

South China Morning Post  
April 28, 2006 Friday

## A course for political change

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When Vietnam's citizens awoke on Tuesday morning, after the 10th Communist Party congress concluded, they could be forgiven for feeling that not much had changed. When the hype had died down, the country still had the same party general secretary, Nong Duc Manh. And while there were eight newly elected members of the ruling Politburo, six remained the same.

Moreover, while Vietnam has a great deal going for it, congresses by themselves do not solve problems. Thus, in terms of the delivery of reforms, there is still everything to play for.

Surveying the new entrants to the Politburo, where the average age is now a quite sprightly (for Vietnam) 60 years old, it is worth remembering that these men - and they are all men - were already in their mid-40s when reforms began to bite. So their formative years were during the war and under central planning. That insight is useful in discussing what we can expect of them.

There is no doubt that they will take Vietnam into the World Trade Organisation - quite possibly later this year - and they are generally prepared to bite the bullet in terms of many of the associated domestic reforms.

However, the new entrants to the Politburo are all tried and tested politicians. They are patriots and they are party loyalists. In that respect, we should expect continued adherence to a significant role for the state in the economy - even within the constraints posed by WTO rules. Moreover, the current generation is not ready to relinquish the party's monopoly on power.

But this is where the party congress gets interesting. The run-up to the session was overshadowed by the mother of all corruption scandals, known as "PMU 18" after a project management unit in the Ministry of Transport. Members of PMU 18 were found to have embezzled millions in public funds - including some overseas development aid. They did it, notably, by awarding public-works contracts to private firms owned by family and friends. The transport minister fell, his deputy was arrested and countless other senior officials have been implicated. A trial is pending.

As the congress got under way, the party made it clear that, while corruption was an important issue, it was not going to allow PMU 18 to dominate the meetings. And, in true Leninist fashion, the party was quite successful: the congress was a well-choreographed

affair from start to finish. However, the approach to it was dominated by a frenzy of media coverage of the PMU 18 case.

While this was sanctioned by the party, the coverage frequently pushed at the boundaries of press freedom. On the streets of Hanoi, it was clear that people were demanding action.

Rapid economic growth in Vietnam is precipitating profound social change, and the relationship between the state and its citizens is changing.

The 10th congress also saw increased discussion - both inside and outside the party - about increasing citizen participation in the decisions that affect them. There was even talk about introducing greater competition into the process of electing the party general secretary.

During the congress, the former party general secretary, Le Kha Phieu, said in an interview that what Vietnam needed was "renovation" in the area of democracy, just as it did 20 years ago in the economy. Mr Phieu was not advocating an end to one-party rule but an end to what he described as the "disease of 'partyisation'", whereby the party dominates everything. The party took a step towards allowing private entrepreneurs to become members, without actually sanctioning it, at the congress.

So we may be witnessing the beginning of a new loosening up: political liberalisation "Vietnamese style".■

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