

Will Vietnam's Communist Party Ever Change Its Ways?

Vietnam is an interesting case study in the question of whether communist parties can truly reform from within.

By David Hutt
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One can trace the abasement of the Vietnamese Communists back to August 1968, not in the aftermath of the “Tet” offensives but in Hanoi’s support of the Soviet Union invasion of Czechoslovakia. Alexander Dubček, the head of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia back then, had ushered in months of political and economic liberalization after the Prague Spring, including easing restrictions on media and free speech. It was the great hope of reform communism until the Soviets invaded.



Image Credit: [Wikimedia Commons/Hector Garcia](#)

Some might want to brush aside the North Vietnamese support for the invasion as pragmatism. The Soviet Union, after all, was Hanoi’s main benefactor. But that doesn’t quite cut it. Dubček, on the eve of the invasion, reaffirmed his country’s internationalist credentials, including financing the North Vietnamese. But Hanoi applauded the Soviet invasion as an anti-imperialist move, tramping further down the Moscow line. On the same day as the invasion, North Vietnamese radio described it as “noble” act. Pham Van Dong, then prime minister of North Vietnam, called it a necessary action to “foil the intervention of the U.S. imperialists” and Czech “counterrevolutionaries.”

Nicholas Khoo, author of *Collateral Damage: Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, probably has the best analysis of Hanoi’s response to the Prague Spring. I mention that event here at the outset not only to show how the Vietnamese Communists’ claim to be champions of internationalism and anti-imperialism collapsed so quickly (yet another indication of how anti-colonialism fits neatly into the history of contradictions). It also raises questions of whether communist parties can reform themselves.

Perhaps someone who thinks it can is Pham Doan Trang, a writer who manages to encompass the borders of journalist, blogger, and activist – or what might be called, in a sense, an intellectual. Incidentally, this month, a Czech humanitarian organization, People in Need, **announced** she will be handed its annual Homo Homini award for human rights.

Trang is one of the bravest and most literate voices found in Vietnam today. “It would be better if we were to live in a world where such awards would not have to exist,” she reportedly **responded** to news of her award, an indication of her ability to commingle wit and intellect. More to the point, Trang is one of those people who make you question your own courage – and naturally leaves you to discover it lacking. After she was arrested and grilled by the authorities in 2012, an incident that would lead others into silence, she defiantly published the text of her interrogation.

I would recommend her articles, which can be accessed at phamdoantrang.com, for their ability to oscillate between high and low politics; between analysis of Party policy and struggles of ordinary people. Importantly, too, she can never be considered guilty of patronizing; she rightly says one of her goals is to raise the political understanding of the Vietnamese. I draw your attention to an **interview** she gave *Radio Free Asia* last year about her newest book, *Politics For All*, which unfortunately has yet to be given an English translation.

I [want] to erase the idea that politics are for a minority of people and the elite. Vietnamese people regularly say that everything will be taken care of by the Party and the state. I want people to understand that politics are everywhere in our lives – even connected to the food we eat and the clothes we wear.

Trang is not content to simply point fingers, unlike some journalists and activists. She is equally skilled at pointing out how reforms ought to be carried out by the Party. This naturally leads to question of whether the Party *can* reform. This returns us to the Prague Spring.

For some communists, this event demonstrated that their power could be withered away by other apparatchiks. For other communists, it was a demonstration that reform could come from within the Party. In the case of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet invasion in 1968 prevented the latter, meaning reform had to come from outside the Party, which it did in 1989 with the Velvet Revolution.

Vietnam, today, is grappling with these same considerations. Since 2016, Vietnam's Communist Party has entered its own phase of *normalizace*, to borrow a Czech term, that along with "Husakism" defined post-1968 Czechoslovakia. It now finds its equivalent in Vietnam with "Trongism" (if I may coin an axiom).

At the 2016 Party Congress, then-Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung was removed from office, while Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong was given another five-year term. In one respect, Dung's removal was a reaction against his populist style of politics, which threatened to outgrow the Party's appeal. In another, Trong's victory was an indication that the Party thought it had moved too far away from the status quo. It's important to remember, though, is that Dung was not a Dubček-like figure; he was hardly the reformer that some commentators have portrayed him as.

Trongism, by most measures, is an attempt to reassert the status quo, when Party policy was decided by consensus, when there was no oversized political figure within the Party and when the security apparatus held considerable sway over society.

The current **purge** of politically-connected businesspeople is a natural offshoot of this renormalization, as is the ongoing **crackdown** on bloggers, journalists, and activists. "Reluctant terror," a phrase used to describe post-1968 Czechoslovakia, where repression was carried out sporadically to maintain the Party's power, is rather apt for what is currently happening in Vietnam. Indeed, repression in post-1968 Czechoslovakia wasn't on a Stalinist level; repression in Vietnam today isn't on a Chinese level, either.

Unfortunately, I suspect none of this will ease up in the coming years, meaning writers like Pham Doan Trang will remain of vital importance. What's more, Trongism appears to be a consolidation of the Party apparatus ahead of the 2021 Congress, when there'll be a monumental shift in personnel. As the *Economist* **put it** in 2016:

[In 2021] a mass of Russian-speaking party members, brought up hating America, are due to retire. Their successors may well be Western-educated technocrats who understand that the party's best hope of survival lies in making the economy more competitive, and in convincing young Vietnamese... that it has their interests at heart.

This might be pushing it a little too far. But clearly 2021 will be a decisive year for Vietnam. The question, then, is whether Vietnam will ever find itself a Dubček-like figure or something that could be described as a Hanoi or Saigon Spring?
