

Persistence Amid Decay

The Communist Party of Vietnam at 83

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Tuong Vu

In the last few decades the theoretical literature on communist regimes has closely followed the rise and demise of the communist camp. In the early 1970s when those regimes were at their peaks, analysts were preoccupied with the question of how they had successfully evolved and adapted after seizing power (Huntington 1968; Huntington and Moore 1970). Strongly influenced by modernization theories, this scholarship assumed that, as vanguard forces of modernization, communist parties were born to last. While most scholars failed to predict the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s, theoretical attempts have since shed much insight into the causes of that collapse (Kalyvas 1999; Ekiert 1996; Solnick 1998; Bunce 1999; Goodwin 2001). However, the literature remains limited for the surviving communist systems in China, Vietnam, Laos, North Korea, and Cuba. There, communist parties still dominate and, for China and Vietnam, have overseen successful economic reforms. Among analysts of China, a sharp debate exists between “optimists” (Shambaugh 2008; Nathan 2003),¹ who view the communist dictatorship as viable, and “pessimists” (Pei 2006), who emphasize decay and possible collapse. There is no such well-positioned debate in Vietnam, although similar questions have certainly been raised and have even gained salience in the context of developments in 2012 and 2013. This chapter addresses part of this gap through a historical analysis of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV)’s evolution and the causes of its persistence. There have been relatively few studies of this party, not only its current situation but also its historical evolution (Pike 1978; Huynh Kim Khanh 1982; Thayer 1988; Stern 1993; Vasavakul 1997; Gainsborough 2007; Koh 2008). Early scholarship is generally

descriptive and woefully dated. More recent scholarship, including my own, has taken advantage of newly released archival documents from Vietnam and the former Soviet bloc (Quinn-Judge 2005; Vu 2010).

A major goal of this chapter is to place Vietnam in comparative perspective and to draw out implications for theories on the persistence of single-party dictatorships. Most scholarship on Vietnam does not engage the comparative literature. On the other hand, comparativists often mention Vietnam only in passing and do not even get their facts right.² In this chapter, I extend concepts developed by Huntington, but examine both the institutionalization of the CPV in the 1950s *and* its decay in recent decades. I reject the teleology in much scholarship on authoritarian regimes that assumes their eventual transition to democracy. Mindful of the abrupt breakdown of the Soviet bloc, neither do I assume the eternal persistence of communist regimes as Huntington did. In particular, I will show that the CPV has evolved through three phases: expansion and institutionalization (1945–60), ossification and decay (1970–86), and reform and continuing decay (1986–present). It is facing a combination of threats and opportunities, and its continuing domination is in grave danger.

As will be argued here, the Vietnamese case contributes to theories of single-party dictatorships by illustrating the role of elite politics, violence, war, and rents in the evolution of these systems. Huntington's observation that revolutionary violence is crucial for the durability of communist systems appears to be borne out in the Vietnamese case.³ While the wars led by the CPV have been viewed by some as catalytic of a durable single-party dictatorship (Smith 2005: 449), my analysis suggests wars have played an ambiguous role. The same is true regarding "rents" (external assistance), which have had both favorable and adverse effects on regime persistence in Vietnam. Finally, an important source of persistence for the Vietnamese dictatorship, as for other communist dictatorships, was its near-total grip on society. Studies that lump communist with other single-party dictatorships naturally overlook this factor.

The evolution of the Communist Party of Vietnam⁴

Huntington defines party institutionalization as "the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability," and which involves four aspects, namely, adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence (Huntington 1968: 18–24). Adaptability refers to a party's ability to adjust over time as its founders pass away from the scene and

as the political environment changes. Complexity refers to the development of subunits and the differentiation of functions within a party. Autonomy means a party has the capacity to make decisions independent from the pressure and control of social groups, while coherence refers to members' substantial consensus on the party's goals and procedures. Since seizing power in 1945, the CPV has evolved through three phases. It experienced rapid growth in the first few years and became institutionalized during 1948–60. In the next phase (1970–86), it became ossified at the top and decayed at the bottom. Since 1986, the party has continued to experience a slow decay even while its leaders have sought to reform and rejuvenate it.

Expansion and institutionalization (1930–60)

The CPV was founded in 1930 in Kowloon with guidance from the Comintern in Moscow.⁵ First leaders of the party were trained in Moscow and sought to organize it in the Leninist mold. In their views, the tasks of their revolution involved two interlocking steps: the overthrowing of colonial rule and the construction of socialism. The party's strategy was to build an alliance of workers and peasants, but tactically other groups such as intellectuals and landlords were to be mobilized if necessary for short-term collaboration.

The party operated in secret from both inside and outside Vietnam. It led two failed rebellions (1931–32 and 1940) and suffered brutal repression by the colonial regime. Its first five general secretaries died young, either in prison or from execution. In 1941, a small group of surviving leaders set up Viet Minh, a front to unite all Vietnamese, regardless of their social class, to fight for independence. Viet Minh operated out of the jungle near the border of Vietnam and China. At the time, the party had a small following of a few thousands and little formal structure. In fact, in early 1945 most members were still locked up somewhere in colonial prisons, where many had spent a decade or more.

When the Japanese surrendered to the Allies in August 1945, communist cadres, groups of Viet Minh sympathizers, and other political groups rode on the back of mass riots and took power (Tonnesson 1991; Marr 1995; Vu 2010: ch. 5). Failing to obtain Soviet support but forced to confront anticommunist groups and their foreign backers, the CPV sought to build as broad a coalition as possible. The new government reflected this effort and was composed of an amalgam of political groups. The CPV had control over the major ministries and its own militia but not the entire state apparatus. Territorially, government authority was established only in larger towns but not over the entire country.

This amalgam also was reflected in party membership. Over the next few years, the CPV attracted many new members. It grew from a few thousands in late 1945 to 20,000 in late 1946. By late 1949, membership stood at 430,000 (Vu 2010: ch. 6). The rapid growth in membership indicated party policy during this period not to be strict about the class background or ideological loyalty of new members. Central leaders also had little effective control over local party branches. This resulted in fast but unfocused growth as the party sought to broaden membership without much emphasis on quality. Most new members came from more privileged social groups, such as educated urban elites, landlords, and rich and middle peasants. The absolute majority of members came from north and north central Vietnam with comparatively few from southern Vietnam, where the French had taken effective control.

In 1948, CPV leaders were anticipating the victory of Chinese communists on mainland China and the opportunity of joining forces with the Chinese to fight the French. Radical leaders led by General Secretary Truong Chinh feared the “contamination” of the party by the admission of upper-class members and called for tightening the criteria for membership and for other measures to strengthen central control. The party thus began the policy to restrict the growth of membership, to expel members who came from privileged backgrounds, and to intensify ideological indoctrination for all members.

The new policy ended the period of expansion and launched the institutionalization of the party. This coincided with the Viet Minh government’s formally joining the Soviet camp and the arrival of massive Chinese aid and advisors (Chen Jian 1993). These advisors were embedded in many party organizations from district level up, and trained Vietnamese cadres in the Maoist methods of thought reform, land reform, and mass mobilization in general. While Chinese military aid helped the CPV lead the anti-French resistance to its successful outcome, Chinese guidance on mass mobilization was critical for remolding the CPV into a Maoist form.

By about 1960, the CPV had become more or less institutionalized if we use Huntington’s four criteria of adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence. First, by then the CPV could show that it had overcome numerous challenges and successfully adapted its functions to great changes in its operational environment. The party began as a revolutionary group on the fringe of the colonial society, acquired leadership of the nationalist movement, led the struggle against France for independence until winning control over North Vietnam, and successfully established its rule there. Measured by generational age, however,

it is less clear that the party was fully adaptable.⁶ While by 1960 the party had adapted to successive leadership changes from Ho Chi Minh (1941–50) to Truong Chinh (1950–56) to Le Duan (since 1958),⁷ Le Duan and Truong Chinh were of the same generation, and both Ho Chi Minh and Truong Chinh remained influential in the Politburo after Duan had risen to the top.

Second, through successful adaptation to changing roles the CPV had become a complex organization by 1960. The CPV now formed the core of the state and its cadres held most public offices with differentiated roles in administration and in economic and cultural management. The party controlled a powerful military which had earlier defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu. It had nationalized most private property, including land and factories; had taken over the markets of key products; and had brought most social means of communication (newspapers and publishing houses) under state ownership. The party now had branches in most villages and urban neighborhoods in North Vietnam. The land reform (1953–56), during which about 15,000 landlords or 0.1 percent of the population were executed, had allowed the party to overthrow the old power structure in the village and to promote loyal party cadres to positions of leadership (Vo Nhan Tri 1990: 3; Vu 2010: 103). Party control now encompassed most aspects of social life in North Vietnam, as one would expect in a communist totalitarian system.

Third, Marxism-Leninism allowed the party to claim a vanguard position above and autonomous from society. In particular, the CPV claimed to fight against feudalism and imperialism. Even before being firmly established in power, communist leaders had challenged powerful social forces such as landlords, first with laws to limit land rent and later with the land reform campaign. Yet the party was not beholden to peasants for very long: land reform was only a tactic to mobilize them. As soon as the party felt secure, it took away land, draught animals, and tools from peasants in the collectivization campaign (1958–60). Besides ideology, material support from the Soviet bloc also enabled the CPV to be autonomous from society. In a society threatened by famine and exhausted after a long war, foreign aid gave the party a crucial leverage against social forces.

Finally, the “organizational rectification” campaign (1952–56) that was implemented in most party organizations from provincial level down helped strengthen the coherence of the party, the fourth criterion according to Huntington. During this campaign, which was essentially a brutal purge, most members who came from “bad” class backgrounds were expelled to be replaced by poor peasants. Previously, party members

who came from upper and middle classes and who made up as much as two-thirds of membership did not wholly support the party's goal of building socialism. They had rallied to the party only as far as national independence was concerned. After the purge, the poor peasants who owed the party for their lands, houses, and positions could be trusted to follow the party to their deaths if necessary. The cohesion of the CPV was also aided by its leaders' tireless efforts at carrying out a cultural revolution, including the systematic propagation of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist-Maoist thoughts, values, and methods throughout the ranks of the party and in the broader society (Ninh 2002; Vu 2008, 2009b).

Ossification and decay (1970–86)

By Huntington's four criteria, the CPV seemed well-institutionalized by 1960. Yet in the following decade the party became ossified under the leadership of Le Duan (1960–86). Duan was from central Vietnam and had spent his career mostly in the Mekong delta until he replaced Truong Chinh in 1958 (officially in 1960). Duan advocated the use of violence to unify Vietnam early on, but the party adopted his views only after he rose to the top. Under his leadership, the CPV led a protracted war to defeat the government of South Vietnam backed by the United States. The war ended in victory for North Vietnam, but the CPV emerged from victory a less cohesive and dynamic organization. Evidence is still somewhat sketchy, but the general trend is clear.

First, the CPV under Le Duan (1960–86) adapted successfully to changing circumstances in the first half of this period but later became ossified. Measured by chronological age, not only did the party survive but it also won the civil war and emerged as the unchallenged ruler over all of Vietnam by 1975. Measured by generational age, the score is mixed. The size of the Central Committee elected in 1976 tripled, allowing new blood in the top leadership.⁸ At the very top, however, not until 1986 when Le Duan died was the party able to arrange for a new leadership to succeed first-generation leaders. From 1960 to 1976, the same eleven Politburo members of the first-generation ran the party.⁹ All the surviving members of the previous Politburo were retained except one.¹⁰ New faces made up less than half of the new Politburo. Among these new members, all had been of high ranks in 1960 – in other words, no surprises.¹¹ First-generation leaders who were in their seventies continued to dominate the Politburo in the 1970s. Several of them would die one by one while in office,¹² and the other Politburo members of this cohort would retire by the mid-1980s but most still wielded tremendous influence even after they had formally retired.¹³

Measured by functional adaptability, the record is also mixed. On the one hand, the party was able to adapt to new challenges as the war against the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and the United States escalated in the 1960s. This war required the total mobilization of the North Vietnamese population and the enlistment of full support from the Soviet bloc. The CPV performed these tasks brilliantly over the fifteen years that led to its victory. On the other hand, this war was not the first war led by the party, which had accumulated nearly a decade of war-making just a few years earlier fighting the French. Peace but not war was the real litmus test of the party's functional adaptability, and here the CPV failed miserably. There was little new thinking in the policy agenda of socialist construction between the 1950s and the 1970s. Despite the failure of collectivization in North Vietnam prior to unification, the party sought to replicate it in South Vietnam in the late 1970s – to the detriment of the Southern rich and vibrant economy.¹⁴ The CPV also failed to notice changes in the international environment. Proud of their victory, party leaders expected world powers to bid for their favors.¹⁵ Subsequent decisions to invade Cambodia and ally with the Soviet Union against China (1978–88) indicated that the party had been addicted to making war and failed to understand the need for peace after three decades of nearly continuous warfare.

On complexity, the CPV displayed a similarly mixed performance as with adaptability. The party underwent tremendous expansion during the war years. Between 1960 and 1976, party membership tripled from 0.5 to 1.5 million (Dang Cong San Viet Nam: v. 21, 491; v. 37, 705). The number of party cells also tripled, and that of party committees doubled in the same period (ibid.: v. 37, 764). At the same time, party organizations became less differentiated. As the entire society of North Vietnam was mobilized for war, economic, social, and cultural spheres of activity shrank tremendously. Most party and state organizations were geared toward wartime demands. Cadres acquired substantial experiences in military affairs but little else. Tens of thousands of young men and women were conscripted and thrown into the battlefield every year, including fresh college graduates and boys in their teens.¹⁶ The slogan of the time “All for the front, all for victory” indicated that uniformity but not differentiation was favored as an organizational goal.¹⁷ Uniformity helped the CPV lead the war to a successful outcome but sacrificed its complexity in the process.

After the war, the party expanded its organization to all of Vietnam and made economic development its top priority – so its complexity increased somewhat. However, war would resume shortly and last for

another decade, meaning that any gains in complexity were limited. By 1986 – 11 years after unification – the CPV still maintained a large army of more than one million soldiers even though the percentage of military leaders in the Central Committee had reduced and some units were assigned to economic development tasks (Turley 1988). Nearly two-thirds of new party members recruited between 1976 and 1982 came from the army (*ibid.*: 200). Seventy six percent of party members were still from North Vietnam, indicating the party's failure to expand its territorial base to the south after unification (Thayer 1991: 21).

Turning to autonomy, the CPV continued to dominate and be autonomous from society throughout this period. Yet there were many cracks in the edifice after 1975. First, the Marxist-Leninist ideology sounded increasingly hollow in the face of a severe economic crisis that began soon after victory in the civil war. Second, a remarkable trend had occurred since 1976, namely the expansion of the Central Committee to include representatives from state organs and provincial party branches (Thayer 1988: 177–93). This expansion reflected the party leadership's desire to adapt to new circumstances, but the change opened up the potential that the Central Committee could be made to serve the interests of sectoral and local groups rather than those of the central party leadership.¹⁸ As will be seen below, this potential was realized after the dominant figures of the first generation passed away from the scene and their successors in the Politburo could not command the same level of prestige and power.

The coherence of the CPV also declined under Le Duan. Duan formed a powerful alliance with Le Duc Tho, who was the head of the Central Organizational Commission with the power to groom and appoint party members to provincial and central leadership positions, including the Central Committee and the Politburo.¹⁹ While Duan and Tho were never powerful enough to remove the other senior leaders,²⁰ they monopolized power to an unprecedented extent. Duan and Tho worked closely together in the late 1940s in the Mekong Delta. Both were long-term Politburo members but became close after Duan assumed the position of general secretary in 1958. Their ascendancy in the mid-1960s was helped by the split in the Soviet bloc that had tremendous repercussions for all communist parties worldwide. The split pitted the Soviet Union against China, resulting in intense debates in the CPV about which side it should take in the split (Grossheim 2005; Quinn-Judge 2005; Bui Tin 1995). Duan and Tho placed their bet with Mao, with the support or acquiescence of most Central Committee members. Based on this support, Duan and Tho carried out arrests of many high-ranking party

and military leaders who did not agree with them. The arrests reportedly targeted Vo Nguyen Giap, the minister of defense, and even though the general emerged unharmed, his power was severely curbed. Although factionalism in Vietnam never approached the scale of Maoist China, it was significant under Le Duan and made a dent in the coherence of the CPV. As Duan's faction consolidated its grip, fear more than consensus governed intra-party relations.

While factional struggles played out secretly at the top, the base of the party showed signs of decay by the early 1970s. Two trends joined to create this situation. First, party leaders launched two main drives during the civil war to recruit new members – one in the early 1960s and the other in the early 1970s.²¹ These two drives primarily accounted for the tripling of membership mentioned earlier, but similar to many campaigns in communist Vietnam, quantity ended up trumping quality in this field. An internal report written in 1966 raised many concerns about the quality of about 300,000 new members who had entered the CPV since 1960. In 1971, an examination of 74 factories discovered that nearly 15 percent of new members admitted since 1970 were “below the standards” set out in the Party Code, and another 19 percent were clearly “of poor quality” (*Dang Cong San Viet Nam*: v. 32, 303).²² Party leaders subsequently launched several measures to improve the situation but found that expelling “low-quality” party members was difficult (as it was for any state bureaucrats) (*ibid.*: v. 443).

The second trend responsible for the decay was the emergence of a massive informal economy in the late 1960s. As Soviet and Chinese aid streamed into North Vietnam just when living standards sharply deteriorated due to war and poor economic management, an increasing number of party members engaged in corruption by stealing state property and selling rationed imported goods and materials on the thriving black market (*ibid.*: v. 34, 265 and v. 35, 1, 102, 106, 112; Vu 2005: 329–56). The rapid expansion of the party, the poor quality of many new recruits, and the spread of corruption eroded the coherence of the party as war protracted. A significant number of party members by the early 1970s was perhaps more interested in war profiteering or in social and political status than in making sacrifices for the revolution championed by the top leadership.

Reform and continuing decay (1986–present)

After Duan died in 1986 and Tho retired in the same year, new CPV leaders sought to reform and rejuvenate the party. This process has continued for the last two decades and brought many achievements. Yet

the decay that began under Le Duan continued at a much faster rate and on many dimensions. Party reform has made the most progress in the criterion of adaptability. The party survived the collapse of the Soviet bloc and has achieved impressive results in economic reform. In the Politburo, the first generation and the transition generation have passed the baton to the second generation.²³ Succession has taken place, often following intense factional struggles, in now regularly held national party congresses. About one-third of Politburo and Central Committee members were replaced in each of the last six congresses. A mechanism perhaps designed to smooth out the process of succession is to allow key leaders who have retired to maintain some influence as “advisors” to the Politburo. On rejuvenating, Central Committee members have become younger and more educated, enabling the party to lead economic development more effectively. Perhaps in response to a more complex society, greater balance of representation among various sectors, gender, age groups, party, military, economic, state, and mass mobilization organizations have been sought in the composition of the Central Committee (Vasavakul 1997).

Adaptability can also be observed in ideological orientations. Party Congresses have dropped Marxist-Leninist principles one by one, such as the dictatorship of the proletariat and the alliance of workers and peasants (Lai 2006). Since 1991 “Ho Chi Minh Thought” has appeared besides Marxism-Leninism as part of an official ideology. After two decades promoting a market economy, the party has recently allowed its members to engage in private businesses, which were once deemed exploitative. From organizational to ideological matters, the CPV has veered far away from the rigidity of Le Duan’s era. Still, the fundamental disposition of adaptability has been gradualism by which changes were incremental and lacked clear direction.

It is precisely this incremental adaptability that has not (yet) helped to create a more complex CPV. While the party has recovered from a membership fall in the late 1980s, most new recruits still come from state employees and military personnel.²⁴ Despite many efforts, the party has failed to penetrate new urban areas and private enterprises.²⁵ Party members can own businesses now, but owners of private businesses who want to join the party are still rarely admitted.²⁶ Not development but involution seems to be the trend, as the party can grow only by sucking from the state sector and the military already under its control but not by expanding its roots into a rapidly changing society. Parallel to limited reforms in administration to increase bureaucratic accountability as analyzed by Thaveeporn Vasavakul in this volume, party leaders

have launched numerous programs to rationalize the party structure so that the CPV remains relevant and effective. Current initiatives include the formation of huge blocks of party organizations based on similar functions, and a pilot project to have party secretaries doubling as government executives at the local level. We know few specifics about the outcome of these recent institutional reforms, but available party reports suggest that they have brought only limited results (*Tap chi Xay Dung Dang* 1–2/2008).

Incremental adaptability was also insufficient to stem the erosion of the CPV's autonomy as it became increasingly vulnerable to corrupting social influences. We have seen earlier how corruption tied to a thriving black market became widespread among cadres in North Vietnam in the last years of the civil war. Corruption did not abate when that black market was legalized in the late 1980s. New forms of corruption have since emerged, and one particularly serious form involves the selling of office. With state agencies generating lucrative rents, party secretaries can now make fortunes by selling state positions to the highest bidders. Recently the party secretary of Ca Mau province was sacked after it was reported that he accepted money in return for appointments to top positions in the provincial government. His case was never made public, but he turned in 100 million dong (\$6,000) that someone tried to bribe him. The said party secretary also claimed that he could have collected 1 billion dong (\$60,000) for several appointments if he had wanted.²⁷

This is not an isolated case. Le Kha Phieu, a former general secretary, revealed that people had tried to bribe him many times with thousands of dollars, perhaps to receive favorable appointments in return.²⁸ The power of appointment has turned party congresses into occasions for patronage networks to compete intensively for positions in the Central Committee, as Gainsborough describes:

For Vietnamese officials, the key question at a congress is whether someone you are connected to personally or through your workplace moves up or out as a result of the circulation of positions, and what this means for you, your institutions, or your family in terms of the provision or loss of protection and access to patronage. In Vietnam, holding public office gives you access to patronage which can range from access to the state budget and the ability to make decisions about how to spend public money, to the authority to issue licenses or other forms of permissions, to carry out inspections, or to levy fines. (Gainsborough 2007)

I have mentioned above that sectoral and provincial interests have gained greater representation in the Central Committee since 1976. In the last two decades, those interests have gained substantial power at the expense of the Politburo.²⁹ Provincial leaders now form the largest bloc in the Central Committee (every province is entitled to at least one seat and each of the two largest cities send at least two). Provincial officials also enjoy many informal channels of influence through dense patronage networks based on places of origin, family relations, or other informal ties. It is not uncommon that local governments interpret central policies any way they like, ignore central policy with impunity, or comply only when subsidies are provided. After provinces were recently authorized to approve foreign investment projects up to a certain limit, they have scrambled for those projects on top of the regular contests for a share of the central budget.³⁰ The central party leadership may be more responsive to local demands than previously, but the autonomy of the party as an organization has declined.

CPV leaders see corruption as a major threat to the regime but evidence suggests corruption now involves the highest level, often through family links and crony networks.³¹ Patronage and corruption are eroding the party's coherence. The occasional dismissal of a Politburo member (Nguyen Ha Phan), the premature end to the term of a general secretary (Le Kha Phieu), the sudden publicity of numerous corruption charges targeted at certain candidates for the Central Committee before a party congress (e.g. Nguyen Viet Tien) – these cases are clear evidence of patronage rivalries at work (Gainsborough 2007). As a retired high-ranking official in the Central Commission on Party Organization who must be well-informed about the party's internal problems recently lamented: "The [party] bureaucracy has increased greatly in size, while quality and effectiveness of policy decline. Red tape and corruption have not lessened but in fact become more serious. The danger is increasingly apparent that [emerging] special interest groups collude with each other to accumulate power, influence policy, and expropriate public property" (Lai 2010).

In sum, Huntington's concept of party institutionalization has been helpful in understanding the evolution of the CPV since 1945. The party has undergone expansion and institutionalization (1945–60), and ossification and decay (1970–86). Since 1986, CPV leaders have launched numerous initiatives to reform the party, but the results have been limited. The party displays an extraordinary ability to adapt, but has tended to react to challenges when they came. This reactive mentality has not helped the party to stem corruption and decay, which now reach the top level.

Origins of persistence

Studies of single-party dictatorships have shown that the origins of their persistence can be traced back to regime-founding moments. If rulers who come to power face a strong and well-organized opposition, and if no external assistance (“rents”) is available, they are likely to build strong party organizations to maintain alliances with powerful social groups (Smith 2005: 430). The struggle against a strong opposition often entails civil wars or the mobilization of large-scale revolutionary violence, which eliminates potential enemies and creates a durable foundation for dictatorship (ibid.: 449–50).

The case of the CPV confirms some of the above hypotheses but disconfirms others. First, it is clear that the party faced strong opposition when it seized power in 1945. As mentioned above, the CPV was not able to seize power on its own or to monopolize power when it set up the Viet Minh government in late 1945. This government relied heavily on the colonial elites and bureaucracy in its first years (Vu 2010: ch. 5). In southern Vietnam, various religious and political groups challenged Viet Minh, and the returning French quickly retook control of government. In northern Vietnam, anticommunist groups such as the Vietnam Nationalist Party (VNP) and the Vietnam Revolutionary League (VRL) had some popular following and the backing of *Guomindang* occupying forces. These groups attacked Viet Minh authorities in many provinces, and posed a real threat to the survival of Ho Chi Minh’s government. The communists defeated the VNP and VRL by negotiating for French forces to replace *Guomindang* troops in mid-1946, only to start a war with the French six months later. On the one hand, their strong and well-organized enemies forced the communists to build a broad coalition, as Smith correctly argues (Smith 2005). On the other hand, it is not this broad coalition that helped the communist regime to persist. While the CPV grew a hundred times in size in just a few years, it lacked centralized control and internal cohesion, and fought the war with the French from a precarious position (Vu 2009a).

It was the campaigns of land reform and organizational rectification in the early 1950s that solidified the communist dictatorship. As discussed earlier, these campaigns were implemented under Chinese supervision and unleashed massive and systematic revolutionary violence. This violence not only reconstructed the party in the Maoist mold but also eliminated the economic and social basis of any potential opposition. It not only destroyed the landlord class, but also drove away nearly a million northern Catholics, who sought refuge in South Vietnam in 1954

(Hansen 2009: 173–211; Huy Duc 2012: 265). Unlike what Smith argues for other cases, “rents” contributed significantly to the lasting domination of the CPV since 1950. While communist China’s material assistance was crucial for Ho’s forces to defeat the French (and later the Americans and the Republic of Vietnam), Maoist techniques of thought reform and class warfare were key to uprooting social opposition and establishing a communist dictatorship penetrating deeply into village society.

While revolutionary violence contributed decisively to the durability of Vietnam’s communist system, the war against the Republic of Vietnam and the United States during 1960–75 had mixed effects. This war necessitated the total mobilization of the northern population. As the economy stagnated, the war helped the CPV channel popular participation through total mobilization. Millions of young soldiers were sent to fight in the South or deployed to defend the North. Participation rate was extremely high: about 70 percent of youth in their late teens and early 20s were conscripted to serve in the military until the end of the war (Teerawichitchainan 2009: 74). US bombing campaigns that created extreme hardship and suffering for ordinary North Vietnamese helped increase regime legitimacy. US crude intervention (compared to discreet Soviet and Chinese support for communist Vietnam) inflamed nationalist anger among many Vietnamese, which the regime successfully exploited.

Yet war was as harmful to the communist dictatorship as it was helpful. I have discussed earlier how the civil war eroded the CPV’s organizational complexity with its preoccupation with war. Furthermore, the Politburo dominated by Le Duan’s faction used war as an excuse to delay holding a national party congress for more than ten years. In the meantime, the top party leadership aged and party organizations above the middle level ossified.

While the civil war had both positive and negative impacts on the communist dictatorship, the wars with Cambodia and China during 1978–89 came close to unraveling it. These conflicts did not provide upward mobility for youth because they never reached the level of casualties nor required total mobilization as did the earlier war. Military careers were far more limited now that most mobilized soldiers would be released from service in a few years. Vietnam also failed to attract as much foreign aid for these wars as in the civil war, which contributed to a severe economic crisis in the 1980s.

An important factor that has been overlooked in the comparative literature but helped the CPV to persist was its near-total grip of public life until the late 1980s. This is a feature that Vietnam shared with

countries in the former Soviet bloc. Organizations created by the CPV for mass mobilization purposes, such as Women's Association, Writers' Association, and Trade Union, maintained branches in most economic, social, and cultural activities. Managers of collective farms were an integrated part of local governments, involving not only in production but also in social surveillance and control. The Communist Youth League and Pioneer Children's Union monitored youth and kept them busy. These organizations lengthened the party's arms to reach most individuals in society, distributing exclusive benefits of the planned economy to their members, offering upward mobility to motivated individuals, and generating a sense of symbolic participation.³² At the same time, they could be mobilized to completely isolate political dissidents from society and effectively deny them alternative means of livelihood.³³

Implications for the party's future

This chapter has analyzed the evolution of the CPV, using the concepts developed by Huntington while exploiting newly available archival sources and recently published studies. The CPV has undergone three phases in its history since assuming power: expansion and institutionalization (1945–60), ossification and decay (1970–86), reform and continuing decay (1986–present). The Vietnamese case offers a useful test for hypotheses about the persistence of single-party dictatorships. In particular, revolutionary violence was found to contribute decisively to the strength of the system, while war had ambiguous impact. Fighting war successfully necessitated military effectiveness, which in turn contributed to regime durability. Total war provided an important venue of political participation and upward social mobility. At the same time, (protracted) war facilitated the personal or factional monopoly of power, weakening the cohesion of the revolutionary party and causing it to ossify.

Contrary to theoretical expectations, rents had mixed effects in the Vietnamese case. Existing literature does not distinguish between building broad political coalitions and constructing cohesive organizations. The lack of rents during 1945–50 forced the CPV to build a broad but loose coalition instead of a cohesive organization. Chinese material aid since 1950 was crucial to help the CPV to defeat the French, but perhaps had only marginal effects on organizational building. It was the Maoist techniques of mass mobilization and class warfare imported and implemented under the close supervision of Chinese advisors that transformed the fragile communist party and regime into a cohesive

organization and durable dictatorship. Another factor overlooked in the comparative literature is the state's near-total control over social life, a common characteristic of communist systems that is critical for their persistence. This is the most important characteristic that distinguishes totalitarianism from authoritarian regimes.

Today the evolutionary path of Vietnam's ruling party is marked by continuing decay, even though decay does not mean immediate or eventual breakdown. Yet understanding the origins of the party's persistence offers some clues about current challenges and opportunities. First, revolutionary violence built a strong base for the party in the countryside, but market reform is destroying it. In the early years of reform, decollectivization was a popular policy that boosted agricultural production and peasants' income. But the regime soon turned its attention to the cities, which have attracted billions of dollars of foreign investment, and neglected agriculture ("So phan cua nong nghiep co phai la dang chet" 2009). While village governments charge peasants hefty fees for public services, provincial governments rush to turn farmland into golf courses and industrial parks to serve foreign investors (*Tuoi Tre* 2006a, 2006b; *Dat Viet* 2008³⁴). The peasantry used to be the bedrock of support for the CPV but open rural protests now break out frequently.³⁵

As part of the old totalitarian system established through revolutionary violence, the mass organizations led by the CPV have not been able to adjust to the market economy. The official Trade Union has struggled to remain relevant as the government restricts workers' right to strike and keeps the minimum wage low to attract foreign capital. The number of strikes (mostly against foreign employers) has increased tenfold since 2000, and all strikes have occurred spontaneously without the involvement or approval of local unions ("Xu huong lao dong va xa hoi Vietnam 2009/2010" 2010: 24–5; Clarke and Pringle 2009: 85–101). The official Farmers' Association has been criticized for taking the side of polluting foreign companies in disputes involving farmers who wanted to sue those companies for compensation (*Tuoi Tre* 2010). The Communist Youth League is saddled with problems of recruitment and aging leadership as young people lack interest in participating in its programs (*Tuoi Tre* 2006c; *Tien Phong* 2006).

Market reform also shrinks the CPV's monopoly of the cultural sphere. The liberalization of foreign trade and intense pressure from Western countries have forced the party to relax control over religions, which leads to the recent revival of religious activities and a surge of religious protests.³⁶ At the same time, rising living standards and freedom of travel now allow many families to send their children abroad to study.³⁷

These young men and women are being exposed to ideas different from the indoctrination they receive at home. The recent cases of Le Cong Dinh, who came from a solid “revolutionary family,” and Nguyen Tien Trung, whose father is a party member and official, attest to the danger of a Western education even for children of the elites.³⁸ A key challenge to the party’s control over culture is the internet, which is not only an indispensable tool of the market but also an effective tool of communication for regime opponents like Dinh and Trung. The internet has provided access to information normally suppressed by the party and has become a virtual gathering place for these dissidents to organize and publicize their anti-government views.

Paradoxically, the current situation also presents opportunities for the CPV to persist. First, rents are now perhaps the strongest glue binding the elites together and keeping the emerging middle class loyal.³⁹ Rents create massive corruption that is gnawing at the regime’s legitimacy, but they give the regime resources to sustain economic growth and maintain its massive coercive apparatus. This apparatus is estimated to employ every one out of six working Vietnamese (Hayton 2010: 73).⁴⁰ As long as economic growth continues, the dictatorship should be safe. Second, the mobilization of nationalism in past wars has contributed the recent surge of nationalist sentiments against China (Vu forthcoming). If war breaks out, or if the level of threats from China keeps rising, the CPV may be able to rally popular support while suppressing demands for political liberalization. Unlike the war against the United States in the 1960s, a war with China today may split and destroy the party because the dominant faction in the CPV leadership still views China as a strategically and ideological comrade (Vuving 2010). Opportunities thus exist, but they are not risk free.

Since the 1990s Vietnamese leaders have pondered over the abrupt disintegration of long-standing Soviet and Eastern European brother communist parties. As the CPV turns 83, that fate now hovers over its head. Reckless monetary policy and wasteful state investment into a corrupt and inefficient state-owned sector have led to slower growth, high inflation, and swelling foreign debt since 2006 (Pham Bich San 2013). Street demonstrations are now a common scene, with causes involving not simply land grabbing by local authorities as before, but also national issues such as corruption, police brutalities, abuses of religious freedom and human rights, and the government’s timid reactions to Chinese aggressive claims of sovereignty over the Spratlys and Paracels in the South China Sea. Violent police crackdowns on protests and more subtle forms of coercion have not been effective but have earned sharp

rebukes from the West.⁴¹ Rising social unrest implies increasing cost to maintain the security apparatus at the very time when state resources are dwindling due to economic difficulties. Yet the party now seems totally beholden to powerful interest groups that block meaningful economic reform.⁴² In the context of rapidly accumulating domestic and external challenges, the CPV's continuing domination and even its survival are in grave danger. For decades the party has been able to persist amid decay but one wonders if that is still an option.

Notes

1. Nathan has since revised his view to be less certain about the future prospects of China's authoritarian system. See Nathan, "Authoritarian Impermanence," *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2009): 37–40.
2. For example, Smith writes, "In Cuba, the road to power followed a path much like that taken by the Vietcong, in which long-term guerrilla warfare was combined with coalition building in the countryside, but which, unlike in North Vietnam, had no ready source of external revenue from foreign supporters" (Smith 2005: 450). The situation was actually the reverse: the "Vietcong" was under direct supervision of the CPV in North Vietnam and received arms from North Vietnam and the Soviet bloc smuggled in through Cambodian ports and Laotian jungles. In contrast, the government which was set up in Hanoi by Ho Chi Minh in 1945 and which fought a subsequent war with France received no foreign support until 1950 (see below).
3. By "revolutionary violence" I mean systematic violence guided by ideologies and tactics aimed at restructuring the social order. Huntington's term is "class warfare."
4. For simplicity, I am using the name CPV for the entire existence of this party. The CPV had other names in some periods, such as Indochinese Communist Party (1931–45), Association for the Study of Marxism (1945–51), and Vietnamese Workers' Party (1951–76).
5. The best account of the party in its early years is Huynh Kim Khanh (1982).
6. As Huntington explains, "So long as an organization still has its first set of leaders, ... its adaptability is still in doubt" (Huntington 1968: 14).
7. Ho Chi Minh's role in the party weakened in the late 1940s because he failed to obtain diplomatic recognition not only from the United States, but also from the Soviet Union. Ho was criticized by some party leaders for his decision to dissolve the CPV in 1945; this decision led Stalin not to trust the CPV. See Goscha (2006: 59–103); and Quinn-Judge (2005: 33). Truong Chinh resigned from the position of general secretary in 1956 after the party rectification campaign and the land reform went awry under his direction (see Vu 2005: ch. 5). He remained powerful in the Politburo, just as Ho Chi Minh remained influential even after he was gradually removed from the daily management of the state in the early 1950s.
8. The Central Committee had 44 full members and 31 alternate members in 1960 and 133 full members with no alternate members in 1976. Most full

and alternate members in 1960 were retained in 1976 and new members accounted for more than half of the Central Committee in 1976.

9. Two died in office: Nguyen Chi Thanh died in 1968 and Ho Chi Minh in 1969.
10. This was Hoang Van Hoan.
11. These were Tran Quoc Hoan, Van Tien Dung, Le Van Luong, Nguyen Van Linh, Vo Chi Cong, and Chu Huy Man. Le Van Luong was an alternate member of the Politburo since 1951 but lost this position in 1956.
12. These included Le Duan, Nguyen Duy Trinh, Pham Hung, Le Thanh Nghi, and Tran Quoc Hoan.
13. These were Truong Chinh, Le Duc Tho, Pham Van Dong, Vo Nguyen Giap, Le Van Luong, and Van Tien Dung. Vo Nguyen Giap died recently but had lost influence since the late 1960s.
14. For the failure of collectivization in North Vietnam, see Kerkvliet (2005). For the failure of socialist construction in North Vietnam in general, see Fforde and Paine (1987).
15. For an astute analysis of the mindset of party leaders at this time, see Marr (1991: 12–20).
16. The DRV lost about 1.1 million troops in the war out of a population of about 20 million.
17. In Vietnamese, “tat ca cho tien tuyen, tat ca de chien thang.”
18. The Central Committee in theory is above the Politburo, but in reality this was not the case until recently.
19. For an astute and most recent analysis of palace politics in Hanoi, see Lien-Hang Nguyen (2012).
20. The only exception was Hoang Van Hoan, who lost his position in the Politburo in 1976 and defected to China in 1978.
21. Party documents referred to members recruited in the first campaign as “the January 6 Cohort” (the campaign was launched on January 6, 1960, the thirtieth birthday of the CPV), and those recruited in the early 1970s as “the Ho Chi Minh Cohort” (the campaign was launched in September 1970 to commemorate the first anniversary of Ho’s death).
22. These sources did not reveal the criteria used to rank cadres.
23. Transition generation include such leaders as Nguyen Van Linh, Do Muoi, Vo Van Kiet. Those of the second generation are Le Duc Anh, Nong Duc Manh, Phan Van Khai, Le Kha Phieu, Tran Duc Luong, and Nguyen Tan Dung. For an account of early years of party reform, see Stern (1993).
24. From 1987 to 1991, the annual number of new recruits fell from about 100,000 to 36,000; see Le Phuoc Tho (1982: 24). By 1998, the number for the first time in a decade rebounded to 100,000; see Ha (1999: 44). By 2007, the number was about 170,000; see Phuc Son (2007). Total number of CPV members in 1986 was 1.8 million or 3 percent of the population (Thayer 1991: 21). By 2007, there were 3.2 million members who made up 3.7 percent of the population (Phuc Son 2007).
25. In 2007, 0.55 percent of 20,000 private enterprises in Hanoi had a party cell (*Tien Phong* 2007). In Ho Chi Minh City, the rate was much lower, at about 0.06 percent (*Tap chi Xay Dung Dang* 2008).
26. Interview with Nong Duc Manh, General Secretary of the CPV, *Tuoi Tre*, April 26, 2006.

27. *Ha Noi Moi*, April 22, 2008. See also *Nguoi Lao Dong*, April 28, 2008.
28. Interview with Le Kha Phieu, *Tuoi Tre*, May 26, 2005. He returned the money, but tellingly did not authorize any investigation of those who tried to bribe him even though the law allowed the persecution of bribe-givers.
29. See chapter by Thomas Jandl in this volume on this issue.
30. At least half of provincial governments have been found to violate national investment laws to attract more foreign investment to their provinces (Pham Duy Nghia 2007).
31. No corruption cases involving CPV Politburo members have been reported or disclosed, although their children, spouses, and relatives are widely believed to use family influence for financial gains (Hayton 2010: 20–5). Among ministers and vice ministers disciplined, fired, or jailed for corruption are Ngo Xuan Loc (construction), Vu Ngoc Hai (energy), Bui Thien Ngo (public security), Mai Van Dau (trade), Nguyen Huu Chi and Truong Chi Trung (finance), Nguyen Viet Tien (transportation), Nguyen Thien Luan and Nguyen Quang Ha (agriculture and rural development), and Doan Manh Giao (government office). Other high-ranking officials who have been suspected or accused are Le Duc Thuy (governor of Central Bank), Le Thanh Hai (Politburo member and Ho Chi Minh City party secretary), and Nguyen Ba Thanh (Da Nang party secretary). Numerous provincial leaders are disciplined and dismissed for corruption every year but details have rarely been made public; see for example *VietnamNet* (2009).
32. For the importance of rituals of participation in dictatorships see Wedeen (1999).
33. See memoir by Nguyen Manh Tuong, a French-trained lawyer and scholar who was involved in the *Nhan Van-Giai Pham* Affairs. *Ke bi mat phep thong cong, Hanoi 1954–1991: Ban an cho mot tri thuc* (translated from French by Nguyen Quoc Vy), available at http://viet-studies.info/NMTuong/NMTuong_HoiKy.htm.
34. There were 138 projects to build golf courses in 38 provinces in Vietnam as of May 2008.
35. An example of these protests was those that occurred in Thai Binh in 1997. A woman who lived in a neighboring village of the protests called this event “a coup d’etat” [dao chinh] because the protesting farmers seized a commune chief and held him before marching to the district with their claims against local taxes and corruption. Interview, Dong Hung district, Thai Binh, July 25, 2003.
36. For state efforts to co-opt religions, see Bouquet (2010: 90–108). Recent protests involved the Hmongs in Son La and Catholics in Hanoi, Vinh, and Da Nang.
37. According to a British Council’s report titled “Vietnam Market Information,” the estimated number of Vietnamese students studying abroad in 2008 was 25,000 and rising. See www.britishcouncil.org/eumd_information_background-vietnam.htm
38. Dinh is a lawyer trained in France and the United States, and Trung received his graduate degree in France. Both were recently tried and sentenced to five and seven years in prison, respectively, for conspiring against the state. For a discussion of their trials, see Forum in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* (2010: 192–243).

39. Since the 1990s, Vietnam has become increasingly dependent on Western foreign aid, investment and markets. Public external debt (mostly official development assistance) is currently estimated to be 25 percent of GDP (31.5% if including the private sector); see World Bank (2008a). Annual remittances from abroad are equal to about 10 percent of GDP. In 2008, for example, remittances, official assistance, and foreign direct investment amounted to nearly 34 percent of GDP (World Bank 2008b).
40. See Carlyle Thayer's chapter in this volume for a detailed analysis of this apparatus.
41. See Benedict Kerkvliet's informative chapter in this volume for the treatment of regime critics.
42. At the 4th Plenum of the Central Committee in October 2012, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and the majority of the Politburo tried but failed to discipline Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung for policy mistakes and corruption.