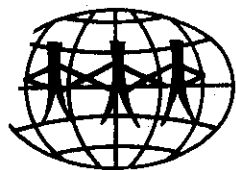


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Letter from Saigon

POWER STRUGGLE IN HANOI

North Vietnam's top two leaders--Lao-Dong Party Secretary Le Duan and National Assembly President Truong Chinh--are maneuvering for a political showdown, which, in the view of Hanoi watchers here, is bound to lead to the demotion of one of them and the emergence of a new North Vietnamese leadership by mid-April this year.

In the reckoning of most students of North Vietnamese affairs here, the struggle for power, which had been smouldering even before Ho Chi Minh's death, exploded last Feb. 2 after the 19th session of the Central Executive Committee of the Lao-Dong Party came to an end. A communique issued on this occasion "appears to fore-announce a shift in the basic approach of Hanoi to its many problems," according to one of these experts.

On first reading, the document reveals nothing extraordinary. That is why it failed to stir any interest at the time of its publication. Like all such pronouncements, it dwells extensively on "the task of saving the country by defeating U.S. imperialism and that of consolidating socialism in the North through economic progress."

Closer Scrutiny

But a close scrutiny of the document and interpretative Press articles in Hanoi has raised quite a few questions in the mind of students of North Vietnamese affairs. Indeed, for all its references to the anti-U.S. struggle, at no point does it mention the Viet Cong and their political organizations, the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG).

For longtime readers of Communist statements, this can only mean one of two things. "Either Hanoi has decided to drop the Communist movement in South Vietnam or it has come to directly take charge of it," one of the experts also said. The intense fighting brought about by the South Vietnamese push into Laos has made the task of interpreting Hanoi's budding policies all the more difficult but most experts concur in viewing the Feb. 2 communique as announcing "something new."

At any rate, Truong Chinh, one of the top contestants for Ho's vacant chair, must have seen the document as an indication of a doctrinal shift he was not ready to accept. It is not exactly clear what displeased the former theoretician and secretary general of the Lao-Dong Party but Truong Chinh, in the words of a Hanoi watcher, "moved fast to counter Le Duan's proposed line--whatever it may be."

General Elections

On Feb. 8, Truong Chinh ordered new general elections throughout North Vietnam. In a way, it was a pity that the important order went unnoticed in the outside world, for it came on the very day President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam announced the 25,000-man foray into the Southern panhandle of Laos.

For those more or less initiated to Hanoi politics or with easy access to a copy of the North Vietnamese constitution, however, the importance of the "Resolution" of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly of the People's Republic of (North) Vietnam cannot be overstressed. "It was nothing less than a coup d'état," one of them said.

But prior to going any further, let us have a look at that important document, the text of which is reproduced here in toto:

"The Standing Committee of the National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, in consideration of Articles 45 and 53 of the Constitution of the Republic, Articles 12, 13, 14 and 31 of the General Election Bill of 31 December 1959, and the Resolution of the National Assembly of 22 May 1958, decides:

"Article One: A general election for the selection of deputies to the fourth National Assembly is to take place on Sunday, the eleventh of April 1971. Article Two: The number of deputies to be elected in this general election is fixed at 400 and the number of electoral units at 80. Article Three: The number of electoral units, their appellations, the number of deputies for each of these units...are spelled out in the list attached to this Resolution."

Constitutional Context

This electoral bill, thus, betrays nothing out of the ordinary--i.e. until it is put in the context of the North Vietnamese constitution and the conditions in which it was approved and signed.

Indeed, the North Vietnamese constitution of 1960 can be said to have been tailor-made to the needs of Hanoi politics in the sixties, when it became apparent that the problem of Ho Chi Minh's succession would be posed some day. In this document, which attributes the very existence of the Communist republic to the Lao-Dong Party, the Party is, of course, given precedence over all other institutions of the State.

But topping all State institutions--National Assembly, Administration, People's Court, etc.--is the legislative body under Truong Chinh. It is the National Assembly which chooses the President, the Prime Minister, and their ministerial assistants. It is also the National Assembly which makes laws besides detaining such powers as that to dismiss the President and the Prime Minister. In other words, the National Assembly of North Vietnam is the origin of formal political power in that country.

Against this context, Le Duan and Truong Chinh, Lao-Dong Party Secretary General and Chairman of the National Assembly respectively, are undoubtedly the most powerful figures in North Vietnamese politics. Chairman Ton Duc Thang, Premier Pham Van Dong, and General Vo Nguyen Giap are only relatively minor elements dependent on both Le Duan and Truong Chinh for their positions in the North Vietnamese leadership.

Had Truong Chinh not moved, Le Duan, by having the Communique of Feb. 2 passed, could have brought about a set of new policies and emerged as the incontestable leader of the political apparatus.

60 Days

But Truong Chinh, sensing the Feb. 2 as the start of a campaign to change the equilibrium of power in Hanoi, responded vigorously. Apparently regardless of politico-military conditions of the moment, he ordered new elections within a bare 60 days, the shortest period of preparations provided for by the Constitution.

Indeed, one may wonder why Truong Chinh deemed it necessary to order this popular consultation at a time when the South Vietnamese push into the Ho Chi Minh trail system appeared a certainty and when North Vietnam itself seemed to be the target of renewed U.S. bombing and South Vietnamese raiding parties.

Moreover, conditions in North Vietnam can be said to be far from ideal for a popular consultation. With growing difficulties encountered in the economic field and with a military struggle that shows no sign of an early end, the North Vietnamese voters certainly could not be expected to take part enthusiastically in the voting.

Reasons prompting Truong Chinh to embark on the course he chose to must have been truly important, one may reason. And later developments, although reflecting rather hazily through the reports of Hanoi radio, were to partly explain what amounted to an attempt at sinking the much vaunted collective leadership of the Hanoi regime.

Indeed, by ordering the 11 April elections, Truong Chinh has signified to Chairman Thang, Premier Dong, and their followers that their political careers now depend on him rather than Le Duan. In the words of a Hanoi watcher here, "Truong Chinh has blackmailed them into cooperating with him in his fight against Le Duan."

One did not have to wait long to see the theory confirmed, at least partially. Hanoi Radio, the mouthpiece of the North Vietnamese administration, began mentioning at length the activities of Truong Chinh, especially following rumors about his death. He went on a grand tour of military installations and this was given extensive coverage.

But even more indicative of the present status of the struggle for power in Hanoi was a radio broadcast last Feb. 24 announcing Truong Chinh had presided over a meeting of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly, which, on this occasion, "also groups representatives from the Council of Ministers, the People's Court, and the Board of Censors."

One may wonder what has brought these diverse elements together in a "regular" session of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly. And for an expert on Hanoi affairs here, "it looks more like a war council rather than anything else. Truong Chinh apparently has succeeded in gaining the support of quite a few people in his fight against Le Duan."

Not Idle

Le Duan, in the meantime, did not stay idle. According to Radio Hanoi, Le Duan started reacting three days after Truong Chinh ordered the new elections. While his rival was busy touring military installations, Le Duan visited a Special Police unit in the suburb of Hanoi and granted that unit one of the most coveted decorations.

On this occasion, still according to Radio Hanoi, Le Duan also urged the Special Police branch "to protect the capital city and ensure a maximum degree of security for the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party and the Government so as to put them in the position to cope with whatever circumstances may arise."

The reference is unmistakable. The Party secretary was worried his opponents might move against him and he did not want the Party to be unprepared. But that Duan had to turn to the Special Police for such an important task, which normally should be that of the Army, was also all the more interesting for Hanoi watchers.

And they screened monitoring reports carefully in an effort to find out what top North Vietnamese generals had to say. This, until today, has revealed little. For the past four weeks, Radio Hanoi has only read one editorial of the Quan Doi Nhan Dan (the People's Army), the organ of Vo Nguyen Giap and his fighting men.

Big Question

The big question that remains to be answered now concerns the People's Army of (North) Vietnam (PAVN). The Quan Doi Nhan Dan editorial, entitled "Under the glorious flag of the Party, our nation surges forward in the direction of Total Victory," reveals absolutely no clues as to the PAVN's stand in the current struggle for power in Hanoi.

Hanoi watchers also said that during his grand tour of military installations, Truong Chinh was not accompanied by Vo Nguyen Giap. The North Vietnamese troops, or at least their leaders, have not made their choice between Truong Chinh and Le Duan. The intense fighting in Laos and elsewhere in Indochina probably will make that choice all the more difficult.

But whatever the North Vietnamese Army may do, it will have its hands full on the battlefields of Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam. And it probably will not be in a position to force a compromise solution on the rivaling factions under Le Duan and Truong Chinh. Collective leadership is something of the past in North Vietnam.

The elections of April 11 will only tell us who will be the top man in Hanoi.