

# FORUM INTERVIEW

## A Perspective on Vietnam: Doan Van Toai

*As a student revolutionary leader in Vietnam, Doan Van Toai helped to topple the Thieu regime and set up the Communist government. However, he quickly became disillusioned with that cause and eventually was arrested in 1975 for refusing to serve on a government finance committee. Since his release from prison in 1978 Doan Van Toai has written extensively on human rights violations in Vietnam. As a Research Fellow at the Fletcher School, he is presently completing another book entitled, Vietnam: Neither Peace nor Honor. The following interview conducted by Barbara Blodi, a MALD degree candidate at the Fletcher School, touches on themes from his last work,\* and probes into the Vietnamese perception of the fraternal rivalry between western and eastern political ideology.*

**FORUM:** There has been a great deal of publicity about Soviet dissidents in recent years. How strong is the dissident movement in Vietnam? Who is involved in the movement; what are the causes of discontent and what can the dissidents do?

**DVT:** The West distinguishes Vietnamese dissidents from those of the Soviet Union. To begin with, the Western media focus more on Soviet dissidents because the Soviet Union is considered to be the communist center of the world. Secondly, the Communists took over Vietnam only five years ago and there has been less time to develop a strong dissident movement in Southeast Asia. Only a few of those who oppose the present Vietnamese regime have managed to escape the country. Thirdly, leaders in Hanoi have tried to hypnotize the mass media and supporters of the Vietnamese revolutionary cause, leading them to believe that the present communist regime puts the interests of the nation above the interests of the Party. In fact, this is not true.

\* *Le Goulag Vietnamien*, Paris: Robert Leffont, 1979.

Both National Liberation Front (N.L.F.) leaders and Communist party members have fled the country seeking freedom. One example is Mr. Hoang van Hoang, vice-president of the National Assembly of a Unified Vietnam, who escaped to China last year. Mr. Hoang held one of the six Politburo positions during the 1960s, and was also the right-hand man of Ho Chi Minh during the resistance against the French colonialists. A colleague of Hoang's, Mr. Nguven Cong Hoan, fled Vietnam by boat in 1977 and is now living in Los Angeles. He had been a secret agent of the N.L.F. during the war with the Americans and was most recently a deputy of the Unified National Assembly. In these two cases, the current regime denounced the dissidents as "foreigner's lackeys" and claimed that both had been influenced by imperialist propaganda. The escape of other dissidents, however, has not been publicly discussed by the Communist party leadership. A case in point is Mr. Hoang Huu Quynh, a graduate of Leningrad University and a high-ranking member of the Vietnamese Communist Party (V.C.P.). He defected to France in September of 1979 during a European tour as an official representative of the Vietnamese government. Another dissident who escaped in 1979 is Mr. Truong nhu Tang, a founder of the N.L.F. and later the Minister of Justice of the Provisional Revolutionary government.

*FORUM:* You mention in your book, *Le Goulag Vietnamien*, that you are disillusioned with the communist regime in Vietnam because of its close ties to the Soviet Union. What is the extent of Soviet influence today and how does it influence the lives of the Vietnamese people?

*DVT:* During the war years, I thought that the Vietnamese leaders were independent of any superpower, including the Soviet Union and China. However, after living under the communist regime I found that it is much more dependent on the Soviet Union than the former Thieu regime was on the United States. At least under the puppet (Thieu) regime, students and other citizens could organize protests against the involvement of the U.S. government and against the Thieu regime's repressive tactics. Now there is no opportunity to express dissent. The people of Vietnam are instructed that the Soviet Union is the paradise of world socialism. Vietnam belongs to the Soviet Union. Le Duan, Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party, stated in a speech that the Vietnamese revolution serves to fulfill the international duty and responsibility to promote communism, under the stewardship of the Soviet Union.

Vietnamese daily life is also greatly affected by the Soviet Union. Portraits of Soviet leaders are publicly displayed in administrative offices, in theaters, and in schools. All the cultural traditions of the Vietnamese people have been destroyed. All books published before 1975 have been banned or burned. The

communist regime regards Vietnamese literature as decadent because of the influence of capitalism and the West. High school students learn only about Russian writers.

*FORUM:* What is the future of the Vietnamese Communist Party: are there signs of resistance to Soviet pressures among political leaders of the Vietnamese government?

*DVT:* I believe that the Vietnamese Communist Party now faces certain political dilemmas. There is resistance to Soviet influence among the people and even among Party members. Some Party members would like to be independent of any superpower; others would like to adopt a neutral position towards the Soviet Union and China, and still others would like to incline toward the West. Last summer, however, the present leader of the Communist party, Le Duan, conducted a purge to eliminate those who disagreed with the current Soviet orientation. Although Le Duan ordered that purge, the real authority behind the party leadership is Le Duc Tho. He is a member of the Politburo and his four brothers are members of the Central Committee. One of the brothers is also mayor of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) as well as a regional Commander-in-Chief. The next is a General, and the third and fourth are Minister of Petrol and Secretary General of the labor unions, respectively. The Le Duc Tho family is the most powerful family in Vietnam today.

In the purge, four other members of the Central Committee were arrested. They were denounced as lazy generals and as Chinese supporters. Since the government controls the lines of communication, it is very difficult to know whether these men were arrested or killed. Take the case of Dinh Ba Thi, Hanoi's former ambassador to the United Nations. In 1977, he was called back to Vietnam. A few months later the government released a report that he had died in an accident but it is widely believed that he was killed by the government.

*FORUM:* In your opinion, did the Soviet government directly influence the Vietnamese decision to invade Kampuchea and Thailand? What has been the role of the Soviet military in these campaigns?

*DVT:* Before I begin to discuss the Vietnamese aggression in Southeast Asia, I would like to say that Western analysts have used liberal Western thinking to judge situations in Eastern countries. Because of that, Western analysts often come to incorrect conclusions. The nature of the Soviet influence in Vietnam is quite different from the nature of past U.S. influence. When the United States interfered in Vietnam it did so openly; everyone knew of the presence of American troops. The influence of the Soviet Union on a communist country is

much more difficult to perceive because both countries are said to agree on the same goals and to share the same interests. In 1978, Brezhnev publicly stated that Vietnam is a solid outpost of world socialism in Southeast Asia. Vietnam attacked Kampuchea to help the Soviet Union in its confrontation with the Chinese. This invasion served to fulfill part of Vietnam's international obligations to the Soviet-dominated communist bloc.

The attack on Thailand was a move on the part of Vietnam and the Soviet Union to test the reaction of the free world. Communist Indochina, under the leadership of the Vietnamese, desires to spread out and to further the revolution. Because Thailand shares borders with Communist Indochina its position in Southeast Asia is crucial to stability in the region. The present situation is very dangerous. I think that the current Thai government would very much like to compromise and live in peace with Communist Indochina. A significant factor in this issue is the success of the Thai government. If the government can strengthen democracy within the country and obtain more popular support, it will be able to confront Communist Indochina. But if the government adopts dictatorial tactics, as was the case in South Vietnam under Thieu, the tension in the area may increase dramatically. In the future I believe that Vietnam will again attack Thailand. The Thais want U.S. protection. If it is not provided, that area will fall into the hands of the communists.

*FORUM:* What do you consider to be the ramifications of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan?

*DVT:* The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was an action taken to divert attention from Vietnamese activities in Kampuchea. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan the media paid more attention to the Middle East and less attention to Kampuchea. I believe that discussion between the Soviet Union and the Vietnamese Communist Party preceded the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan. It is conceivable to me that Soviet soldiers could benefit from the Vietnamese experiences in guerrilla warfare. I have already heard reports that Vietnamese Communist party members are serving as military advisors in Afghanistan.

Some Western analysts equate the Soviet position in Afghanistan with that of the United States in Vietnam before 1975. I think that argument is incorrect because of differences in domestic policies. During the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the widespread anti-war movement was given a great deal of exposure by the media. There is no anti-war movement within the Soviet Union. Also, the resistance forces in Afghanistan are weaker than those that existed in Vietnam's case, where both China and the Soviet Union provided aid. I doubt that the Afghan rebels have that level of support. I think the resistance forces cannot overthrow the Soviet Union without the support of the rest of the world.

*FORUM:* You have observed a reluctance among Americans to discuss the Vietnam war in the post-war era. Americans seem even less likely to take action against the violation of human rights in Vietnam. Do you foresee any changes in the United States' attitude with the Reagan administration? In your opinion, what steps can the U.S. realistically take?

*DVT:* In principle, I think the foreign policy of the United States government is determined by the American people. In this context, Reagan's victory demonstrates that a shift toward conservatism has taken place. This does not mean, however, that the next administration will be more involved in Vietnam. In my opinion, both liberals and conservatives are tired of Vietnam. On the one hand, many conservatives believe that past administrations led us to defeat in Vietnam and they are ashamed of that. On the other hand, many on the left feel that they have been deceived by the Vietnamese Communists but do not want to admit this in public. Overall, Americans paid a great deal for the Vietnam war. Over 50,000 Americans died there and 300,000 were wounded. Billions of dollars were spent. Americans do not want to be reminded of Vietnam. However, the reality of the situation in Southeast Asia does not allow America to forget. America has become the new home for hundreds of thousands of Indochinese refugees and, just recently, the U.S. sent military aid to Thailand because of the Vietnamese intervention.

In terms of changes in U.S. foreign policy, some Americans have pressured the government to normalize relations with Vietnam. I believe that such action will increase the self-confidence of the Vietnamese Communist regime and establish its legitimacy in the eyes of the world. In contrast, the Vietnamese people will continue to lose hope. Such an attitude can be traced to the lack of direct U.S. response to the invasions in Kampuchea and Thailand and to the violations of human rights in Vietnam. If the United States does normalize relations with Vietnam, I would urge the Reagan administration to set certain conditions. The first would be to ask the Vietnamese government to withdraw troops from Indochina and to halt its involvement in Kabul. The second condition would be to respect human rights within Vietnam. This means closing all re-education camps, closing all economic zones, and allowing those who would like to leave the country to do so.

*FORUM:* What political changes do you foresee taking place in China and how will they affect Sino-Vietnamese relations?

*DVT:* I am optimistic about the political situation in China although I am uncertain about its long run effect on Vietnam. I foresee no improvement in the relationship between China and Vietnam in the near future. China is moving away from the Marxist-Leninist line and is gradually moving closer to the

West. I hope, therefore, that China will be able to play the role of mediator between capitalists and Marxist-Leninists. I believe, however, that there is a great deal of uncertainty about China's future. Even if the present Chinese leaders are more moderate, there could be a coup d'état at any time. A new regime could easily regurgitate a Marxist-Leninist ideology.

*FORUM:* Do you see any possibility of establishing ties, whether economic or political, with the ASEAN<sup>1</sup> countries? Are these ties a necessary ingredient for stability in Southeast Asia?

*DVT:* The ASEAN nations are too weak to confront Vietnam without the support of a superpower. Although Vietnam has maintained diplomatic relations with the ASEAN countries since 1975, there are no strong ties. The Communist Vietnamese regime wants to stabilize political relations — but only on their terms. One of the conditions for entry into ASEAN would be that no foreign military bases be allowed in Southeast Asian countries. Vietnam, however, is not willing to give up its Soviet bases. I think the real problem for ASEAN is not one of military strength but one of will. Countries may have enough military weapons but lack the will to use them. Those countries will be defeated.

*FORUM:* In the past, you have received support through politically active individuals such as Joan Baez and human rights organizations such as Amnesty International. How will you continue your struggle against the current Vietnamese regime?

*DVT:* In a communist country such as Vietnam, it is very difficult to fight for human rights. The difficulty lies in the fact that it is taught that people who are anti-Communist are the conservatives and reactionaries, while those who are progressive support the Communists. Most societies rely on its progressive elements to promote human rights. If the progressives associate themselves with a regime that violates human rights, then there is no group left to struggle for the preservation of basic human freedoms. The Communists have depicted themselves as the true revolutionaries. In opposing the policies of the Communists, a Vietnamese is labelled an enemy of the revolution and a supporter of the Thieu regime. Many outsiders believe that the Communist government and the people are one and the same. But when the Communists took over, the Vietnamese tried to escape the country. They wanted to leave at any price.

The rest of the world continues to believe that the Communist regime represents the Vietnamese people. If there is discussion about the Vietnamese

1. Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Communists violating human rights or repressing its citizens, few believe it. But look at history. When Stalin was in power and when Hitler was in power, few people believed the tragedies that were taking place at that time. I remember when I read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, during the war. I thought it was the fabrication of anti-Communist propagandists. Ironically, I have now written a book about the prisons in Communist Vietnam.

In the past, the American people have been very involved in the Vietnamese war. Many Americans wrote books or articles about the Vietnamese war and the American conscience. I would like to make a statement about the American war and the Vietnamese conscience. Those who now live in Vietnam feel they have been betrayed. Those who were anti-Communist and believed in the protection of the U.S. in the fight against the Communist invasion feel they have been abandoned by Americans. Those Vietnamese who believed in the National Liberation Front, the Communist revolution and the American leftist movement, feel betrayed too. The anti-war movement in America remains silent about the suffering that exists in the political prisons of Vietnam.

*FORUM:* In conclusion, what do you believe the future holds for Vietnam?

*DVT:* In the short run, I am pessimistic because I know that my compatriots will continue to suffer. The present Vietnamese regime will continue to oppress people; more Vietnamese will die in jail or while trying to escape. The only difference between the horror in Kampuchea and in Vietnam is that in Kampuchea death is immediate while in Vietnam death comes slowly. I have greater hopes for the distant future. There is a growing resistance movement among the people and there is a serious split within the Vietnamese Communist party. I believe that Vietnam will be the first country to overthrow a Communist dictatorship. We hope to be a third voice for the Third World countries, neither capitalist nor Communist. The Vietnamese people, the people of Southeast Asia or of any underdeveloped country for that matter, are not interested in ideology. They are only interested in basic freedoms. These people want to be able to go anywhere they want, to be able to earn money and spend money. They do not want to be the slaves of ideology, whether in a democratic or communist state.