

A Vietnam for Tomorrow: Change at Home before Changing Abroad
August 6, 2012
By Khanh Vu Duc

Before Vietnam can assume any role on the international stage, it must first change at home

This past Monday, Dang Thi Kim Lieng, mother of Ta Phong Tan, died after setting herself on fire to protest the detention of her daughter. Ta, a blogger and former police officer, was arrested for conducting propaganda against the state—an all too common charge as of late. Standing trial in August alongside fellow bloggers Nguyen Van Hai (also known as Dieu Cay) and Phan Thanh Hai, each risks 20 years in jail if convicted. Unable to help her daughter, Mrs. Dang could only voice her opposition through self-immolation.

Human rights, and by extension Vietnam's domestic policy, cannot be divorced from its foreign policy. Yet the Vietnamese government hopes to convince its critics, particularly the US, that such a separation is possible. Tragedies such as that of Mrs. Dang and the continued detention of human rights and democratic activists simply underscore the deteriorating situation in Vietnam.

To be blunt, the Hanoi government does not respect the will of its citizens and thus it cannot be said that the government's actions on the international stage are in any way indicative of the will of the people. Reform is on the mind of Vietnamese citizens, yet the government continues to crack down on such efforts. Not surprisingly, the US has continued to refuse to lift its ban on arms sales to Vietnam until these problems are addressed.

Despite the appearance of increasing closeness between Vietnam and the US, the latter will continue to maintain its distance as long as Vietnam remains a single-party state and human rights conditions fail to improve. Only Hanoi's wariness of Beijing and the South China Sea disputes have kept Vietnam from joining hands with China. Nevertheless, the desire not to upset both countries has Vietnam continuing its political balancing act between the two.

Special relationships over strategic partnerships

Vietnam has wisely pursued an independent path, seeking to build relationships beyond the US and China. Rather than putting all of its eggs in one or two baskets, Hanoi has decided to spread them across continents. Establishing strategic partnerships is an important aspect of Vietnam's idealistic goal of being friends with everyone. Unfortunately, strategic partnerships are not friendships.

Although China is a strategic partner of Vietnam, it can hardly be said to be a close friend. One need only examine the South China Sea disputes for evidence of this. Indeed, on paper Vietnam can lay claim to having many partners; but in times of crisis, how many will stand by its side?

Vietnam's hope of being friends to all is not inherently wrong, but it is naïve. When one's friend (the United Kingdom) includes a friend's opponent (Russia), it can raise questions regarding one's intentions and reliability. Vietnam has many "friends," yes, but how many can it truly call a friend?

Simply amassing partnerships will not suffice. Vietnam needs friends, countries it can rely upon in times of need. Such special relationships are difficult to establish because it

requires trust, a commodity in short supply under the current Vietnamese government.

With whom should Vietnam establish special relationships? Ideally, Vietnam should seek closer ties with countries that share its values. The question is therefore what values does Vietnam represent? Is it those of the government or the people? In a democracy, the government would fairly represent the will of the people and so the two can be discussed together. However, such is not the case with Vietnam, where the government and the people are often philosophically divided on this issue.

It is increasingly evident that the Vietnamese people are seeking change, demanding respect for human rights and even democratic reform. These are the values of the people, values that more closely resemble those set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The people have little in common with the government, which has made every attempt to stifle democratic progress in order to maintain the Communist Party's grip over Vietnam.

Until such time that government truly represents the people, Vietnam will be prevented from establishing a lasting special relationship with any nation, treated instead at a distance and with suspicion.

Working as part of a greater whole

But let us assume these changes have taken place: could Vietnam act as a pivot for both the US and China? Perhaps yes and perhaps not, but Vietnam should instead dedicate its efforts to uniting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which has the potential to reshape the region but, in its current state, has failed to live up to this potential.

The recent conference in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, was the first to conclude without a joint statement delivered by Asean in the pact's 45-year history. Central to this failure of unity is the South China Sea disputes, which has divided the organization.

To remain relevant in the future, Asean must change and adapt to current circumstances. Given its voluntary nature—member states are not bound—the effectiveness of the group is dependent on its members' goodwill. Given the vast diversity of the states, the interest of member states are likely to diverge. A unified front must therefore be established on the ground of shared values, not unlike Vietnam. What is the role of Asean in the future, and how can it achieve these goals? That remains to be seen, for the most pressing issue is for member states to commit to ASEAN and realize its potential.

Asean is without a leader to rally around. Indonesia may prove to be this leader, but there is a chance for a new Vietnam to act as the group's conscience, to voice real concerns when it is unpopular to do so, and to suggest unpopular decisions when the alternative fails to address these concerns.

If Vietnam should act as a pivot for the US and China, it should do so as part of Asean. There is an opportunity for Vietnam to improve and reinforce its foreign policy credentials as part of ASEAN, where it can acquire the capabilities and influence necessary to play a larger role on the international stage. There is a path on which Vietnam can follow to become a leader, but it must first change.

Copyright © 2005 - 2012 Asia Sentinel.

Source: http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4730&Itemid=188

