South Korea. All their citizens are in fact free to vote and to stand for election, without the effective approval of the party as candidates as the case is in Vietnam. Thus, the citizens of these countries are allowed a much greater degree of overall creativeness by their government than are the Vietnamese. The intelligence and intellect of the people of these nations are much more respected by their governments than is the case with the Vietnamese people.

(b) Second, all these Asian countries have grounded their economies on “the absolute and complete concept of private ownership”, without in the least being stained by Marxist-Leninist follies. It has been largely this pristine concept that has released their creativity and propelled their economies into the forefront of an extremely competitive world environment.

Meanwhile, the whole of the 1992 Constitution, even Part II on the economy, displays a markedly outdated Marxist-Leninist influence. The Vietnamese economy, shackled with this influence, could be compared to a second-class athlete, afflicted not only by his own shortcomings, but also by the incredible weight of this ideological burden, in a race involving first-class athletes from Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea ... who can not only rely on their much superior natural dispositions but who are also free from any of these ideological stupidities.

Indeed, in Chapter Two of the constitution, we can clearly see the political constraint on the economy in the wording of Article 15:

"The government develops a multi-sector goods economy ... with government management, in accordance with socialist directions."

Further, although there are three separate sectors of the economy, namely the nationalised sector, the collective sector and the private sector, they are not allowed to operate on an equal footing. The constitution itself lays down the priorities in no uncertain terms. Indeed the priorities are as follows in proper order:

- The nationalised economy (Article 19)
- The collective economy such as co-operatives (Article 20)
- The private economy (Article 21)

Thus it is possible that the 1992 Constitution might breathe some temporary life into the moribund economy and thereby, with the assistance of the army and the secret police, prolong the existence of the régime. It might even stabilise the economy, after years of Stalinist central control. However the Vietnamese economy needs much more than these half-hearted measures to provide the launching pad for any take-off significant enough to aspire to the standards of the Asian Tigers. This is clearly off the mark given these ideological constraints on the concept of private ownership.

(c) There is always still the risk of the economy entering into a state of stagnation of Latin American proportions if this constitution is allowed to last.

Indeed anywhere in the world, and especially in Vietnam where corruption makes it worse, the nationalised sector of the economy is the most inefficient sector. To grant constitutional

recognition to its priority over the private sector is an act of ideological fanaticism and economic blindness that only the conservative elements of the Communist Party of Vietnam are capable of. Further, the so-called 'collective' sector (or co-operative form of business enterprise) has proved to be ineffective and inefficient and has gradually disappeared from the modern world economy. Yet in the 1992 Constitution, it has priority over the private sector. Thus this constitution is not only ideologically foolish but also economically outdated. This is an act of sabotage of the economy.

Its legal consequences on economic policies may be deeper, in that even if the government wishes to pass laws to liberalise private ownership, such new laws could be, in principle, challenged as being unconstitutional. This of course is mere speculation since in a one-party system such as the one under the present constitution there is no separate and independent judiciary to consider the constitutionality or otherwise of any laws whatsoever.

(d) The abovementioned Article 23 in a one-party system cannot guarantee private ownership. The most potent reason is that the Communist Party is the highest centre of power encompassing all three branches of government: the executive (with power over the army and the secret police), the legislature (with puppet deputies) and the judiciary (with judges who could only approve party directives, or else). Even in cases of blatantly unconstitutional violations of private property by the executive, no courts would be in a position to protect the individual proprietors. Deputies would not hesitate in any way to pass the most unconstitutional laws to infringe on private properties. No independence exists in any way to challenge such laws since the party is supreme and without opposition.

Thus private ownership in the constitution is at best a half-baked concept forced upon the Communist Party by objective economic and international circumstances, and reluctantly adopted in order to buy time and survive politically.

It is imperative for all Vietnamese to be aware that time is

against us insofar as economic development is concerned. For indeed, after forty years of socialism in the North and seventeen years in the South, Vietnam is decades behind nations of comparable culture. Thus, even given an absolute concept of private property coupled with skilful and enlightened economic policies, it would be found difficult to motivate the economy in its effort to catch up with the Asian Tigers ... let alone a bunch of loaded mixed bags of socialist jargons.

It is sad to reckon that, like the stupid mandarins of the Nguyễn dynasty more than one hundred years ago, the present communist mandarins have failed the Vietnamese people in this crucial challenge by giving clear preference to the survival of their class as the ruling class over the interest of the people.

(e) The 1992 Constitution, despite the fanfare of its promotion by the party, continues to give constitutional recognition to the one-party rule. In a system where private wealth starts to build up, such a one-party government, having no real opposition, tends to breed corruption on a monumental scale. Indeed, the well-known dictum that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely" is completely applicable to Vietnam today. In a very real sense, the institutionalisation of the one-party rule by the Communist Party is equivalent to the institutionalisation of corruption, enriching certain party members beyond imagination at the expense of the very workers the party still pretends to represent.

4. The Industrial, Scientific, Educational and Cultural Régimes:

Part III of the constitution deals with the above matters. It is regrettable that even here there are too many ideological and nonsensical insertions that tend to insult the intelligence of the Vietnamese people and place unnecessary control on civil society. Article 30 mentions: "the thoughts, virtues, demeanour of Hồ Chí Minh" and "strictly prohibits the propagation of reactionary thoughts and cultures". Article 31 refers to "loving

socialism". Article 34 "... strictly prohibits acts that interfere with revolutionary and historic sites." Then Article 36: "People's organisations and foremost the Hồ Chí Minh Youth ... are responsible for the education of the young men and women, adolescents and children."

Thus instead of granting to their own people a modicum of respect by teaching them human and civil rights in accordance with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, as their former socialist colleagues are doing in Eastern Europe, the party still persists in controlling the thoughts of the people by attempting to control and manipulate the minds of the young.

However, in reality this attempt is only a desperate move by an organisation that has already lost its ability to objectively perceive social reality and the limits of its power within a changing society. The reality is that there is absolutely no more faith in either the party or the Marxist ideology, either within the party or in society at large. The institutionalisation of Marxism and its strict authoritarian régime is valid in name only. The power of the party to effect control on society has been severely restricted by extensive corruption and political divisions within its own ranks. Thus, a situation typical of a régime about to collapse clearly emerges: the leadership continues to advocate draconian controls when the rank and file no longer has the ability to put these controls into effect.

Gradually but surely the Communist Party loses its capacity to appraise political realities as they truly are, not as they would like them to be. In doing so the party loses its competitive edge over the many nationalist parties that used to vie for control of Vietnamese politics, and for the leadership role in the anti-French war. Indeed, the demise of the party now is only a matter of time.

5. "Defence of the Vietnamese Socialist Fatherland"

Such is the title to Part IV of this constitution. The term 'defence' here includes internal security. Thus in an indirect

sense, the socialist state feels strongly the need to defend itself against its own citizens as well as external enemies.

This part provides that defence is the responsibility of “the people’s armed forces” but at the same time the people’s armed forces have also the responsibility “to protect socialism and the fruits of the revolution” (Article 45). In consequence, the armed forces are given the constitutional duty to suppress all movements, organisations and political inclinations leading to multi-party democracy and human rights as recognised by the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Internal national security is the responsibility of the “revolutionary people’s police.” In addition, the police have the responsibility to protect the “socialist heritage” (Article 47).

In summary, the armed forces and the police — instead of being given the justified role of defending the nation, the people’s private property and human rights in an impartial and non-ideological fashion, as is the case with all other nations on earth — have instead been hijacked by the communists to defend a moribund ‘socialism’. What is intended in this constitution of course is that the armed forces and the police forces should suppress the people and human rights when ordered to do so by the party, in the name of the socialist state.

6. The Basic Rights and Duties of Citizens

Part V of the constitution is one of the most complex parts. It is comprised of 34 Articles. However the most significant ones are the following:

- Article 54: “Citizens, regardless of their ethnic origins, sexes, social strata, faiths, religions, educational levels, occupations, length of residency, 18 years old and over have the right to vote and 21 years old and over have the right to stand for elections to the Congress, the People’s Council in accordance with the law.”
- Article 66: “Young people [shall] be given the opportunity

by their families, the government and society to study, develop the social ideal and to be the vanguard in the task of creative labour and defence of the fatherland.”

- Article 76: “The citizens must be loyal to the fatherland. To betray the fatherland is the most serious crime.”
- Article 79: “The citizens have the responsibility to protect state secrets (*bí mật quốc gia*)”.
- Article 82: “Foreigners who struggle for freedom and national independence, socialism, democracy and peace or who are oppressed and harmed because of their scientific works [shall] be considered by the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam for residence.”

Of all the articles in Part V, and in terms of the development of democracy in Vietnam, Article 54 is the most important. This article, or its equivalent, is always present in all genuine democracies in the world. However in the case of Vietnam, its real meaning has been modified by three crucial factors: Firstly, Article 4 is generally understood as overriding this article and the police and armed forces are there to ensure the prevalence of Article 4; secondly, there is no opposition to highlight the real significance of Article 54 and insist on its implementation; and thirdly, due to its absolute control of the political agenda, the party can blatantly afford to ignore the real difference between the constitution as fundamental law and the electoral laws as subordinate to this fundamental law. Thus the party merely understands the term “in accordance with the law” as equivalent to these terms: the Party can pass any laws in the Congress (through its puppet deputies) without regard to the real meaning of Article 54.

Thus, the expression “in accordance with the law” is very frequently used in the 1992 Constitution with the express aim of providing the world and the people with a constitution

incorporating some apparent civil rights, then pass laws that blatantly violate these very rights, in the hope that such antiquated tactics as these could still delude some people. The most obvious example is the Congressional Electoral Act, 1992. Indeed Clauses 25 to 36 of this legislation expressly provide that the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Fatherland Front (the front organisation of the Communist Party) decides finally the names of candidates for Congress to be included in the official list of candidates for election, and only those candidates on the list could stand for election.

It is quite certain that, in a real democracy with a truly independent Supreme Court, these clauses of the Congressional Electoral Act would be declared unconstitutional and invalid for the simple reason that the term "in accordance with the law" does not enable the law to infringe the spirit of Article 54 of the constitution.

The spirit of Article 54 is that "all citizens 21 years old and over have the right to stand for election to Congress." However the 1992 Act effectively changes this spirit into something completely different: in effect, "all citizens 21 years old and over, *with the permission of the Communist Party of Vietnam, through its front organisation (the Fatherland Front)*, can stand as candidates for the Congress."

Clauses 25 to 36 of the 1992 Act are in conflict with Article 54 of the constitution. Since the constitution is fundamental law, then by operation of law Clauses 25 to 36 should be considered invalid because they are simply unconstitutional.

However, as shall be discussed in more detail in this chapter, the supreme judicial body in this constitution (The People's Supreme Court) is not an independent organisation but is completely under the thumb of the Party. Furthermore, the interpretation of the constitution, legislations and regulations (Article 91), which should be the role of the judiciary, has been given to the Permanent Commission of the Congress (under strict party control). This is a clearly undemocratic move since no democracy can accept a situation where the same political institution can both make laws and pass judgment on the

validity of the laws it has itself passed. This lack of impartiality, separation of powers, or checks and balances leads surely to dictatorship. However, by virtue of this novel invention by the Communist Party of Vietnam under the curious label "Socialist Rule of Law", such action becomes entirely acceptable — since the legitimacy of the party's rule does not come from any democratic or legal principle, but from the armed forces and the police.

Article 66, mentioned above, adds to the ideological dogmatism and retrogressiveness of the constitution. In addition it is worth mentioning that Vietnamese youth in general have lost faith completely in the party and socialism.

Articles 76 and 79 are merely cheap political manoeuvres to suppress individuals, organisations that dare to oppose the party's dominance and these articles cannot, under such laws, lay claim to any legitimacy.

Article 82 is at the same time impractical and downright farcical since hundreds of thousands of people left communist North Vietnam in 1954 and communist Vietnam in 1975 in search of freedom and democracy. It is rare, on the other hand, if not impossible, to find a genuine political refugee from political persecution from the West fleeing to communist Vietnam to enjoy the level of democracy granted to its people under the so-called socialist rule of law.

7. The Congress

Part VI, from Article 83 to Article 100, defines the powers and responsibilities of the Congress. Article 83 outlines the supremacy in principle of this legislative body as:

"The highest representative institution of the people, the highest institution of power of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The Congress is the only body with the power to make the constitution and to make laws. The Congress decides the fundamental policies on domestic and foreign

affairs, responsibilities on socio-economic, defence, security and sovereignty (*đất nước*), the key principles on the operations of the governmental machine, on the social relations and activities of citizens. The Congress effects the supreme review of the entire activities of the government."

Due to the importance at least in appearance of this institution, the Party has made sure that there are in-built mechanisms to control it in addition to the Congressional Electoral Law, 1992, mentioned earlier. The mechanism to control the Congress in this constitution consists of the following Articles:

(a) Article 85: "The term of the Congress is five years. In special circumstances, with the approval of at least two-thirds of the deputies, the Congress can reduce or prolong its term."

(b) Article 86: "The Congress meets twice every year at the instigation of the Permanent Commission of the Congress."

(c) Article 87: "The National Chairman (*Chủ tịch nước*), the Permanent Commission of The Congress, The Nationalities Council and Committees of the Congress, the government, the Supreme People's Court, The People's Supreme Inspectorate, The Fatherland Front and its member organisations may submit draft legislation to the Congress. Deputies of the Congress may submit legislative proposals and draft laws to the Congress."

(d) Article 90: "The Permanent Commission of the Congress is the permanent institution of the Congress. The Committee comprises: the Chairman of Congress, The Vice-Chairmen and Commission Members."

Article 85 gives the party the power, through its control of the entire membership of the Congress, to do away with

elections in special circumstances. The expression "special circumstances" is not defined in the constitution, thus by virtue of Article 91 The Permanent Commission of the Congress is empowered by the constitution to define its meanings. It is easier for the party to control the Commission than the Congress itself since there are fewer members to control here.

Article 86, together with Article 90, consolidates the Party's control even further. Thus the Congress meets twice a year and the timing of its meetings lies with the Commission. In the normal course of events, the Commission under Article 91 has vast power to act in the name of the Congress. It can indeed manipulate the timing of the meetings and retain virtually all power to itself. Such is the intention of the party since it does not even trust the puppet deputies chosen by itself as candidates and elected to the highest legislative body of the land.

In addition, the party saw fit to tighten its grip on power by blatantly and expressly allowing its unelected Front organisations the same legislative power as the so-called elected deputies, by virtue of Article 87. This would be completely absurd in any democracy and can exist only in the so-called socialist rule of law created by the 'superior minds' of the 'sons of Karl Marx and Lenin' in Vietnam.

8. The National President

Part VII, from Article 101 to Article 108, spells out the duties and rights of the National President who is also Head of State. Article 102 provides for the President to be elected by the Congress from among the Deputies. Article 103 defines in more detail the role of the President. However it is most regrettable that the party has given in to the need to accommodate the inner party disputes by the various factions (who all want a share of executive power) at the expense of a more rational division. However there is only a limited amount of executive power to share and the result is a lot of overlapping authorities leading to current conceptual confusions and potentially grave constitutional crises between the three most powerful institutions: The National President (Article 103), the Permanent

Commission of Congress (Article 91) under the leadership of the Chairman of Congress and the Prime Minister (Article 112).

This irrationality forced upon the Party by political expediency will lead to future internal division and potentially will spell the demise of the Party. A couple of obvious examples of how this might occur are:

(a) With regard to the Provincial People's Committee (PPC), the Prime Minister has the "duty and power" to: "... discontinue the implementation of resolutions of the PPC which are unconstitutional, illegal and in conflict with higher government authorities, as well as propose to the Permanent Commission of Congress (PCC) to annul these decisions" (Article 114[5]). The Prime Minister has also the "duty and power" to dismiss the Chairman and Vice-Chairmen of the PPC (Article 114[31]). The word 'and' in Article 114[5] above should obviously read 'or'; otherwise serious problems could arise because it would be almost impossible for a decision to be at the same time unconstitutional, illegal and in conflict with higher government authorities. The fact that they either are unconstitutional or illegal or in conflict would be serious enough for discontinuation. This is clearly either ignorance or a drafting error.

The issue here is that under Article 91 only the PCC can interpret the constitution, legislation and regulations. Thus either Article 114[5] is in conflict with Article 91 or should be redrafted to clearly indicate that the Prime Minister cannot interpret the constitutionality, legality or otherwise of any PPC's resolutions but can only make submissions to the PCC and, upon the PCC having made a ruling, can either discontinue or not discontinue a resolution as the case may be. Although this is not mentioned in the constitution, it may be safe to assume that besides the Prime Minister making submissions on the validity of resolutions of the PCC, other institutions such as The People's Inspectorate (or, more improbably but not entirely impossibly, any individual) can request a review of such resolutions. Then a situation could arise where the PPC has ruled that a resolution, as requested for review by the Inspectorate, is

illegal, and yet the Prime Minister can choose not to discontinue its implementation because of the fact that such discontinuation is within "the duty and power" of the Prime Minister. The expression "duty and power" implies that he has both, and can exercise both, or either. If he considers discontinuation a duty, then he must discontinue. If a resolution is in the interest of his political faction, for instance, then he can consider discontinuation a power which he may or may not choose to exercise and he is well within his right *not* to exercise such power. In this situation, a constitutional crisis could arise.

(b) Regarding the appointment and dismissal of Deputy Prime Ministers and other members of the ministry, the potential conflict is much greater because of the concurrent involvement of the three most powerful institutions besides the party itself: The Prime Minister, the PCC and the National Chairman.

The Prime Minister has the "duty and power" to "make submission" (*trình*) to either the Congress or the PCC (if the Congress is not in session) (Article 114[21]).

The PCC, when the Congress is not in session, has the "duty and power" to approve (*phê chuẩn*) the submission of the Prime Minister (Article 91[8]). By implication, although this does not appear to be explicit in the constitution, the Congress itself, if in session, would resume all the duty and power of the PCC.

The National Chairman has the "duty and power", based on the resolution of the Congress or PCC, to appoint or dismiss these members of the ministry (Article 103[4]).

Because of the fact that the three most powerful institutions belong to different political factions within the party, and because this time the dispute involved has to do with positions of great power and authority within government, the lack of clarity in the expression "duty and power" will lead to major crises that could bring down the régime. So long as the party still has absolute control of the government and all the factions within itself, these dissensions could be managed. However, once the party loses its absolute power, as appears to be inevitable now, these inter-factional dissensions will sooner or later explode.

9. The Government

Part VIII provides for the duties and powers of the government which is the "the executive organ of the Congress, the highest administrative organ of the Socialist Republic Of Vietnam" (Article 109). Besides the normal duties and powers of an executive organ, the 1992 Constitution also makes the following provisions to consolidate the dictatorship of the party:

(a) Article 110: "The government shall be comprised of the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers and other members of the government. Besides the Prime Minister, other members of the government may not necessarily be deputies of the Congress. The Deputy Prime Ministers perform their functions as allocated by the Prime Minister. In the absence of the Prime Minister, a Deputy Prime Minister, at the recommendation of the Prime Minister, will lead the government in his place."

(b) Article 111: "The Chairman of the Central Committee of the Fatherland Front, The Chairman of the Congress of Trade Unions and the heads of people's organisations may be invited to participate in the government meetings (*các phiên họp chính phủ*) when related issues were discussed."

(c) Article 114: "The Prime Minister has the following duties and powers: To approve the election, dismiss or manage the Chairmen or Deputy Chairmen of the provincial people's committee and the people's committees of cities [administered] by the central government, cease the implementation of resolutions of the provincial people's committees and the people's committees of cities [administered] by the central government, which are unconstitutional, illegal and against the [spirit] of the written documents (*văn bản*) of higher government organisations, and at the same time make submissions to the PCC to annul these resolutions."

Article 110 could be interpreted as a clear indication that the

leadership of the party is still uncomfortable with the concept of a government responsible primarily to the Congress instead of to itself, despite the fact that the change is only cosmetic by and large. Thus Article 110 represents a technical means by which the party could reduce the power of the 'elected' deputies. However, the hardline faction of the party must have gone a little bit overboard, resulting in a rather farcical situation where, with the exception of the Prime Minister, all other members of the ministry need not be deputies of the Congress. Indeed, this article goes further by allowing a Deputy Prime Minister to become the acting Prime Minister in the absence of the former. This may appear logical in any democracy other than one under the 'socialist rule of law'. Here the party can at any time request a Prime Minister to disappear permanently. As a result the Vietnamese people would have an entire ministry whose members are not Deputies of the Congress but nevertheless, in theory at least, responsible to Congress — not that this is of great concern, since the people have already been disenfranchised altogether. These tactics by the party are only evidence of their contempt for the intelligence of their people, fair play and the democratic process.

Article 111 is another familiar technique to control the government through front organisations.

Article 114 ensures that democracy will never develop at the local level. If it does, the party, through its absolute power at the centre, will be able to dismiss all liberal local leaders.

10. The People's Council and the People's Committee

This is provided for in Part IX. This part consists of eight Articles: Articles 118–125. However, the constitution does not appear to recognise the importance of provincial governments. For this reason, Part IX does not provide for the election of the Chairman of the People's Committee, despite the important responsibility of this official in "co-ordinating the activities of the People's Committee" (Article 124). Indeed, the election of this official is only mentioned briefly and indirectly in Part VIII, Article 114[3], when the duties and powers of the Prime

Minister were discussed. Even then, Article 114[3] only vaguely indicates that the Prime Minister has the duty and power to "approve the election, dismissal, manage the chairmen, deputy-chairmen of the people's committees in provinces and cities under central control."

Article 118 provides that: "The establishment of People's Councils and People's Committees at administrative units [shall be] in accordance with the law." Thus there will be separate legislation to provide for provincial government.

The great powers given to the Prime Minister with regard to provincial government as per Article 114, coupled with Article 6 which enshrines the Leninist principle of "democratic centralisation" (a commonly-used Bolshevik term to concentrate all powers at the top of the party) will deprive a provincial government of whatever freedom it might otherwise have under Part IX of this bizarre constitution.

Even at provincial level, the party still feels the need to authorise, via Article 125, the Fatherland Front to participate at councils' meetings, obviously with the real purpose of supervising the conduct of members of the councils.

11. The People's Court and the People's Inspectorate

Part X of the constitution from Article 126 to Article 140 speaks of the judiciary and quasi-judiciary institutions of the régime. As we are all aware, in a democracy based on the rule of law not only respect for the law but also respect for the integrity of the whole legal system is paramount. For this reason, in most Western democracies, judges of higher courts are appointed by the Parliament or Congress upon the recommendation of the Executive Government. In a bicameral Parliament or Congress the appointment must be done by both chambers of the legislature. The terms of office of the judges should be for the term of their natural life or until retirement, so as to ensure the judges are well beyond political pressure or any other type of pressure in the carrying out of their duties. In particular, if their terms are limited, judges could easily be manipulated by

either the executive or the legislature, especially at critical times such as when their terms are about to end and they need to be re-appointed. Thus, in a political structure renowned for corruption and abuse of power the likes of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Article 128 of the constitution defining the terms of the Chief Justice of the People's Supreme Court as "following the terms of the Congress" ensures that the head of the judiciary is dependent on politicians. Part X of the constitution does not mention the methods of appointing or dismissing other members of the judiciary. It merely says that the appointment of judges will be defined by legislation. This is evidence that the régime does not place much importance on this branch of government as it still relies heavily on the army and secret police to keep itself in power.

However, when providing for the duties and powers of the National Chairman in Part VII, Article 103[3] states that the National Chairman has the duty and power to propose to the Congress for the election (by Congress) of the Chief Judge of the People's Supreme Court and the Head of the Supreme People's Inspectorate.

Article 126 of the constitution provides as follows for the objectives of the Judiciary:

"The People's Court and the People's Inspectorate of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, within their jurisdiction, has the responsibility to protect the Socialist Rule of Law, protect socialism and the ownership rights of the people, government properties, collective properties, protect the lives, properties, freedom, and honour and human dignity of citizens."

Thus Article 126 spells out clearly the duties of the judiciary and the inspectorate as, mainly, to protect not the rule of law and private property but socialism, the socialist rule of law (a euphemism for the dictatorship of the Communist Party) and "ownership rights of the people" (which should not be confused with private ownership since, for all practical purposes, the

concept of 'the people' is an extremely abstract one and the party, through its monopoly of political power, effectively owns all property on behalf of the people). Obviously, as the party gradually loses its idealism and its hold on its membership, corruption abounds and all property in the name of 'the people' becomes in fact the private property of a small élite class of communist cadres. The socialist rule of law ensures that these privileged cadres will never be caught by the law.

The People's Supreme Court, under the constitution, has no jurisdiction to resolve constitutional disputes between the executive, the legislative or the National Chairman as the case would normally be under any other democracy. Thus in Vietnam, whenever there is a constitutional dispute there are only two alternatives: either (i) the Communist Party is strong enough to pull its weight and iron out the differences internally without much fuss; or (ii) the party is already so weak that it can no longer control all its conflicting factions, leaving the way open for internal strife and bloodshed, eventually bringing down the régime.

There is no such thing as an independent constitutional resolution of conflicts since this constitution expressly excludes that option in favour of preserving the dictatorship of the party by providing for the PCC to arbitrate on constitutional matters, the PCC itself being easily controlled by the party.

The flaws suffered by the People's Supreme Inspectorate are similar to the ones suffered by the Supreme Court and need not be repeated here. In short, there are no guarantees whatsoever for freedom, democracy and human rights because there is no truly independent judiciary under this constitution.

Parts XI and XII provide for less important issues such as the national flag, national emblem, national anthem, national capital and national day (2nd September, 1945), the constitution as foundation law and the requirements for constitutional change. Analysis of these parts is beyond the scope of this book.

In summary, the 1992 Constitution, despite its bizarre irrationality, is not necessarily the exclusive product of communist dogma. To a very significant extent this constitution is also the product of the two major vices of the Vietnamese national leadership during the past 200 years of our history: the profound ignorance and unlimited greed of the ruling class.

Indeed, more than 100 years ago, when the cannon fire from Western warships exploded at the doorstep of Vietnam, our so-called learned Confucian leaders, due to their ignorance and greed, refused to modernise the country for fear of losing their privileges in a modern society.

During the French occupation, then the First and Second Republics in South Vietnam, the vast majority of our leaders knew only how to worship their foreign masters and emulate their cultures in order to maximise their personal gains at the expense of the national interests.

Today, the Communist Party of Vietnam has inherited these two cardinal sins from the previous ruling class of the Vietnam of old. The 1992 Constitution displays the vast ignorance and greed of this new ruling class.

VII. THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL

A. DEFINING DEMOCRACY

ONE OF THE GREATEST achievements of humankind in the 20th century no doubt is the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the General Assembly of The United Nations on 10th December, 1948. This historic document, despite its brevity, crystallises the highest human aspirations in socio-political affairs and exposes the democratic principle in its most basic and unequivocal form.

For this very reason, it is impossible to define democracy outside of the context of human rights or vice versa, especially in the case of Vietnam.

Over the years, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been consolidated by other covenants and conventions in order to promote human rights in particular spheres of human affairs. The significant ones are the following:

- The International Covenant On Civil And Political Rights (ICCPR) passed by resolution 2200A on 16th December, 1966, by the General Assembly for execution by member nations, effective from 23rd March, 1976.
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) also passed by resolution 2200A, effective from 3rd January, 1976.
- The International Convention On The Elimination Of All Forms Of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) passed by resolution 1904 of the General Assembly on 20th November, 1963.

Human rights are so essential to democracy that unless the basic tenets of human rights are recognised and enshrined in a nation's political and institutional processes and structures, there can be indeed no effective democracy. To that extent, the

concept of democracy in the context of Vietnamese politics cannot be complete unless it has the following three necessary elements:

- (a) A constitution which lays down the fundamental laws of the land and which recognises the most important human rights (*Hiến Định*).
- (b) A system of Rule of Law (*Pháp Trị*).
- (c) Political pluralism (*Đa Nguyên*)

All this may appear basic to any student of politics in the Western world, but is completely new to the majority of the Vietnamese people.

1. The Constitution

Although a constitution can be either unwritten (such as the British constitution) or written, its existence is indispensable in a democracy. It could be defined as the fundamental social contract agreed upon by all citizens of the nation-state. Since in a democracy, all individuals and institutions are equal before the law as mere legal entities, there is no obligation on any individual or institution to be bound by personal loyalty to any other individual or institution except by their own free will. However, because the constitution is the foundation of the nation state, all legal entities owe allegiance to the constitution and the principles embraced by that document. In other words, in a democracy, there is ultimately no supreme ruler. All legal authorities emanate from a set of fundamental laws as laid down in a constitution. The supreme power of the constitution also leads to the inevitable conclusion that all other laws must accord to the spirit of the constitution to remain valid. No less than the then Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court Marshall had this to say about the American constitution at the legal level:

“... There is no middle ground. The constitution is either a superior paramount law, unchangeable by ordinary

means, or it is on a level with ordinary legislative acts and, like other acts, is alterable when the legislature shall please to alter it.

If the former part of the alternative is true, then a legislative act contrary to the constitution is not law. If the latter part is true, then written constitutions are absurd attempts, on the part of the people, to limit a power in its own nature unlimitable."¹²⁴

He went on to say in the same case:

"Thus the particular phraseology of the constitution of the U.S. confirms and strengthens the principle, supposed to be essential to all written constitutions, that a law repugnant to the constitution is void, and that the courts, as well as other departments, are bound by that instrument."

His words leave no doubt that the written constitution is supreme and that where repugnancy exists, the supreme law must prevail, and that the judiciary will determine whether a law is or is not constitutional. Jacobsen and Lipman describe the characteristics of a constitution as follows, at the political level:

"A constitution helps to reduce the uncertainties of political life to a minimum. Such questions as how officers shall be chosen, which officers shall exercise certain powers, how far their powers extend, and what right the people may legally claim against the action of the executive, the legislatures and the courts should be clearly set forth in terms as definite as possible. A written constitution should be concise and yet comprehensive. It should cover the whole field of government and make provision for the exercise of all political power. It should

¹²⁴ *Marbury v Madison* (1803).

not include minute details. It should always be kept in mind that a constitution must be carried out by men in governing other men. Therefore, the provisions should incorporate the best experience of the nation for which the constitution is made."¹²⁵

Thus besides laying down the mechanics of government in essential terms, the constitution must take into account the best experience of the nation. In the case of Vietnam, the constitution cannot ignore the basic elements of its national culture which were founded on the three fused religions of the Far East: Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, the reason being that no constitution can operate within a cultural and social vacuum.

The British constitution operates as part of the total system of Christian culture and experience. The constitution of the United States of America, despite its more defined and concrete form, still benefits from the same tradition.

Thus, to the extent that Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism have remained the underlying fabrics of Vietnamese society for almost two thousand years and permeate all aspects of the life of the nation, their cultural values (as distinct from purely religious aspects) must be recognised and consolidated.

Obviously, a constitution must also incorporate the concept of separation of powers and a system of checks and balances in order to avoid tendencies towards dictatorship and abuse of powers. However there appear to be limitations to the effectiveness of this concept in preserving democracy. Indeed this concept seems useless in a one-party system of government. In this situation, the concept of separation of power only ensures that power is shared by members of the same political party that single-handedly rules the nation. There might just be some limited intra-party democracy for members of that particular political party but not for the citizens of that unfortunate nation. Thus in order to ensure the existence of democracy, a pluralist

¹²⁵ Jacobsen and Lipman, *Political Science*, 1964, p. 72.

political régime encompassing a multi-party system appears to be necessary.

In addition, no democratic constitution could be justified unless all the provisions incorporated therein strictly satisfy the most stringent test imposed by the all-important principle of social justice and equity. Thus constitutions which are imposed upon the people by a group of people in order to perpetuate or promote the rights and interests of a particular group at the expense of others, whether on racial, religious, class, ideological or any other grounds, will inevitably be conducive to conflicts and possibly wars and socio-political upheavals. In the case of Vietnam, the interests and independence of all religions including new and minority religions such as Catholicism, various Protestant groups, Caodaiism or minority ethnic groups such as Mèo, Máng, Mường, Ra Ê etc. should be given specific constitutional recognition in the most unequivocal terms.

With particular reference to religious matters in Vietnam, this mechanism should be specific enough not only to give credit to the contributions that all religions make to the national culture as an ongoing process, but should also more importantly operate as a system of checks and balances to prevent the possible destabilising attempts of particular religious groupings to manipulate political power and further the interests of their members or organisations at the expense of the nation.

And last but not least, the following cardinal principles derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and other related covenants and conventions should be enshrined in the constitution:

(a) Political pluralism

This principle will be defined in more detail later in this book. For the purpose of this section, suffice it to say that it ensures that the power of the State is derived from various socio-political groupings or interest groups, not from one single source, provided however that they operate within the limits of

the law. This principle, originally created to curb the excesses of the theory of State or National sovereignty by John Austin in his lectures on Jurisprudence (1832), is used in this book to counter specifically the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Thus, even the State, let alone the proletariat as allegedly represented by the Communist Party, is but a legal entity subject to the laws of the land and ultimately the constitution.

(b) The principle of private property

Article 17 of the UDHR provides that “(1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others. (2) No-one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.”

‘Private property’ are not and should not be dirty words. The ownership of private property is the incentive *par excellence* for the creation of wealth, thrift and hard work leading to progress. Provided such acquisition or creation of wealth does not infringe the laws of the land, it should be applauded. Further, charitable work and other altruistic activities are possible only if one possesses wealth.

A nation of beggars cannot be altruistic by definition. Further, private property is to a very significant extent the most effective defence available to the individual citizen against possible abuses of power or outright oppression from the State. To deprive an individual of his property is to expose him naked and defenceless against all the injustices of this unpredictable world. A government that abolishes private property invariably ends up with absolute and dictatorial power over its citizens. There will be no challenges to its rule for human and civil rights have no private means of support to fight the immense wealth available to the State alone by law.

(c) The family as the foundation of society

Article 16(3) of the UDHR states: “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.”

Because of the importance of the family unit, the concept of

the family has been also given emphasis in other documents such as Article 23 of the ICCPR and Article 10[1] of the ICESCR.

Whereas private property provides the individual with a measure of economic independence and an effective legal defence against injustices, the family is the moral and emotional refuge of the individual and his *raison d'être*. For the Vietnamese people, the family means much more than the nuclear family or the concept of the family as envisaged by the United Nations. It extends not only to the grandparents but also to the original ancestor (*thủy tổ*) from time immemorial. At the time of the commemoration of the death of the original ancestor, all his descendants from near and far, perhaps hundreds of them, will come back to the original birthplace of their extended family to worship. Thus, the family for a Vietnamese has also a spiritual dimension. This dimension has been extended to the whole nation and its culture. Indeed, in the Vietnamese language, people communicate rarely through the impersonal first person "I" and second person "you" as the case of most Western languages, but almost always through the words "brother", "sister", "uncle", "aunt", "son", "daughter", "nephew", "niece" in the course of their normal conversation. In a family, the husband will address the wife as "younger sister", the wife will address the husband as "older brother" as though they belong to the same family by birth.

To destroy the family structure of a Vietnamese is to destroy the foundation of his very soul. Not all human problems, needs or aspirations could be resolved by the general society even if that society is endowed with a perfect political and legal system. The family provides the extra spiritual element that no artificial political or legal construct can provide.

(d) The principle of freedom of thought

Articles 18 and 19 of the UDHR provide respectively that:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or

in company with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

Obviously the spirit of the above Articles should be enshrined in the constitution. However, tyrannies on the thoughts and ideas of men are much more comprehensive than could be controlled or cured by mere constitutional or legal remedies. Indeed throughout human history, there appear to have been various forms of tyranny on the thoughts of men. The most vicious ones are:

- Religious fanatical ideologies such as the Catholicism of the middle ages, and its renovated version at the height of the colonisation period by the Jesuits up to the early decades of the 20th century, and more recently Moslem fundamentalism looming large in the Middle East.
- Intellectual fanaticism such as Marxism-Leninism.
- Moralistic ideologies such as Song Confucianism (*Tổng Nho*).

The human race has been afflicted by many contradictions which are probably part of the human condition. While, together with scientific knowledge, wisdom and compassion, the triple attribute comprising religious aspirations, intellectual pursuit and moral rectitude have been and will still be the greatest moving forces of human history, it appears to be undeniable that deeply religious men, intellectuals and moral zealots can be susceptible to spiritual and mental diseases of the worst types. In these instances such leaders are more dangerous to humankind than the lowest common criminals.

Indeed, among the common characteristics of men are their personal failings and weaknesses.

To compensate for the above failings, religious men tend to become fanatics in the hope that fanatical loyalty to their God will ensure their eternal salvation, not only ahead of non-believers, but also ahead of fellow believers if they are able to convert more non-believers to the service of their God than their less hard-working fellow believers. Thus in this subjective atmosphere of spiritual competition, the Catholic Inquisitions of the Middle Ages were created. The ravages they wrought on the then emerging scientific community were vast and could be only equalled by the ferocity of the Spanish Conquistadores in Latin America. Led by the intrepid Jesuits at the height of the Western colonisation of Asia and Africa, the same fanaticism was applied in the conversion of the so-called 'less civilised nations' of the earth.

Today, Moslem fundamentalism is an exact replica of a human tragedy that already had taken place many centuries ago. Not only the Islamic world but international peace and security might be affected by this modern version of religious fanaticism.

To compensate for the above human failings and weaknesses, the intellectuals tend to build vast and complex theoretical constructs more commonly known as philosophical ideologies. Their purposes are manifold: to escape reality, to shield themselves from attacks by their opponents and to exert power over those who are gullible.

The most typical model of this type is Marxism-Leninism. Once they are able to seize political power, the tyranny they inflict on their fellow humans can be rivalled only by the evil Inquisitors of the Middle Ages.

The same situation applies to the moral promoters of the Song version of Confucianism. They were able to dominate nations of the Far East including China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam for centuries right up to the early part of the 20th century. In alliance with monarchical and feudal powers, they appeared to be invincible but for the shock of the encounter

with the West. Needless to say they betrayed the spirit of Confucius on a monumental scale.

These vast ideological empires, whether of religious, intellectual or moral type, have one thing in common: that is, they all seek to imprison human thoughts and creative ideas within the confines of their artificial and rigid theoretical constructs, regardless of the fact that objective reality has left them very many years ago. Of course, in the process they have created untold human sufferings while convinced they have brought humans untold benefits.

As a consequence, the constitution of a modern society should have built within itself a mechanism to banish or at least to discourage in an active manner all dogmatic ideologies conducive to the exertion of tyranny over the thoughts and ideas of free men. Indeed, a new Vietnam should be a society fertile in ideas but sterile in ideologies. Certainly, the responsibilities of socio-political leaders of the future in Vietnam are not only to provide a constitutional and legal framework to ensure freedom of thought at the social level but, more importantly, to break through that veil of prejudice and subjectivity that has characterised humans of all times and to bring about wisdom and compassion within themselves and their fellow man. For only a society of men endowed with wisdom and compassion can be truly immune to ideological diseases. Thus wisdom and compassion should be able to transcend the human-centred world, with all its selfishness and hypocrisy, and encompass all living creatures of the universe in an attempt to rebuild the universe in which we live and preserve it for all forms of life.

(e) The principle of freedom of movement

Article 13 of the UDHR states:

“(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State.

(2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and return to his country.”

At the time of writing this book, this freedom is severely curtailed in Vietnam by the communist government. Indeed, inside Vietnam, freedom of movement is subjected to a complex system of security measures involving police and administrative procedures aimed at controlling any dissent from the people. Further, no-one is allowed to leave Vietnam unless provided with an exit visa from the government.

The constitution of a new Vietnam should provide for the incorporation of the spirit of this Article. This right is the necessary requirement for the effective exercise of the freedom of thought for, without freedom of movement, the propagation of thoughts will be very inadequate indeed.

The Article also has in mind, perhaps in the distant future, a situation where all state and national boundaries will become irrelevant as far as the movement of any individual citizen of the world is concerned. Then a man or woman, or his or her family, would be able to live wherever they chose as determined by themselves and the objective economic circumstances of the time, and no longer by any immigration restrictions imposed by any national or state authorities.

(f) The rule of law

The rule of law, more commonly known as government by law as opposed to government by men, is an extremely familiar concept in Western democracies. However, this concept has never been sufficiently appreciated in the Far East due to the historical circumstances of nations of this region. This region was shrouded for centuries under the mantle of Song Confucianism where the pretence of the rule of the righteous man dominated society. Then China, North Vietnam and North Korea fell to the communists who replaced the so-called rule of the righteous man with the dictatorship of the proletariat. South Vietnam was governed briefly by a succession of incompetent American puppets and military leaders.

South Korea had experienced pretty much the same situation until the presidency of General Pak Ching Hee and the recent economic and democratic developments.

Even in Japan, despite its democratic constitution imposed upon it by the Americans, and despite its extraordinary economic power, there is doubt as to whether the rule of law is strictly enforced given the state of corruption and confusion pervading its political system.

The whole of Vietnam fell to the dictatorship of the proletariat in 1975. Thus the concept of the rule of law is either non-existent or infantile in Vietnam.

Suffice to say here that the constitution should give unequivocal recognition to the rule of law, including a clear requirement for an independent judiciary with power for judicial review of both executive action and legislative abuses of power. The concept of the rule of law will be discussed in much more detail later.

Of course, besides the above principles of the UDHR that should be given constitutional recognition, there are many others in that document that are beyond the scope of this book. But the UDHR should be an extremely powerful source of inspiration for all law-makers in a truly democratic Vietnam.

(g) The principle of power decentralisation

Given her historical, cultural and political past Vietnam has had and should retain a unitary system of government as opposed to a federal system. Her relatively small area, homogeneous population and the absence of any regional sovereignty predating national sovereignty are the most important factors favouring a unitary system. However, within this unitary system, the constitution should provide for the greatest measure of power decentralisation possible at the village and provincial levels. Democracy and significant local autonomy at the village level will preserve the traditional cultural values that have been developed for thousands of years and that determine the character of the people. Democracy and significant provincial autonomy for the people of the province to manage their own affairs within the jurisdiction of the province, without threatening national unity and sovereignty, would achieve a great deal of good for the

nation. Such democracy and autonomy would increase inter-provincial competition for effectiveness and efficiency in matters of government and public administration in general. At the political level, it would provide a suitable ground for the operation and the fostering of the concept of political pluralism. Indeed, a particular political party or sectional interest which may not have won a national election and held power at the national level, may still be able to win elections at the provincial level and thus keep the political process on an even keel by providing for a credible counterpoise.

Democracy and autonomy at the village level would achieve the same effect politically to a lesser degree, of course, besides the cultural emphasis mentioned earlier.

2. The Rule of Law

The concept of the rule of law is new to the Far East for several reasons, two of which have been mentioned earlier: the dominance of Song Confucianism and the dictatorship of the proletariat. The third reason is the fact that civil society in this part of the world, despite its advanced culture, is still in its infancy and has not yet grown out of the shadow of the State. We must hasten to add that citizens of civil society in the Far East are not less intelligent nor less courageous than their counterparts in the West but the opponents they have to face are much more powerful than those of their Western counterparts. Indeed, the most enduring and powerful alliance of political interests to monopolise state power and dominate civil society is not one between religious leaders and the monarchy (as was the case in Europe in the Middle Ages), nor intellectual leaders and the working class (as in communist countries) but the alliance between the Confucian scholars, older generations and the State or monarchy (as the case was and still is with the Far East).

To break free from that triumvirate of moral, parental and political oppressors is much more taxing. Objective evidence appears to show that the moralising old men of China and Japan are still very much in charge despite the different but equally vast changes both countries have experienced, and even despite

the recent July 1993 fall from power of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan.

To a very significant extent, Song Confucianism is the ideological justification for the dominance of the civil society by the State, control of the younger generation by the older, loyalty of the people to the State and last but not least the dominance of men over women. Thus Song Confucianism is the fossilisation of a set of Confucian values exploited to serve the interests of certain classes of society.

In the West, the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages used to display similar characteristics. Indeed, the Catholic Church with its excesses was then only a fossilised version of the idealism of Jesus Christ and his early followers who in their time were reformers in their own right against the conservative excesses of Judaism.

In time, however, the Catholic Church became an extremely conservative institution and the Protestant reformation was a whiplash reaction against the injustices of the Catholic Church. But the emergence of Marxism-Leninism and the dictatorship of the proletariat was a real revolution hitting hard at the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches, at the very concept of a personal and anthropomorphic God, and at the very concept of religion itself.

It is an irony of history that because communism was successful in gaining power in Eastern Europe, Russia, China, Vietnam and Korea, by and large the Orthodox Church and Confucianism became the main victims of this new revolution. Only in Cuba did the Catholic Church fall victim, at a fairly late stage, to communism.

The dictatorship of the proletariat is, by definition, a tool to recast the whole of human society in accordance with new standards. The old standards are considered obsolete and should be discarded. The concept of the rule of law is considered by Marxists as a bourgeois concept worth less than cow dung. Under the dictatorship of the proletariat, since 1954 in the North and since 1975 in the whole of the country, Vietnam has known little if anything of the rule of law.

So what is the rule of law? It is first and foremost the antithesis of the rule of men. Confucianism has unashamedly throughout the Far East, for centuries, promoted the concept of the rule of the righteous man (*Quân Tử*). It is possible that this concept could have worked for a while at a time when China was a confederation of small States with a rural economy and led by a scholarly class bent on studying a dozen classics on philosophy and ethics. However, history has clearly demonstrated that when China developed into an empire with a vast population, immense material wealth and competing schools of thought in matters of religion, philosophy and politics, then many so-called righteous men seemed to have lost their virtues and become passionate with greed, power and downright evil. Any doubt on this point would be shattered by the reading of a few famous Chinese novels which dramatised history, but whose messages remain quite genuine, such as *The Romance of The Three Kingdoms* (*Tam Quốc Chí*), *The Fall Of The Eastern Chou Dynasty* (*Đông Châu Liệt Quốc*) and *The Struggle Between the Han and the Sho* (*Hán Sở Tranh Hùng*).

An objective study of Chinese history would paint an even worse picture than these dramatised and romanticised versions. Indeed, Chinese history confirms the fact that it has been extremely rare for the righteous men to be able to rule China, and that extremely evil men (and their even worse concubines) had somehow acquired and had been given the Confucian mantle of the righteous men (or women) whereas truly righteous men were banished into gaols, distant exile or executed.

The reason seems to be obvious. In an institution or system that seeks to promote the righteous men and eliminate the evil ones, at least one thing has to work to perfection: that is, the identification and selection of the righteous men must be done by truly righteous ones. If the system or institution is imperfect and such identification and selection is conducted by corrupt men, then obviously they will select their own kind. Then the righteous ones will be labelled as evil and punished and perpetually banished from power. The Empress Dowager and her cohorts are one of the latest cases in point.

To make matters more complex, some men have been evil but, upon becoming supreme rulers, have proved to be good and able men. They even produced offspring who became great emperors, such as the Yuan and Ching dynasties or many other dynasties. By the same token, some righteous men became bad rulers and produced very evil offspring who became the curse of their people.

The moral is that righteous men need a lot of help. Not even Confucius or his teaching can protect the righteous men, and in the final analysis good and evil are only two faces of the same coin — or Yin and Yang in the Tai Chi concept — which is, in any case, the cornerstone of both Confucianism and Taoism. The inference from this moral lays waste to the Confucian position that men are by nature good (*nhơn chi sơ tính bổn thiện*). The only consolation is that this moral also invalidates the opposing legalist position (led by Tuân Tử) that men are by nature bad (*nhơn chi sơ tính bổn ác*). Perhaps Matsu (Mặc Tử) might have been right in that men are neither good nor bad by nature but external factors such as the moral and social environment in which they live will determine their nature.

Setting aside Matsu's solution to men's problems, known as the doctrine of Universal Love (*Thuyết Kiêm Ái*) (which postulates that if one knows that his fellow human fails to contribute his fair share to the community then one should double one's own contribution to compensate for his fellow-human's failure), considered by the Chinese as too idealistic and impracticable, perhaps his non-committal position on the nature of men is the best justification for the rule of law. For a system of rule of law based upon the principle of justice and equity would be the best social environment to influence the nature of men. Furthermore it is always much easier to conceive of justice and equity as abstract ideals than to perform just and equitable deeds. Besides, to set standards for all men to aspire to provides a perfect solution to a truism of strategic proportion: all men are corruptible, even Confucian righteous men, but standards are much less so.

Replicas of the same human failings have taken place in

Vietnam, Korea and Japan, all satellites of the Chinese sphere of cultural and political influence. It is high time for men of the Far East to finally give up the rule of men and wholeheartedly take on board the rule of law. Nations of the West have done this years ahead and the UDHR has stated this principle in unequivocal terms in Articles 6 to 12 as follows:

- (6) Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.
- (7) All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination..
- (8) Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.
- (9) No-one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.
- (10) Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.
- (11) (1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.
(2) No-one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.
- (12) No-one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the

right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Thus the above familiar concept of due process, that is the right to be charged and the right to be tried in a fair trial, shall of course be applied also to government officials who commit criminal offences. The law shall also ensure that they, too, receive the same standard of justice as the rest of the population.

Since the foundation of the rule of law is the constitution, an extremely important inference is the requirement for all Vietnamese to know that all government officials and citizens, from the president or prime minister to the village clerk, from the army general to a simple private, from the national commander of the police force to the lowest policeman, from the supreme court judge to the court attendant, from a school teacher to a schoolboy, must swear personal allegiance to the constitution and to vow his or her support and protection of the principles enunciated in this constitution. The aim is to completely eliminate from the body politic in Vietnam all remnants of feudalistic, and private loyalties to either particular groups or individuals, which have been the curse of Vietnamese politics for hundreds of years. Needless to say, to conspire to overthrow a government constituted by a constitution agreed upon by the whole people, as discussed above, would be considered the most serious crime demanding the severest penalty in the criminal code of the nation.

Thus, in a Vietnam under the rule of law, the president and the commonest thief who have committed the same crime would be treated with absolute equality before the law of the land.

All this will never take place unless the position of the judiciary in Vietnam is granted the independence, respect and powers it deserves and requires for the discharge of its duty as the supreme protector of the rule of law. Indeed, under the traditional monarchy, the rule of law was totally absent. Under the First and Second Republics in South Vietnam there was a semblance of the rule of law which had to make amends to the

rule of the generals. Under the dictatorship of the proletariat in North Vietnam until 1975 and in the whole of Vietnam since 1975, even under the 1992 Constitution, the socialist version of the rule of law is really the law of the jungle in that the Communist Party rules because it has the power of the army and the police, both of which it controls. Thus the constitution of the new Vietnam should incorporate a Judicial Branch completely independent of the Executive and the Legislative branches of government. For this to happen, judges should be nominated by the president or prime minister from the ranks of those who are legally trained, but appointed by the Legislative Branch. Further, once appointed, they should be shielded from all political pressures by terms that should last the entirety of their natural lives or until retirement and their removal could be effected only on grounds of misdemeanour by the Legislative Branch of government.

The judiciary should be given responsibility for judicial review, not only for Executive and other administrative actions but also for legislative acts that may be unconstitutional by virtue of being *ultra vires*. Indeed, the judiciary (through the national Supreme Court) should be the supreme arbiter of any conflicting interests between the Executive and Legislative branches of government.

Obviously, if the nation adopted the Westminster system of government in preference to a presidential system similar to that of the U.S.A. then there would be no conflict between the Legislature and the Executive for the two branches would in effect be one.

In Vietnam a presidential system would be preferable in that it would provide a more stable government and diminish tendencies to monopolise power, thanks to the clear system of checks and balances between the three branches of government. However, if the nation were to decide on the adoption of the Westminster system, then the judiciary should be considerably more strengthened to protect the rights and interests of all minorities, and in particular its power of judicial review of executive, administrative and

legislative actions should be broadened to prevent abuse of power by the majority party in government. The lack of a clear division of power between the Legislative and Executive branches in the Westminster system is to some extent counter-balanced by the presence of a shadow government in opposition in the Parliament itself; but its presence does not negate the all-important principle that the majority party holds absolute power in the legislature and therefore, by inference, in the executive government. It is not guaranteed that such power would be exercised with due restraint in an emerging democracy where politicians would tend to act with less tolerance.

3. Political Pluralism

As a nation with a tolerant culture based on Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, Vietnam is a society quite receptive to conflicting schools of thought. None of the above religions have ever sought to completely exterminate the others in order to reign supreme as the absolute doctrine. Contact with the West has also given birth to many political parties and movements, especially during the period of resistance against French occupation. But for the victory of the communists in 1954 in North Vietnam and their subsequent conquest of South Vietnam in 1975, political pluralism could have been the norm in Vietnamese politics by now.

The October revolution in Russia in 1917 put an end to parliamentary democracy in the Soviet Union and banished from that country all remnants of political pluralism. The same history repeated itself twice in Vietnam in 1954 and 1975 with exactly the same effect. Indeed the dictatorship of the proletariat, now more commonly known in Vietnam as the Socialist rule of law, is anti-thesis to the concept of political pluralism itself.

There are three assumptions underlying the pluralist principle: first is the assumption that political power comes from a multiplicity of power sources. Second is the assumption that society consists of a variety of groups and organisations, whose claim on the loyalty of their members is equal to the claim of the State; and third, groups, organisations, political parties or

indeed individuals and even the State itself are merely equal legal entities before the law of the land. Thus the State, as any other legal entity, must act within the legal and constitutional framework or suffer the consequences.

The first assumption, at the political level, would give rise to a multi-party democracy. For this to happen, the spirit of following Articles 20(1), 21 and 23(4) of the UDHR should be given constitutional recognition:

20(1): Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

21(1): Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

(2) Everyone has the right to equal access to public service in his country.

(3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

23(4): Everyone has the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

To enable the multi-party system to work effectively and to reflect the multiplicity of social cultural interests in Vietnam, the electoral method should be sensitive enough to achieve political representation in the Congress or Parliament for even the smallest political organisations. In this respect, the proportional or preferential system currently practised in Australia or perhaps the 'two-rounds' electoral method in France should be preferred over the 'first past the post' system currently practised in Great Britain. There is really no need to be concerned about the fragmentation of the political process due to the presence in the legislature of too many political groups. In reality, the constitutional recognition of the principle of political pluralism will inevitably give rise to a realignment of

political forces leading to a *de facto* state of political polarism. In this polarised body politic we will see the emergence of a majority forming a government and an opposition under one form or another, including coalitions of interests under various guidelines.

Thus the constitutional recognition of political pluralism implies indirectly the constitutional recognition of political opposition. The legitimisation of this multi-party system would also prevent the building of ideological doctrines with a view towards dominating the political process in the future.

The second assumption is important in that it provides the very much needed and long overdue demystification of the concept of the State itself. For too long in the history of the nations of the Far East, including Vietnam, the ruling classes have elevated the State to exalted levels in order to serve their own sectional interests at the expense of progress, justice, equity and downright commonsense.

Nowadays, men are able to pursue their personal interests and aspirations. Many of these interests and aspirations transcend national boundaries. Thus the concept of patriotism must also undergo radical alterations to its meaning and, indeed, relevance. The rationale for true patriotism must be the conviction that one's country has justice and equity firmly on its side. If one's country is acting against that overriding principle then it is one's duty as a man to oppose it. In today's world it is entirely possible that it is a particular social, political or religious organisation that satisfies a man's highest aspiration rather than his country's ideal.

The third assumption postulates that it is the rule of law that is supreme, no longer the State. This assumption reduces the State to the same level footing as any component of the civil society (such as any group, company or individual) as a mere legal entity before the eyes of the law. Of course, this alone is not sufficient to protect the individual citizen against the State because even an impartial law can be partially applied due to the vast financial resources of the State compared to the finite resources of a simple citizen. The individual under the rule of

law has also to face equally unfair circumstances when in legal conflict with financial or corporate institutions whose resources sometimes rival those of the State. However, how to improve the lot of the hapless individual *vis à vis* the State or institutions in a comprehensive manner, under the rule of law, is beyond the scope of this book.

It is sufficient to say that only some of man's many problems can be resolved by socio-political measures. The vast majority of his problems can be resolved only by himself, whether mentally, psychologically or metaphysically, within the deep recesses of his own mind. **In the final analysis, he is born in this vast universe responsible for his own fate and no external factors, not another man, nor society, nor the State, nor a god can nurture him.** But to the extent that collective co-existence is possible, the implementation of the Western democratic ideal (with its three components, i.e. a constitution, the rule of law and pluralism) on the traditional culture of the Far East would achieve one of the most powerful socio-metaphysical syntheses in human history — the reasons being that for too long the West, at the metaphysical level, has reeled under the benevolent dominance of a personal and anthropomorphic Creator-God; while the Far East for too long, at the socio-political level, has reeled under the dominance of an all-powerful triumvirate of scholar-parental-State interests.

This synthesis would create, in the new Vietnam, an environment in which men shall live a life conducive to complete emancipation from any external dominance, either socio-political or metaphysical. Such a synthesis is only able to create a favourable environment, of course. The genuine hard work has to be done by each individual in the very solitude he finds himself in when facing himself in the context of this conceptually beginningless and endless universe.

The implantation of Far Eastern metaphysics on a Western world already endowed with the democratic ideal would achieve an equally powerful synthesis.

B. THE DIAMOND SUTRA OR, ON THE SHATTERING OF PREJUDICES

FOR THE VIETNAMESE NATION to embark upon the new democratic venture, it is necessary to completely shatter numerous prejudices fettering its body politic from time immemorial until the modern episodes of colonialism and Western domination. The 'diamond sutra' in Buddhist literature (which evokes the image of the diamond as the purest and hardest natural material, able to destroy others while remaining unharmed itself) to shatter all human prejudices to achieve enlightenment, is most appropriate in the circumstances. For the Vietnamese people need no less than the most powerful mental implement imagined to cut asunder the following fallacies littering the road to true democracy.

1. That ideologies can capture reality in their intellectual or metaphysical constructs

Since the dawn of history, humans all over the world have been confronted not only with an objective universe which is not always easy to understand but also insurmountable subjective realities, as beings endowed with thoughts and feelings. Various cultures have responded in various ways to these challenges. However, their responses generally follow two basic tendencies:

(a) Some cultures come to the conclusion that the universe must be the work of an omnipotent and omnipresent God-Creator who can bestow favours or punishment as he wishes according to his own will. Typical of these cultures are the peoples of the Jewish, Christian and Moslem faiths. Ultimate salvation thus comes from the observance of certain divine laws and the glorification of the God-Creator.

By virtue of being the followers of the right God, the individual will be rewarded not only in heaven after he dies, but also during his lifetime he is entrusted by his God with the right to populate, dominate and conquer this objective universe in the name of his God.

(b) Some other cultures come to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a God-Creator but the universe is governed by underlying principles, and salvation comes not from the glorification of the God-Creator but from the understanding of these principles. Typical of these cultures, are the traditional Chinese and Buddhist philosophies and the philosophy (as opposed to the mythology) of the ancient Greeks.

However, there is a cardinal difference between Chinese and Buddhist philosophies and Greek philosophy in that the Greek's aim is to understand the principles governing the universe in order to conquer and dominate the objective universe, not in the name of God as is the case with the God-believers, but possibly in the name of science or philosophy. By contrast, the Chinese philosopher's aim is to understand the principles governing the universe, live in accordance with these principles and in harmony with the objective universe. The Buddhist philosopher takes the position one crucial step further than the Chinese one in that, having understood the principles governing the universe and by inference its true nature, he must transcend this objective universe which belongs to the realm of relativity (objectified by the six limited human faculties with all their failings and illusions: the five physical senses together with the mind, being the sixth) and achieve a state of realisation reaching into the absolute. Thus he becomes free from the laws governing the objective universe. His position is therefore different from that of both the Greek and the Chinese philosopher in that there is no objective universe to conquer, nor one to live in harmony with, since from the point of view of a being conceptually in the absolute plane, the 'objective universe' or 'subjective universe' are merely illusions or artificial dichotomies created by the feeble minds of beings living on the relative plane. The absolute is one that cannot be perceived by any of

the above human six faculties, nor described by thoughts or languages. The terms 'god' or 'satan', 'good' or 'bad', 'hell' etc. ... only exist in the mind of the ignorants who are in dire need of the Buddha's compassion and enlightenment. Hence the following verses that all Buddhists in Vietnam, China, Korea and Japan must learn by heart from the well-known sutra *The Heart of Perfect Knowledge*:

The Bodhisattva Avalokita

While meditating deeply on the nature of perfect knowledge
Suddenly realised the five *skandas* (being form, perception,
imagination, thoughts and discrimination) were equally
illusory.

Upon this realisation he transcended all sufferings.

Listen, Shariputra

Form is not different from emptiness

Emptiness is not different from form

Form is emptiness

Emptiness is form

The same is true of the remaining four *skandas*.

Listen, Shariputra

The nature of all dharmas (or phenomena) is emptiness

They are neither born nor deceased

Neither pure nor defiled

Neither increased nor decreased

Therefore in the nature of emptiness there is no form

Nor perceptions, nor imagination

Nor thought, nor discrimination

No physical senses nor mind

No corresponding physical faculties nor mental faculty

No objects of perception of these physical or mental faculties

No ignorance, nor cessation of ignorance

No "four noble truths" (nor "eightfold paths" nor doctrine)

No perfect knowledge, no realisation (of perfect knowledge)

Since there is no realisation
 A Bodhisattva, with this understanding
 Sees no obstacles in his mind
 Seeing no obstacle, he has no fear
 Detached from all illusions
 He realises absolute Nirvana
 All the Buddhas of the past, present and future
 Achieve incomparable enlightenment thanks to this
 understanding.¹²⁶

Thus, in the eyes of the Buddha, an essential condition is that his followers should free themselves from the intellectual and metaphysical constraints of his doctrines, and indeed the entirety of his doctrines, to achieve enlightenment.

In the same spirit, the greatest crimes against humanity are not only the holocausts that were committed against the physical bodies of masses of people such as the sacrificing of thousands to build the Great Wall of China by Ch'in Shih Huang Ti, the massacre of the Jewish people by Hitler or the extermination of the Kulaks by Stalin, but more importantly the confinement of the human mind and its intellectual capacity within the narrow limits of ideological dogmatism. Indeed, when measured in terms of human suffering, the dogmatic pursuit of doctrinal purity by the Inquisitors of medieval Christianity, the religious zeal of the Crusaders and Moslem defenders of the faith of the Middle Ages, the hardline fanaticism of fundamentalist Islam, the ideological fervour of early Marxism-Leninism and even the self-righteous intransigence of the Americans in the application of their concept of liberty on the rest of the world, must have created more devastation and long-term scars on the human collective consciousness than ten times the hordes of Genghis Khan.

The tendencies to formulate intellectual or metaphysical ideologies are manifestations of intellectual and spiritual

126 *Bát nhậ, tâm kinh* as explained by The Venerable Thich Thanh Từ, publ. Thiên Ân Pagoda, pp 66-7.

inadequacies, immaturity and ignorance across cultures. These tendencies also represent the final capitulation of their authors in their quest for knowledge, since such a quest requires a degree of intellectual and spiritual honesty that they do not possess.

Thus, the first priority of all political systems and their leaders is not the creation of more ideologies but the destruction of all existing ones, the reason being that ideological constructs can never capture objective reality in their entirety since objective reality is perpetually in motion. All ideologies can capture are certain fossilised concepts and human creativity. For once a person's mind is taken over by ideological motivations, it ceases to be objective and loses its capacity to see things as they truly are, but only as permitted by the dictates of that ideology. The destruction of all ideologies would result in the vigorous revival of the thinking capacity of the human race, in the blossoming of new ideas, in intellectual creativity and in spiritual liberation. In these latter respects, the Vietnamese people deserve no less than the people of the community of free nations of the world. The foundation of human thought is and should always remain reality in its pristine and uncoloured, objective self. The foundation of human thought should never be allowed to deteriorate into doctrinaire dreams of power, grandeur and illusions completely alienated from reality.

2. That the Nationalist Forces' weaknesses are their internal divisions

For decades the nationalist forces in Vietnam have suffered this unjust condemnation by the communists and the intelligentsia alike. The truth is that nationalist forces cannot and should not be united in the sense expected by the general community and that their weaknesses are really their strength and indeed the strength of the nation in the long term.

The many nationalist groups that were created during the French occupation of Vietnam were by and large spontaneous reactions of Vietnamese intellectuals as patriots against foreign domination on the one hand, and as reformers against a

traditional socio-political order that has clearly failed to protect national sovereignty, on the other. Due to their spontaneity, each group would have a different perception of the new world order as represented by the French invaders with superior weaponry, a new religion and totally different cultural and political values. Each group would also have passed different judgments on the traditional monarchy, religions and cultural and political values. Thus the difference in policies between them as to how best to fight the French and reform society are only natural.

However, in times of fierce struggle, it is undeniable that the lack of unity among them was a weakness. Indeed, in the North since 1954 all the nationalist forces were eliminated and the remnants of their organisation fled to the South. In the South, however, thanks to the intervention of the Americans supporting the Diêm régime, the nationalist forces were kept tightly on the fringe of politics. By contrast, the socialist movement as founded by Marx and perfected as an international revolutionary force by Lenin have been carefully engineered on a worldwide scale. Thus, the communist party of Vietnam has been able to benefit from a whole international network of physical and ideological support. The unity of the socialist camp could be much more easily organised for these reasons. However, because of the lack of spontaneity, the Communist Party has never really properly appreciated the powerful nationalist sentiments of the Vietnamese people as a whole. The party for too long has acted as a tool of the Communist International to impose upon the Vietnamese people the socialist world order. Thus even at the height of its popularity, it still had to keep up the pretence of an alliance with the more genuine nationalist forces in the fight against French occupation. With the failure of its economic policies and more recently with the international collapse of the communist ideology, its credibility among the people has been totally destroyed yet it still holds power through the army and the police.

Thus in the final analysis, the nationalist forces have not had the opportunity to lose credibility with the people, but neither

have they been able to build a credible power base; whereas the communists have already lost credibility, yet they have built an infrastructure so powerful as to sustain power in the short term. Since the modern world has moved into a phase where ideological motivations are no longer the tools of trade *par excellence* of political parties, it would be fair to say that the future of Vietnam no longer lies with the communists but rather with the still-weak nationalist forces.

In terms of national interests, these nationalist forces have clear advantages over the communists:

- The lack of ideological commitment by the nationalists, considered one of their worst drawbacks during the period of French colonial rule, now becomes an advantage. Indeed, in today's pragmatic world, the sign of maturity of a political party is no longer ideological commitment, but the ability to create realistic policies that can be effectively and efficiently implemented, and which can produce tangible results.
- The chronic division within the ranks of the nationalist groups, if kept within reasonable limits, will enhance the principle of political pluralism enshrined in the new constitution. For nothing is worse than the totalitarian rule by a monolithic political institution answering only to itself. For this reason even small political parties with representation in the Parliament or Congress should be given every financial assistance to hire researchers and administrative staff and to be able to relate to their constituencies and reflect their wishes at the highest level of government.
- Last but not least, a multiplicity of political parties, not only reflecting a variety of political tendencies, but acting as a system of checks and balances within themselves, can guarantee the individual his position *vis à vis* the powerful social institutions that he has to confront in modern society. For in the end, society was created to serve the individual man, for his interest and benefit, not vice versa, because society and social institutions are only abstract concepts, whereas the individual man can feel, touch, think and suffer as a human being. In the

eternal struggle between man, society and social institutions, every effort should be made, and every safeguard should be built to protect the individual.

Thus a politician of modern times should be akin to a Zen monk in his search for ultimate reality, forever watchful and rigorous in shattering the illusive but powerful egoistic self within his human nature in order to prevent it from controlling his destiny and clouding his judgment. By the same token, social institutions, especially political parties, should contain an in-built mechanism to be called their "collective conscience", forever watchful to shatter to smithereens all tendencies towards giving themselves a permanent *raison d'être* independent of the interests of men in society. Institutions should be and should always remain servants, not masters, of men. Institutions should be allowed to rise and fall as dictated by the objective demands of men on their usefulness and services. They should not be allowed to control the destiny of men.

3. *That the relationship between the government and the people is one similar to the relationship between parents and their own children*

This particular prejudice is the ingenious invention of that Confucéen scholars-parent-State triumvirate designed to perpetuate their rule and self-interests. This prejudice has detrimental consequences for the people of Vietnam:

- (a) It provides an undeserved and unjustified moral dimension to what is truly a relationship between oppressors and oppressed.
- (b) It allows the government unlimited power without any system of checks and balances, resulting in an immense network of corruption.
- (c) It renders the people passive and alienated from their responsibilities as true citizens of the State.

It has been indeed the norm in Vietnam that government directives, even the French colonial ones, were by and large observed

by the people, not because they necessarily agree with the content of these directives, but merely because they are the wishes of the government. This rendered the task of anti-French fighters extremely difficult. The same situation exists in Vietnam now under the rule of the Communist Party of Vietnam. The Party has lost its popular mandate since time immemorial or perhaps never had or needed a mandate. Yet, *because it is the government*, its wishes are rarely questioned. The unchecked power of the government brings about corruption at all levels. Neither is Japan an exception, despite its advanced economy. Indeed, dynasties in China generally were terminated because the levels of corruption were such that even the extremely docile and patient Chinese could no longer tolerate them.

In the recent history of Vietnam, since the French invasion, there has been no administration that is not corrupt. Indeed, the French colonial administration, the First Republic in South Vietnam, then the Second Republic in the South, and of course the Communist Government in the North, and then in the whole of Vietnam; so much so that corruption has become part of the culture. By far the greatest harm is done by the fact that the people have abdicated from their responsibility to participate in the running of the affairs of the nation as true citizens of the nation. Especially in the modern world of international competition, this is indeed a weakness of grave significance. It could easily be argued of course that this is not their fault because they were never allowed to have this responsibility. However, this is not the time to allocate blame. It is incumbent upon both the government and the individual citizens themselves to make a supreme effort to create new governmental and constitutional standards as well as attitudinal changes for the people to become aware of their duties. In comparative terms, the role of the people in determining the destiny of the nation is much more potent than that of the government, despite the latter's illusions about its own contributions. The most obvious evidence of this proposition is the fact that in times of crucial national survival, it is much better to have an

intelligent people with a stupid government than a stupid people with an intelligent government. For instance, under the Hồ dynasty Vietnam had a leader and a government with extremely enlightened policies; however the intelligentsia and the whole people were too conservative and in 1407 China was successful in invading the country. On the other hand, the current communist government in Vietnam is a conservative, corrupt and unenlightened group of alienated revolutionaries running the country in the most incompetent manner, yet even so the country has not yet sunk to the level of the Latin American economies. Thus Vietnam has performed creditably despite the economic ignorance of her leaders. It is not rare in the history of nations for their governments to undeservedly accept either accolades or blame for successes or failures for which they are only really responsible in very modest proportions. It is possible that without the constraints of government stupidity, the Vietnamese people will move rapidly in the direction of economic development similar to the Japanese, Taiwanese, Koreans, Singaporeans and Hong Kongese merely because their age-old Buddhist-Confucian and Taoist culture has provided these people of the Far East with a mental and spiritual temperament of the right calibre to take on any challenges imposed upon men by the world.

4. *That only the masses can make history*

The masses can make history only if the majority of individuals making up the masses are truly enlightened. If this is not the case, then the above proposition is only a propaganda tool for political agitators and charlatans to seize power for their own personal gains. Indeed, experience has shown that the masses have been constantly manipulated by demagogues and ideological and religious zealots throughout history. To create a just society demands moral courage and a great deal of wisdom, but to corrupt society and seize political power only demands determination and political guile. Further, words of wisdom can only be appreciated by the wise, whereas simple catchcries by

populist religious or political leaders with simple promises of rewards for loyalty and support may find a ready audience in the hearts of the many.

It is, then, inevitable that throughout human history, those who respected humankind and elected to tell them the truth could only be successful if their wisdom were exceptional. In the majority of cases they failed, being beaten by much inferior charlatans. For wisdom and the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood require a much greater degree of intellect and integrity than blind faith and loyalty for immediate rewards. By the same token, loyalty and blind faith are the worst enemies of the intellect since they tend to blunt all the individuals' critical abilities.

Numerous determined and fanatical religious and ideological groups have been able to seize power and terrorise whole societies for the above reasons. The only defence society has against these groups lies in the constitutional recognition of political pluralism for the short term; in the long term nothing less than the political and spiritual enlightenment of the whole nation is necessary to subdue forever these dangerous elements.

Indeed, nothing less than the destruction of all prejudices, including ideologies, to free the thoughts of men, is required to ensure lasting democracy in Vietnam.

APPENDIX

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

ON DECEMBER 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the full text of which appears below. Following this historic act the Assembly called upon all Member countries to publicize the text of the Declaration and "to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories".[†]

PREAMBLE

WHEREAS recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

WHEREAS disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

WHEREAS it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

WHEREAS, it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

WHEREAS the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

[†] Final authorised text published by the United Nations Office of Public Information.

WHEREAS Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

WHEREAS a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge,

Now, Therefore,

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
proclaims

THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS
as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

ARTICLE 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

ARTICLE 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

ARTICLE 3. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

ARTICLE 4. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude, slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

ARTICLE 5. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

ARTICLE 6. Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

ARTICLE 7. All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

ARTICLE 8. Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

ARTICLE 9. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

ARTICLE 10. Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

ARTICLE 11. (1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.

(2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

ARTICLE 12. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

ARTICLE 13. (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.

(2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

ARTICLE 14. (1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

(2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

ARTICLE 15. (1) Everyone has the right to a nationality.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

ARTICLE 16. (1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

(3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

ARTICLE 17. (1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

ARTICLE 18. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

ARTICLE 19. Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

ARTICLE 20. (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

(2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

ARTICLE 21. (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

(2) Everyone has the right to equal access to public service in his country.

(3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

ARTICLE 22. Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

ARTICLE 23. (1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

(2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.

(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

(4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

ARTICLE 24. Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

ARTICLE 25. (1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

ARTICLE 26. (1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

ARTICLE 27. (1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

(2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

ARTICLE 28. Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

ARTICLE 29. (1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

(2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

(3) These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principle of the United Nations.

ARTICLE 30. Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms put forth herein.

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