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The Seventh Plenum of the Communist Party of Vietnam: The Gains of the Central Committee

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Seventh Plenum of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) was notable for the tensions between the Secretary-General and the Central Committee of the Party.
- The Central Committee gained more clout by securing more statutory power. The increase in its power and influence that began in 2001 seems to have reached a new peak in 2013.
- However the CPV as a whole has become weaker as the factions in the party become stronger and more disparate.
- There was a break up, albeit partially, in the practice of democratic centralism within the CPV which could be a healthy development.
- The Foreign Minister is still not a member of the Politburo even though the rules of the Communist Party of Vietnam dictate that he be so.
- The Politburo of the CPV is now seeking to rebuild internal unity, trust, and solidarity within the party, and to regain the trust of the Vietnamese people who have shown increasing dissatisfaction with growing corruption.

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INTRODUCTION

The Seventh Plenum of the Eleventh Congress² of the CPV held in early May 2013 was an incredibly important event for the CPV leadership in Hanoi. The Party had intended to use the Plenum to take the first steps in leadership planning towards the next Congress expected to be held in early 2016, and to try to make progress in the fight against corruption, 'decadence of cadres', and 'social evils'. But the results of the votes for additional members to the Politburo and Secretariat took the Plenum onto an unexpected path.

The CPV's Central Committee of 175 members turned down proposals from the Secretary-General of the CPV, Nguyen Phu Trong, and declined to vote for admitting the Head of the Commission on Internal Affairs and Head of the Commission on Economic Affairs (both bodies were re-instated by him after being abolished in 2006) into the Politburo.³ It thus reduced the power of both the Politburo and Secretariat to fight corruption and supervise the government's economic policy - the two key areas that will determine the legitimacy, and perhaps the very survival, of the CPV. With this situation in mind, the main interest of this brief essay is to make sense of what this tension in the CPV was about, its implications, and what the gains of the Central Committee mean.

THE TENSIONS WITHIN THE CPV

The Secretary-General and several other members of the Politburo were actually mistaken in their belief that the re-establishment of the Commission on Internal Affairs would result in some form of breakthrough in the fight against deep-seated corruption in Vietnam. That would have been difficult even if its head were a Politburo member because power had been shifting to the government, the Prime Minister and the Central Committee. Likewise it was a mistake to think that the Commission on Economic Affairs would, in fact, be able to supervise and implement the government's economic policy. As far as the Central Committee was concerned, its main rationale for not bringing back the two Commissions had to do with the fact that they had been abolished in 2006 because of their failure to contribute significantly to anti-corruption efforts, economic development, and the rule of law reforms.

Given also that, since 2006, the government⁴ had enjoyed more power in economic management, the CPV's Central Committee could not exercise basic supervision over the government's economic policy. In fact, since 2001, the Politburo, had

2 There are fifteen or so plenums, each with a specific agenda, between two CPV Congresses. The current term between two consecutive congresses is five-years.

3 For each of the Commissions, the head must be a member of the Politburo.

4 The head of the government is the Prime Minister, who is presently ranked third in the CPV hierarchy.

loosened CPV supervision over the activities of the government. The inefficiency of State-owned conglomerates even after consuming large slices of national income, the ballooning of the public debt to nearly 100 percent of the GDP, slow speed of technological innovation, high moral hazard among civil servants, and mistakes in the development of human resources have collectively destabilised economic development, and lowered the welfare of the Vietnamese people.

Apart from the tension over the two Commissions, the Seventh Plenum also saw, for the first time, the Central Committee projecting its statutory power by producing its own list of candidates for election into the Politburo as against the list that was proposed by the Secretary-General. In other words, the Central Committee rejected the list put forward by the Secretary-General, which traditionally would have been accepted without fanfare. Moreover, while the Central Committee in the past would only name one candidate for each of the 16 seats in the Politburo, this time the Central Committee named four candidates for each of those seats in the Seventh Plenum, and then voted for their preferred candidates.

Remarkably too, Nguyen Ba Thanh, and Vuong Dinh Hue, the two candidates strongly endorsed by the Secretary-General, failed to get into the Politburo. The Central Committee decided not to vote for these two candidates, but rather, gave 80 per cent of their votes to the Secretary-General's proposed third-choice candidate. Furthermore, the Central Committee named one additional candidate, and then voted that candidate into the Politburo. The Central Committee also voted against the candidates the Secretary-General had proposed for the Secretariat.⁵ The admission of one additional member into the Politburo, and two more members into the Secretariat, as preferred by the Politburo, were postponed to future plenums.

IMPLICATIONS

A notable implication arising from the tensions in the Seventh Plenum is that the CPV has become weaker as the factions become stronger and more disparate. More specifically, the power of the Secretary-General appears to have deteriorated considerably. Traditionally, based on the mode of collective leadership followed by the CPV, the Secretary-General was akin to a Chief Executive Officer who enjoyed substantial power over the Politburo and the Central Committee. However, during the period from 1986 to the May 2013 Plenum, the power of the Secretary-General has steadily shrunk due to heightened factionalism within the CPV. So, despite the CPV Statute granting the Secretary-General significant influence, he appears not to get much support from the Central Committee. Today, the Politburo is considered the CPV's

⁵ *The Secretariat of the CPV is a day-to-day administrative body that implements the decisions of the Central Committee, and the Politburo.*

top executive body, while the Central Committee is seen as the 'Management Board of Directors' of the Party.

Factionalism has also come to the fore within the CPV. In fact, the Secretary-General himself conceded that there have been factions (or "interest groups" in his words) within the CPV. Factions have existed since 1991, but it was only around 2012 that they became more prominent and began flexing their political muscles. Quite clearly, as stated above, there was infighting among different factions during the Seventh Plenum. Further, while the factions in the past were identified with the regions of the North, South and Centre of Vietnam, factions today have become far more complex not just geographically, but also in the pursuit of their specific interests.

Another noteworthy development is the fracturing, albeit partially, in the ostentatious practice of democratic centralism⁶ within the CPV. The reality is that the CPV, like many other Leninist parties in the past, had not been following democratic centralism, because the rule by the Politburo and the Secretary-General on 'one candidate for one position' was against the spirit and practice of democratic centralism, as originally conceived, at least in theory. Moreover, the Politburo in the past decided on everything, and stood above the Central Committee. What should take place is for all issues to be discussed in an open and democratic fashion within the framework of democratic centralism; and after the voting, the minority would have to abide by the decisions and/or resolutions agreed to by the majority. So, in a sense, during the Seventh Plenum, there seemed to have been some noticeable changes in the interpretation of democratic centralism within the CPV, perhaps for the better.

Another development is that the Foreign Minister is still not a member of the Politburo, although the CPV rules dictate that he should be so. The current Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh was actually named as a candidate for the Politburo in the Seventh Plenum. But the fact that Minh's name was proposed only by a minor group in the Central Committee, and not the Secretary-General or some of the more influential groups within the Central Committee, resulted in his garnering very few votes even after several rounds of voting, and therefore, in him not being able to secure a seat in the Politburo. As a consequence, the final decision on foreign affairs is still in the hands of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, and is partially assigned to his deputy, Nguyen Thien Nhan, who is one of two new members voted into the Politburo from the Seventh Plenum.

Finally, what do these developments have on policy? It is perhaps too early to draw policy implications from these developments. Suffice to say, an increase in factions and divisions in the power elite would not be conducive to the formulation and implementation of coherent policies. Also, if corruption continues unchecked and

⁶ *Democratic centralism is a Leninist principle of Communist party organisation where members partake in policy discussions and elections at various levels within the party, but decisions are made centrally by officials, who are democratically elected in an ostentatious fashion.*

the needed economic reforms are not implemented, public disillusionment with the regime will increase—to the detriment of regime legitimacy, as some commentators have noted.

CONCLUSION: GAINS OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE

The main gain of the Central Committee at the Seventh Plenum has been the securing of more statutory power which includes, among other things, the capacity to supervise the activities of the Politburo, the Secretariat, and the Secretary-General. At first glance, the powerful nature of the Central Committee does not seem unusual because the CPV statute does state that the Central committee is the ‘top power body of the Party between two consecutive congresses’. But in reality, the Politburo has been the ultimate decision-maker for many years, at least since 1951.

However, for the first time in 2006, the Central Committee utilised its statutory power to compel three top leaders (Speaker of National Assembly, State President and Prime Minister) to step down before the first plenary session of the National Assembly was held that year. At the same time, the Central Committee chose to retain the Secretary-General for a second congressional term. Later, in October 2012, the Central Committee decided, against the wishes of the Politburo, not to discipline a member of the Politburo. In the Seventh Plenum, as noted above, the Central Committee took a bold step to reject the candidates proposed by the Secretary-General for membership in the Politburo and the Secretariat. Simply put, the increase in the power and influence of the Central Committee that began in 2006 seems to have reached a new peak in 2013.

For the less reform-minded people within the CPV, the new rules on ‘more candidates for one position’ and ‘one candidate for more positions’ possibly suggests a move away from the traditional practice of democratic centralism. But for the more reform-minded ones, this rule is a healthy step toward democratic centralist practice in the CPV. Presently, the Politburo of the CPV is trying very hard to rebuild the internal unity, trust and solidarity within the party, and above all, to regain the trust of the Vietnamese people. The collective outcome of the Seventh Plenum has turned the clock of hope forward from ‘politics as unusual’ to ‘politics as usual’, that is, as they should be.

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