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PARTY CONTROL IN DISTRICTS

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NORTH VIETNAM

PARTY CONTROL IN DISTRICTS

An earlier number of CNA<sup>1</sup> examined the method by which all important decisions are taken by the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Lao Dong (Communist) Party in North Vietnam, are endorsed by the periodical plenary sessions of the Central Committee, and are transmitted downwards via the Secretariate through the various levels of the Party organisation. This issue of CNA looks at the organisation of Party control at the lowest Party administrative level, the District Party Committee. There are, of course, Party units operating below the district level and extending down to the individual cell, but these do not play a significant role in the apparatus of control over administration in the State.

Basically, the Party operates along two distinct channels. The Party machine parallels the State administration, with its leading organs at the centre directing a descending pyramid of area committees reaching down to the District Party Committee. There are also Party groups, or branches, inside each State organ or agency extending from the government ministry to the village administrative council. There is an overlap at all levels between the two, but their separate organisational entities are strictly maintained.

During the past two years and more, the relentless escalation of the Vietnamese war and continuous American bombing have

placed heavy strains upon the N. Vietnamese regime. Large numbers of men have been mobilized for the armed forces to be infiltrated into South Vietnam, to man the extensive coastal and anti-aircraft defences, to maintain internal order, and so on. Many more men and women have been assigned to the repair of damaged roads, bridges, and railways, while others work as coolie porters to maintain the flow of materials serving the war effort. This vast reallocation of N. Vietnam's population has radically affected the Party's earlier apparatus of control, has created new and urgent demands for the services of experienced Party members in tasks directly related to the war and has left many echelons of the apparatus undermanned, staffed by inexperienced personnel, or both.

Interestingly enough, the majority of N. Vietnamese soldiers taken prisoner in S. Vietnam are willing, even eager, to discuss their attitudes towards the communist regime in their country, and almost all of them have very much the same things to say. They are, of course, perfectly aware of material shortages, hardships, administrative muddles, and the rest, and all agree that much time is wasted in never-ending meetings. These things would appear to be the subjects of universal dissatisfaction among N. Vietnamese, though few if any complain while still in N. Vietnam.

except to one or two trusted friends. Significantly, none of the prisoners seems to place the blame for such shortcomings on the leading members of the communist regime; these men are remote, invariably praised when their names are mentioned by press or radio, and generally accepted as "good" people. Blame attaches to the lower ranking Party members, the local bosses who are identified at the local level with those things which irk or displease. They live and work in a circumscribed locality, so that their failings and weaknesses become well known. Everybody is aware that they are no supermen but fallible like the rest of the people, and so the blame attaches to them.

Nevertheless, these lower level Party cadres are as important to the communist regime as are junior officers and non-commissioned officers to any army. Without their loyal service and experience the Party leaders, like generals in an army, would be helpless. Yet it is at this level of the Party membership that the severest strains are now being felt. So serious had the situation become by last summer that the Party secretariate found it necessary to conduct a study of local leadership exercised by Party committees and to issue a five-point directive on the subject. This was followed by the publication of an unusually detailed and revealing study of the problem by To HUU, probably the only truly articulate member of the whole N. Vietnamese leadership.

The subject of Party leadership at District Committee level is complex because of the many and varied responsibilities entrusted to committee members and of the double system of State and Party control which overlap again and again. But it is of sufficient importance to the communist system, and of sufficient interest as a system of control, to merit study. A newly published book on Vietnam<sup>2</sup> asserts that the critics of the late President Ngo Dinh Diem condemned him for imposing too much governmental control on the provinces and villages of S. Vietnam, yet his real mistake was to impose too little to meet the requirements of Vietnam. After examining the complicated local machinery of control inside N. Vietnam, readers may conclude that there is something to be said for this view.

administrative unit in N. Vietnam and has remained so under the communist regime. Although size varies in accordance with local geography, the average district contains some thirty to forty villages together with the land they cultivate. Each district is today controlled by a District Party Committee which comprises a chairman, a secretary, several assistant secretaries, a standing committee, and a number of ordinary members. The committee is responsible for ensuring that Party policy is implemented in the district under its control and itself plays a leading role in every activity, Party and State, which goes on within the boundaries of its own jurisdiction. In the first place, it must study directives from the secretariate of the Party Central Committee or of any Party echelon superior to itself, relate these to the individual situation within the district, and then formulate sets of detailed orders for the organs under its control which will ensure that the applicable Party requirements are fulfilled. It is, in other words, not only the interpreter of Party policy within the districts of N. Vietnam, but also the supervisor and even the executor.

In addition to a Party Committee, each district is endowed with a number of other Party organisations. There are the bases, which comprise the basic Party units ranging from individual cells to village committees and cooperative committees, and these constitute the foundation upon which the whole national Party structure rests. As well, there are Party groups which operate within the various administrative bodies and organs responsible for such things as organization, finance, police, tax collection, and so on. Other Party organs devote themselves to Party concerns like ideological indoctrination, the building up of mass movements, etc. Side by side with this strictly Party organisation is a state or government administrative machine which is controlled at every level by the Party groups incorporated in it. Thus, Party decisions taken at the highest level filter down through the Party groups active inside each of the descending levels of the administration until they reach the district, where their implementation is supervised by the appropriate Party group, which itself works under the direct supervision of the District Party Committee. Such a procedure appears duplicative and clumsy to the out-

The district (*Huyen*) is a traditional

sider, but it ensures that there are multiple checks and multiple supervision and make it difficult, if not impossible, for anything unauthorised to be done. That is what makes the system attractive to the N. Vietnamese communist regime.

Under existing war conditions the performance of local authorities, both Party and State, has fallen short of requirements and this has led to muddle, confusion, and inefficiency. To Huu's article cites a number of instances of what has been happening:

*"For example, in leading agricultural production, they have paid attention to achieving the production of 5 tons of paddy per hectare but not to the development of subsidiary crops, industrial crops, or animal husbandry. In the mountain regions, some localities have laid heavy emphasis on paddy production instead of paying more attention to subsidiary crops, animal husbandry, forest exploitation, etc."*<sup>3</sup>

It goes on to point to the neglect of irrigation in some provinces *"though they have suffered greatly from both drought and water-logging"* and to utter disregard for the use of fertilizer in others. The principal reason for the situation is the failure of District Party Committees to draw up a sensible list of priorities among the many tasks to be performed, so that nothing gets done properly. In the words of To Huu:

*"A serious weak point in the leadership of quite a few localities is its failure to determine which task is the main task and its failure to see that this task is carried out. Naturally, in such cases, the higher authorities are partially responsible for the situation. They send out too many instructions and resolutions to lower authorities, who become confused and passive."*<sup>4</sup>

The reason is that war conditions have made it necessary to decentralize the hitherto highly concentrated authority and to give an unprecedentedly high measure of autonomy to localities.

A measure of the greater powers currently enjoyed by local authorities is apparent in To Huu's statement: *"Each Party committee must have the right to classify its own tasks in order of importance in the light of the concrete local situation"*.

District Party committees are recommended first to draw up a list of priorities and then to produce a detailed work plan setting down the tasks to be carried out, allocating labour to them on a realistic basis which does not exceed the manpower available in the area, and setting a timetable for the completion of

each task. What is left unstated, but is left implicit in the whole of To Huu's article, is the fact that the work to be performed in each district has now become so great that it outstrips the local capacity to carry it out. This, as much as any other factor, is probably responsible for the state of confusion which exists and the reason why so many tasks are left uncompleted.

If the only responsibilities of the District Party Committee were to determine and execute production tasks, then members might somehow contrive to fulfil them, but there are many more besides. This body must also maintain efficiency and dedication within the ranks of the Party and ensure the Party does not relax its tight control over every activity within the district.

*"In some areas"*, writes To Huu, *"the comrade secretary and the entire Party organisation devote all their efforts to leading production and, in consequence, pay no attention to the Party tasks and the tasks concerning the masses. Meanwhile, the comrade chairman (of villages and cooperatives) and specialist organs rely on the Party committee and do not fully develop their own responsibilities. It is because of this situation that leadership over the ideological and organisational tasks, together with the task of building the Party and mass organisations, has become slack."*

But what are these already overworked District Party Committee members to do about it? The suggestion is put forward that greater use must be made of the state organisations in order to relieve the burden.

*"The comrade deputy-secretary who is also secretary of the administrative committee, must make use of the state apparatus and lead the specialist branches in implementing the resolutions of the Party Committee. The comrade secretary and comrade deputy-secretary on duty must mobilize the Party branches and committees to assist them in supervising and helping the state organs to implement the Party Committee's decisions. They must—together with the comrade commissars in charge of agriculture, finance, propaganda and training, organisation, women, youth, and so forth—closely lead the fulfilment of the ideological and organisational tasks and the task of building the Party and mass organisations."*

It is apparent that, in the past, District Party Committees have relied almost exclusively on Party members to fill offices of responsibility within the areas under their control, obviously feeling that these people would at least be thoroughly loyal, whatever shortcomings they might have. Indeed, as eventually happens in all 'establishments',

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the Vietnamese Communists had adopted the practice of awarding promotion on the basis of seniority without regard for ability. Worse still, appointments were being made on the basis of favouritism, friendship, or sense of obligation. But the present situation has become too grave to permit the continuation of these practices. To Huu now instructs:

*"The assignment and deployment of cadres must be motivated by the requirements of revolutionary tasks and by the interests of the revolution, not by personal relationships. It is necessary to help cadres to understand this correct view and resolutely to combat the tendency to promote cadres on the basis of seniority."*

The situation now calls for a more realistic approach to problems and solutions which run counter to all earlier practice. To Huu observes:

*"In the mountain regions, where emphasis is on developing food production, animal husbandry, and forest exploitation, it is necessary to examine the problem of how to assign cadres in order to achieve this trend. In areas where the military action is intense, the cadres cannot carry out their tasks if they are old and sick. In the specialist and professional branches, it is necessary to have leaders who are specialists even if these do not belong to the Party Committee provided they can fulfil their responsibilities. It is essential to overcome the tendency to head these branches in an irrational way after each election to the Party committees. . . ."*

Certainly the old Party apparatchiks will not like this, but desperate situations call for desperate remedies, and their complaints are unlikely to receive much sympathy at the present juncture.

But when Party policy has been correctly interpreted, tasks determined, work plans devised, state organs fully mobilized, and the best qualified men placed in positions of responsibility, two further problems remain to be solved. The first of these is how to deploy the now depleted membership of District Party Committees in the most efficacious way so as to ensure that the committee maintains as close as possible control over every organisation, Party and State, functioning within the district.

*"The current shortcoming", writes To Huu, "is the failure to keep a firm hold on the various branches and bases, especially the bases. Cases in which leadership is dispersed or loosely exercised have frequently occurred. The District Party Committee must keep a firm hold on various branches and know how to make use of and develop their role. A wingless bird cannot fly. Without being helped by various branches*

*or without knowing how to mobilize them, a Party committee cannot exercise its leadership effectively."*

Up to the present time, District Party committees appear to have deployed their available personnel badly, concentrating on controlling the administrative branches but ignoring the basic Party units. They have failed to distinguish between branches important in the present war situation and others less immediately concerned and have allocated members to the less important ones. To Huu writes:

*"At present, in many areas this distribution of work among District Party Committee members is still irrational. District Party Committee members in charge of leading branches are still too numerous while those in charge of leading villages are too few. The organisation, propaganda and training, supervision, and police branches, as well as the district military units, must naturally be led by District Party Committee members. As for the economic and specialist branches, we must base ourselves on the situation of each area to appoint District Party Committee members at the head only of some branches, the important ones, because not every branch needs a District Party Committee member in order to function well. The remaining District Party Committee members must lead villages, each comrade being in charge of a cluster of villages embracing five or six cooperatives so that he is able to keep a firm hold on them. The remaining villages will be led by a District Party Committee member who combines this function with that of leading a branch."*

Intense pressure of work on District Party Committee members has prevented them from devoting sufficient attention to the lower units of the Party, the cell organisation and the village committees, which in theory operate under the direct control of the district. The results of this neglect have led to a deterioration at these lower levels and damage to the Party. In an uncharacteristically frank admission of failure, To Huu complained,

*"A number of villages and cooperatives are weak because the cadres there are weak, their working methods are weak, they are corrupt, they violate the people's right of mastery, and there is no internal unity. . . . Attention must be paid to eliminating corruption, arbitrary behaviour, and dictatorship. . . . Bad cadres are few but the bad influence of these few is very serious."*

It may surprise some to discover that N. Vietnamese leaders are calling for the elimination of corruption and other abuses in language very similar to that employed by leaders in S. Vietnam. If so, this is a tribute to the effectiveness of censorship in N.

Vietnam rather than to the morals of its people. These are the same Vietnamese people in both parts of the divided country, sharing a common language, culture, and experience. It would be surprising indeed if they were to react to similar situations in markedly different ways. In fact there have been a number of press references to corruption in the past inside N. Vietnam, and its existence among officials is confirmed by defectors and prisoners in S. Vietnam as well as in letters sent out from N. Vietnam to relatives and friends abroad.

But controlling the basic Party units is a difficult task calling for skills of a special kind, and not all District Party Committee members are capable of carrying out this work. Since the present situation is far from satisfactory, To Huu exhorts his readers:

*"When selecting and establishing District Party Committees, we must pay special attention to men who have that ability. We are not afraid that there is a shortage of such men. The real difficulty is of finding able new men, evaluating their qualities, using them boldly, and promoting them. Such men do not necessarily belong to the immediately inferior echelon—the Village Party Committee—but may be Branch Party Committee members or Party cell heads. Naturally, promotions of this kind demand careful advance preparation and must be carefully controlled".*

Nothing has yet been said about the areas into which the districts are subdivided. These are relatively recent creations and, since they do not feature in the structural framework of the Party, do not have any area Party committees. Their size varies, being determined by considerations of local geography, but as a general rule there are three or four in a district and each contains from seven to ten villages. An area is the responsibility of a District Party Committee member, normally a senior one, though the current dearth of members has produced a situation in which the same person may have to combine the responsibilities of leading an area with those of leading a branch. The principal reason for the creation of areas was the difference between natural and economic conditions within a single district, and the main function of the area is to act as a unit following the same agricultural production plan. The area is responsible for drawing up its own plan within the framework of the overall district plan and for solving any difficulties

which may arise in implementing this. The committee member responsible for an area is, however, required to supervise Party work in the area and to ensure that all the residents play an active part in the mass organizations. Because of the pressure of their other duties, the chairman and secretary of the District Party Committee are exempted from the work of area supervision, though they may elect to control an area for a limited period in order to acquire experience of this kind of work. Area leadership is regarded as important and, in the majority of districts, is reserved for members of the standing committee of the District Party Committee, while work of branch supervision is carried out by ordinary members.

It was explained earlier that, as part of the work of controlling Party bases, members of District Party committees were made responsible for clusters of villages. These men now make decisions on the day-to-day problems which may arise in the villages, but they may do so only after first consulting with the standing committee member responsible for the area in which the cluster of villages is situated. This recently introduced procedure, though still a little cumbersome owing to the reluctance of the Lao Dong Party ever to trust one man to reach a decision alone and unsupervised, is less so than the normal procedure whereby the Village Party Committee was required to meet for a discussion of the problems, to report on them to the District Party Committee, and then to await the latter's decision on how they should be resolved. The standing committee member responsible for an area and the committee members responsible for clusters of villages inside that area constitute a useful channel for the the passage of orders from the District Party Committee to the villages and for the reporting of developments in the villages to the committee. All relevant documents never fail to make it clear, however, that this machinery is not an established Party echelon, and To Huu's article is no exception. He writes:

*"Naturally, an area is not an intermediate echelon, and the standing committee member in charge of an area should not be the only hero in his locality. . . . Periodically, for example say every ten days, the District Party Committee standing committee will hold a meeting during which the members in charge of areas will report on the situation in the bases, the problems which have been solved, and the problems*



which require new instructions from the standing committee. Major problems concerning the rights of the District Party Committee may only be decided by the entire committee sitting in plenary session."

The safeguard of requiring two people to decide on the solution to problems and holding regular meetings of the district standing committee is, apparently, insufficient to satisfy the Party.

"The various branches too", writes To Huu, "for example agriculture, irrigation, organisation, propaganda and training, supervision, youth, and women, must all assign cadres of their own to participate in the task of controlling the areas. To do so, the cadres must visit the whole area and not exercise perfunctory leadership from their desks at district headquarters, and when they go to the areas they must be given the cooperation of the standing committee members on duty there. . . . The standing committee members and cadres of various branches who are assigned to areas, as well as District Party Committee members in charge of clusters of villages, must study each problem thoroughly while carrying out their daily duties and must not remain at their desks working in perfunctory manner."

The passage conjures up the picture of an area seething with officials from different organisations, each of whom is keeping an eye on the others, and the resulting volume of paperwork must achieve frightening proportions.

If the actual work of the members of the District Party Committee is analysed, it becomes apparent that each member has more tasks than he can hope to accomplish with anything approaching efficiency. In the first place, the committee is bombarded with an unending succession of orders, directives, exhortations, and requirements from higher Party bodies ranging from the Provincial Party Committee right up to the Secretariate of the Party Central Committee. All of these documents must be read, analysed, and discussed in committee, which alone occupies a considerable length of time each week. Only when this has been done can a start be made on the task of deciding which of the many instructions are directly applicable to the district for which the committee is responsible. Next, these have to be further studied so that they may be arranged in order of importance, after which a list of priorities is drawn up. With this as the guideline, the committee then sets to work to establish a working timetable, deciding which jobs will be done by which organ, how many men can

be allocated to carry them out, and how long each should take to complete.

Most of the orders at the present time concern production, agricultural, handicraft, and industrial, with a heavy emphasis being placed upon agriculture. The chaos affecting transport in N. Vietnam has obliged the authorities to decentralize as much industry as possible and to set up smaller production units in each locality, where these strive to satisfy local needs and thereby minimize the transport mileage necessary for distribution. Handicraft industries, too, have been set up in as many places as possible for the same reason. Both are a source of concern to District Party Committees, which have to ensure supplies of raw material, working space, and the distribution and sale of the finished products. But agriculture, which serves national as well as local needs, is the greatest problem of all. Production plans are drawn up on the basis of areas, which means that those members of the standing committee of the District Party Committee responsible for area leadership must consult with other committee members responsible for clusters of villages and with representatives of each of the village and cooperative committees within the area. Area leaders must then reconcile demands sent out from the Party Secretariate with the production potential of the area and seek to arrive at a compromise acceptable to both sides, a time-consuming task. So great have demands been for increased agricultural production during the past two years that the tendency is for District Party Committees to devote an undue proportion of their time and attention to agriculture and its problems.

The Chairman and Secretary of the District Party Committee are fully occupied with paperwork, supervision, allocation of tasks, standing committee meetings, plenary meetings, liaison with Provincial Party Committees, the writings of reports, and the rest, so that they are excused from taking direct responsibility over one or more organs. They, however, together with the assistant-secretaries, must maintain close and continuous liaison with Party groups inside government agencies to ensure that they carry out tasks allocated to them by the Party. The remaining members of the District Party Committee are given a variety of other responsibilities, the more important of which devolve on standing committee members. They must exercise leadership over the area within the district, over clusters of villages, over specialised agencies, and over individual

Party groups in agencies, commonly known as Party branches. The tasks almost invariably outnumber the committee members, so that most members now have to accept two, which they must carry out in addition to their normal committee work described above.

On top of all this, District Party Committee members are responsible for the efficient working of all the lower Party units within the district. They must see to it that regular meetings of these units are held, must supply materials to be discussed at the meetings, and supervise the appointment of unit members to positions of responsibility. If the Party units become slack, if they fail to carry out their duties, or if they appoint the wrong people to office, then it is the District Party Committee members who are held to blame, because each Party echelon is directly responsible for the state of the Party units within its jurisdiction. The committee must see to it that a vigorous Worker Youth movement functions in its district to give the potential Party members among the youth of the area a foretaste of Party work. It must supervise the recruitment of new Party members and carry out a careful vetting of each to ensure that he comes from the correct social background, has proved himself by performing voluntary work, is free from any taint of political unorthodoxy and so on. As the lowest administrative Party echelon, it is responsible for the future membership of the Party and, indeed, for the future health and vigour of the Party.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of Party activities at district level is that they have, in early years, proved successful in maintaining the effective management of districts. So great is the overlap between Party organs and state organs,

so diffuse is the Party authority, so many are the checks, the double and treble supervision, and so involved is the criss-cross network of individual organs that one might have expected the whole arrangement to collapse in chaos. It did not do so under more normal circumstances and, even in times of acute distress, material hardship, and manpower shortage, it still appears to be capable of carrying out most of its functions. Possibly the reasons for this are to be found in the earlier experience of the Vietnamese people, especially during the reign of Vietnamese emperors. The old imperial administration resembled the modern communist Party administration remarkably closely, and even a cursory reading of contemporary descriptions of mandarin control will reveal that it was scarcely less onerous than modern communist rule. Such close supervision of every activity is something with which the Vietnamese people has lived for many centuries, so that they have come to regard it as normal. What is not familiar to them is the less stringent and vastly less complex administration set up in S. Vietnam since independence. Possibly the ordinary Vietnamese is not yet accustomed to the greater responsibilities of reaching his own decisions and organising his own life which have been thrust upon him in S. Vietnam. In N. Vietnam the only course is to obey the Party authority, to refrain from criticising it, to perform work when an official orders it, and to accept punishment uncomplainingly. The pattern is familiar, even if the titles, the vocabulary, and the literature have changed.

P. J. Honey

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<sup>1</sup> CNA, No. 595, January 14, 1966. See, in particular, pp. 2-4

<sup>2</sup> Government and Revolution in Vietnam, by Dennis J. Duncanson. Oxford University Press

<sup>3</sup> "Improve the Quality of District Party Committee Leadership", article published in the Lao Dong Party's theoretical monthly Hoc Tap (Studies), August 1967

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. All the remaining quotations are taken from this remarkable article.