

The Vietnam Dilemma

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It was a great and emotional experience to visit Vietnam for an 8 day study tour in April 2011 as part of a 7 member PSM team. Vietnam has been the inspiration of many since the seventies. Many activists in the world today were inspired by the great Vietnamese revolution which ousted the victor of world war two - The United States of America. Many people in the West as well as in the Third World saw the Vietnamese victory against all odds as a new hope for humanity. Perhaps no nation in the current world has undergone such a struggle for liberation and freedom.

Many people in today's world are inspired by Che Guevara but Che himself was inspired by Vietnam. In this great saying of Che in 1966 where he said let's create two, three, many Vietnams. Che said in his "Message to the Tricontinental," which he wrote in Cuba in 1966 before leaving for Bolivia where he was ultimately killed. Che wrote, "And let us develop genuine proletarian internationalism, with international proletarian armies. Let the flag under which we fight be the sacred cause of the liberation of humanity, so that to die under the colors of Vietnam, Venezuela, Guatemala, Laos, Guinea, Colombia, Bolivia, Brazil - to mention only the current scenes of armed struggle - will be equally glorious and desirable for a Latin American, an Asian, an African and even a European. Every drop of blood spilled in a land under whose flag one was not born is an experience gathered by the survivors to be applied later in the struggle of one's own country. And every people that liberates itself is a step in the battle for the liberation of one's own people.... We cannot evade the call of the hour. Vietnam teaches us this with its permanent lesson in heroism, its tragic daily lesson of struggle and death in order to gain the final victory."

The Vietnamese struggle was a great achievement by any standards. We visited the Museum and reviewed the history of Vietnam - it was really amazing. The liberation struggle against the Japanese and French in the 1940s culminating in the 1954 defeat of the French army at Dien Bien Phu. This was documented in the War remnants Museum we visited. This was the first time in history that a colonial power was militarily defeated and this defeat was followed by massive decolonization worldwide. The Colonial rulers had understood the writing on the wall! 1965 saw the first of the US aerial raids against the North. The tonnage of bombs, chemical arms, used during the US intervention in Vietnam exceeded that used during the whole of WW II. The US troops grew to more than half a million but once again the empire was defeated when Saigon fell and South Vietnam liberated in 1975. But the story of Vietnam did not end here. In 1979, Vietnamese troops entered Phnom Penh to end the murderous Pol Pot regime in Cambodia and then had to repel a retaliatory invasion from China, a staunch ally of the Khmer Rouge regime. Vietnam finally withdrew from Cambodia in 1989 and since then the nation has not been engaged in any war. So it is amazing to note that Vietnam has been war-free only for the last twenty years. As Ho Chi Minh said, "Nothing is more precious than independence and liberty."

Malaysia shares historical links with Vietnam. On 30 April 1930, Ho Chi Minh launched the Communist Party of Malaya (MCP). MCP became the first political party to call for the ouster of the British from Malaya. 30th April seems to have special significance for the left in Vietnam as well as in Malaysia. On 30th April 1975, the last U.S. helicopter left US embassy grounds and Saigon surrendered. North Vietnamese Army under the Communist party of Vietnam was finally in control. As for the PSM, 30th April has its own significance as it was the day PSM was launched after socialism appeared to have been wiped out in Malaysia, and then it took 11 years to win registration for the

socialist party . Was this hesitation of the Malaysian authorities due in part to the fear that this could be the first step towards the development of a socialist alternative in this country?

It was with a real feeling of pride and sadness that we visited the mausoleum where Ho Chi Minh still lies magnificently. He continues to inspire thousands of people who come daily from all over the world and from various parts of Vietnam. Uncle Ho seems to be the only remaining icon of Vietnam's revolutionary past and tributes to him can be found all over Vietnam - the huge lakes where he used to walk, the mango trees which he planted, and the mountains terrains he climbed. Every government building and post office continues to have his image and statue. With sadness, because back home in Malaysia, for the younger Malaysians, they only remember the thousands of boat people who came to the Malaysia's shore in the late 1970's and today reference to Vietnam brings to mind dog eating migrant workers living in crowded make-shift hostels. That is how this great nation and its people have been portrayed in Malaysia today. Mahathir however saw the openings for his coterie of national capitalists and started doing business with Vietnam. Maybank and Petronas are among the Malaysian capitalist companies which have crept into Socialist Vietnam. Many countries including US companies have a footing now in Vietnam.

It is because of all this that we had to visit Vietnam. For a new socialist party like the PSM, we are inspired by the great revolutions in the world. We cherish the victory of each and every revolution as our own victory, likewise we see the defeat of the left in any part of the world as our own defeats. It was this quest for knowledge and alternative models, that prompted our party congress to decide that we must organise a study tour of Vietnam. In recent years we have been inspired by the great revolutionary advancement made by Chavez in what is called 21st century socialism. But many comrades felt that we know so much of certain countries so far away, but we don't know much about Vietnam - the only remaining socialist republic in South East Asia.

Our visit was an eye-opener. Whatever we had read did not prepare us for what we saw. For a start, we were amazed by the huge progress Vietnam has made physically. We expected a war torn country with dirt roads and scrappy infrastructure. But we were pleasantly surprised to see bustling modern cities. Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi are well developed metropolitan cities with state of the art infrastructure, big roads and a very modern set-up. Even the rural areas are well linked with roads to the main-roads etc. I have visited Jakarta, Manila and Bangkok before. It was with great pride that we noted that there were hardly any beggars in the streets of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh. It seems to indicate that the Communist party of Vietnam(CPV) has accomplished much compared to the capitalist orientated government in other parts of South East Asia (SEA). Vietnam social indicators too are far better than most other developing countries and in certain things, they are far better off than other countries including Malaysia. When we walked along the streets, we saw that the people of Vietnam seemed happy and free - we hardly saw any policemen or military personnel! The towns are bustling with economic activity and the freemarket really seems to be booming. We saw a street filled with shops selling shoes competing with each other. The towns and villages were clean and there seems to be a proper system of governance in place.

A lot of this achievement is attributed to the CPV and its leadership. Most people we met spoke very highly of the CPV and this includes the people we met who were not on our official itinerary. There seems to be the general belief that the party will lead them in the right way. Most Vietnamese seem happy with the country opening up its economy to the world. They say socialism means being wealthy and not sharing out poverty. They believe that the leadership of the CPV consciously opened up the Vietnamese economy to break out of isolation and poverty. As socialists, we are very worried at the pace of how fast Vietnam is embracing the market economy. But at the same we can understand the dilemma facing the CPV in its quest to lift the Vietnamese people out of poverty in a unipolar world order dominated by corporate interests.

CPV officials told us, what is important is not how much FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) that flows into the country but who controls the means of production. Most leaders we met felt that the State Enterprises remain the main economic players. These State Enterprises are seen as being under the control of the CPV which in turn is viewed as a Government representing the class interests of the workers and peasants in Vietnam. We were told how laws have been put in place to safeguard the people's interest including a raise in minimum wages.

Vietnam had to take this road after the collapse of the Berlin wall. Without the support from the Soviet Union and the failure of communist and socialist parties to make inroads in SEA, what do you expect Vietnam to do. It is an uphill task to build Socialism in one country and we in Malaysia are equally humbled that we were no help in helping socialist reconstruction in Vietnam. As for Thailand and Philippines, they participated in the Vietnam war supporting the Americans in "bombing them back to the Stone Ages!" A few years ago, I asked a senior member of the MCP (Malayan Communist party) why the MCP didn't seize permanent power after the defeat of the Japanese in 1945. Why did we allow British to come back? Why didn't we wage a war like what was done by the Indonesians and Vietnamese. The answer I got then was that the MCP cadres were very young and that they didn't have a leader like Ho Chi Minh.

But our anxieties for Vietnam grew during this trip. Ho Chi Minh was truly a Marxist-Leninist and a member of the Comintern. What would he have done over the past 20 years had he been alive we asked ourselves. With the way Vietnam is going today, I won't be surprised that Vietnam will emerge as one of the leading economy in SEA even surpassing Malaysia. I say this because the Vietnamese people are very hardworking and disciplined. The war has developed their character and they have a strong attitude to working hard. The question is, will Vietnam end up like China? Will its Socialist ideals remain intact when the peoples' culture and motivations are continuously assaulted by capitalism's individualism and greed. We were told that the Vietnamese Communist Party biggest challenge is how to balance the forces. The scenario is very similar in Venezuela where Chavez talks about a revolutionary process in a capitalist economy. But at least we see Venezuela moving left. Deep down, we didn't have the same feeling about Vietnam.

As we travelled through the country, people told us of the emerging of a super rich group. There are issues such as increasing income disparity between the rich and poor; there are concerns when education and health care which were previously free even during the most difficult periods are today being charged a nominal sum. We saw how agricultural land is being converted to industrial areas. Many huge foreign companies are moving into Vietnam. When I asked about corruption, we were told that "one needs to have the right connections to make it happen". Money corrupts! Members of CPV can participate in business and there seems to be huge interest in this. Will the CPV be able to consistently represent the interests of workers and peasants of Vietnam after another 10 years of flirtation with the profit motive? These questions were the subject of the discussion that we had amongst ourselves as we travelled the country.

Before, during the liberation struggle, the enemy was clear. They came in war planes loaded with bombs but today they are coming in the form of FDIs with US currency. Their motive then and now is similar - to plunder the resources and make profits. Vietnam also has borrowing from the World Bank and the IMF. There are some projects funded by these groups and Vietnam already has a huge debt to such institutions. Vietnam's external debt amounted to 32.8% of GDP in 2009. Some of our concerns seemed to also concern some of the people we met during our trip. The Vietnamese National Assembly in January this year came out with a policy pronouncement that economic growth cannot be at all costs. This came about after several mass organizations raised concerns that unbridled growth is leading to growing inequalities. We were told that the fatherland fronts and other mass organization representing youth and women have been critical with some of the current economic policies. It is heartening to know that their voices did contribute in formulating national

economic policy and that the National Assembly is now being more cautious about growth for growth sake.

The other bugging issue is that there seems to be gap between between ideology and practical practice in Vietnam. The essence of Vietnamese socialism today is not very clear. We also failed to see clear feedback mechanisms with the people though we were told about the Fatherland front, women and youth mass groups. Our concern is that the CPV is underestimating the seductive capacity of the capitalist forces in play. We felt that the opening of market without constantly deepening ideological understanding in the people, will lead to a new society where many believe in capitalist ideas and this group will ultimately defeat the great achievements of the CPV and the Vietnamese people.

As we reflected on Vietnam's place in the current world, we had to admit that one doesn't see CPV or Vietnam engage in Internationalism or take an anti-imperialist position like Cuba, Bolivia or Venezuela. Vietnam seems to be very inward looking, and doesn't seem to be taking clear positions on International issues. Ho Chi Minh was an Internationalist and the Vietnamese people were supported by people all over the world during the Vietnamese war. Yet today Vietnam seems to be only concerned with its own development. The masses seem to be not conscientized with regards the global situation and seem prepared to allow market forces dictate their destiny, There is an obvious lack of mobilization based on issues or for building ideological positions, and this stands out very prominently when we compare with the processes taking place in Venezuela and Bolivia. We were told that there are ample avenues for the people to raise issues etc. Yet we were concerned that there are not many cooperatives, communal councils or efforts to involve workers in the management of their factories. There seems to be lack of a consultative process. To us it seemed that the CPV is underestimating the corrupting influence of market forces and think they can ride the storm.

Having said all this, and though the future may seem challenging, it would be wrong to say that Vietnam is not going to prosper. The Vietnamese economy is definitely going to grow and the availability of jobs is going to increase. The challenge for Vietnam is whether it can maintain its high social indicators and ensure that its current market friendly policies do not create uncontrollable capitalist inclinations within the highest echelons of the party and the state apparatus. Will Vietnam and its people continue to be inspired by the revolution their forefathers sacrificed so much for or will they be overwhelmed by market forces. These are hard questions which the CPV needs to look openly.

May will see the National Assembly election which is held once every five years. We were told that this year's elections is going to be interesting. There seem to be different factions within the CPV pulling in different directions. One faction wants to take Vietnam to the right and open up the country to more FDIs and private ownership while the second faction wants to ensure that strong State intervention in the economy to ensure the well being of workers and peasants, and better redistribution of the surplus of the economy. The CPV says that it is only trying to construct socialism in Vietnam and that this is just the transitional period. Yet most socialist countries get in trouble during this transitional periods.

The class struggle and an ideological questions appears to be slowly but surely emerging in Vietnam today. The next few years starting from the May National Assembly will determine the route Vietnam heads. The dialectical relationship between growth, development, peoples' participation and distribution will see where Vietnam will end up. Growth, but not at all cost. That is the guiding principles for now. That is a good position to take in a world dictated by the capitalist mode of thinking. Vietnam has been victorious in all its previous wars over the past 60 years, but its current struggle it is undergoing will be the most decisive. Socialists in Malaysia and other parts of SE Asia

will have to intensify our struggles back home. We may end up as the balancing of power which Vietnam is really looking for.

S.Arutchelvan, 12 May 2012

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* <http://parti-sosialis.org/en/node/2304>