Levitsky, Steven; Way, Lucan. Revolution and Dictatorship (pp. 157-160). Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.

Regime Origins and Diverging Paths in Vietnam, Algeria, and Ghana

VIETNAM

Vietnam is a case of a successful armed liberation movement that triggered prolonged military conflict, which lay the bases for durable authoritarian. The Viet Minh's liberation war against France gave rise to a powerful and cohesive party-state. The communist government's pursuit of revolution in South Vietnam triggered a second war, this time against the United States, which reinforced elite cohesion and further developed the regime's coercive capacity. The wars also destroyed independent power centers, giving rise to a state-society power imbalance that endured for decades. These features enabled the revolutionary regime to survive a severe economic crisis, the loss of Soviet patronage, and the global crisis of communism.

The Revolutionary Seizure of Power: A Two-Stage Revolution

Prerevolutionary Vietnam possessed few conditions favorable to durable authoritarianism. The precolonial state was weak and decentralized, which facilitated the French conquest in the mid-nineteenth century. State institutions were further weakened by colonial rule. The French broke Vietnam up into protectorates, dismantled precolonial administrative structures, and weakened the monarchy and traditional local authorities. By the 1940s, the precolonial state had been dismembered "to the point where, like Humpty Dumpty, it could not be put back together again." As a result, much of Vietnam was effectively stateless during World War II. It is difficult, then, to identify conditions in prerevolutionary Vietnam that would predict durable authoritarianism in the absence of a social revolution.

The revolutionary seizure of power in Vietnam occurred in two stages: the short-lived August 1945 revolution and the protracted liberation struggle that culminated in the 1954 revolution. The events of 1945 constituted a *political* revolution, not a social one, but it nevertheless triggered a reactive sequence that gave rise to a powerful and cohesive party-state by 1954.

THE 1945 REVOLUTION

The August 1945 revolution was a historical accident. Vietnam's anticolonial movement, led by the nationalist Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD) and Ho Chi Minh's Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), had been badly weakened by French repression. World War II created an opening, however, as Japan's occupation of Indochina loosened colonial controls and opened space for organizing in the countryside. In 1941, ICP leaders created a nationalist front called the Viet Minh, which launched a guerrilla struggle in 1944.

Two events in 1945 catapulted the embryonic Viet Minh into power. First, in March, Japanese forces abolished the colonial state, disarmed and imprisoned French troops, and installed Nguyen dynasty heir Bao Dai as a puppet emperor. The disappearance of French forces created a vacuum of authority in the countryside, which Japanese forces did not fill, allowing the Viet Minh to expand. Second, Japan's August 1945 surrender in World War II threw Vietnam into anarchy. Formal authority fell to Bao Dai, but his government had no army, no revenue, and no rural presence. With French forces in disarray and allied U.S. and British forces not yet on the scene, the Viet Minh was the only viable political organization in the country. Seizing the moment, ICP leaders launched an uprising. They met no resistance from Japanese troops or the hapless Bao Dai government. On August 19, 1945, Viet Minh troops entered Hanoi, having fired only "a few symbolic revolver shots." Bao Dai abdicated shortly thereafter, and on September 2, Ho Chi Minh declared independence. The 1945 revolution was thus remarkably easy. Amid the collapse of the colonial state and the Japanese retreat, power "simply fell into Viet Minh hands."

The Viet Minh government was weak. The ICP was small, with only 5,000 members, and the new army was "miniscule." The new government had no military presence in the south, and it was so ill equipped that cadets in the military academy used wooden rifles. Finally, the Ho government was isolated internationally, failing to gain recognition or support from either the Allies or the USSR.

The Ho Chi Minh government responded to this vulnerability with accommodation. Although it abolished the 1,000-year-old monarchy, it left much of the colonial bureaucracy intact and made no real effort to overturn the existing socioeconomic order. There were few expropriations, and the commanding heights of the economy, including the Bank of Indochina, remined in private—mostly foreign—hands. The government also eschewed agrarian reform, leaving landowners' power intact. Finally, Ho adopted a pragmatic foreign policy, embracing the Allied cause and allowing France to maintain its investments and 15,000 troops in Vietnam.

Moderation achieved little, however. Vietnam was soon invaded on multiple fronts. British troops arrived in Saigon in September 1945, and British and French forces soon controlled most of South Vietnam. French forces arrived in the north in November 1946 and forced the Viet Minh out of Hanoi by year's end. France reestablished de facto colonial rule, naming Emperor Bao Dai as head of a figurehead government. Forced back into the countryside, the Viet Minh resumed its guerrilla war.

THE 1946–1954 REVOLUTIONARY WAR

The 1946–1954 liberation war transformed the Viet Minh into a powerful party-army. The war was brutal: an estimated 500,000 Vietnamese were killed, while French forces suffered 75,000–95,000 deaths. Yet the war dramatically strengthened revolutionary forces. The ICP underwent a "phenomenal expansion." The party mobilized peasants on an unprecedented scale, expanding from 20,000 members in 1946 to more than 500,000 in the early 1950s.

The Viet Minh also built a powerful army. Military threats from China and France had forced the Viet Minh government to rapidly build up its military. Under the leadership of Vo Nguyen Giap, the embryonic People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) grew from 5,000 soldiers in August 1945 to 40,000–60,000 by late 1946. The Viet Minh also organized tens of thousands of young men into "self-defense patrols." By the time the war began in earnest in December 1946, the PAVN had as many as 100,000 people under arms.

The liberation war transformed the PAVN into a potent military force. Within two years, Viet Minh forces had mobilized 250,000 troops and were fighting the French to a stalemate. By 1949, the PAVN "possessed a seasoned officer corps and battle-hardened battalions moving toward regiment and division-size formations." China's 1949 revolution accelerated the PAVN's growth by providing safe territory, arms, and training. The PAVN expanded from 32 regular battalions in 1948 to 117 in 1951. The Viet Minh took on state-like functions, governing 7,000 villages, taxing landowners, and operating schools for nearly a million children in liberated zones.

By 1953, the Viet Minh had reached military parity with French forces. According to French intelligence estimates, the PAVN had 125,000 well-trained soldiers in 1953, which, when added to 200,000 village militias and 75,000 regional troops, meant that the Viet Minh had as many as 400,000 combatants under arms. The Viet Minh's May 1954 victory at Dien Bien Phu, which has been described as "one of the greatest defeats ever suffered by a colonial power," delivered the death blow to French rule. Bao Dai's army disintegrated, paving the way for Communist control of North Vietnam following the July 1954 Geneva Accords.

The revolutionary war also enabled the Viet Minh to destroy rival organizations that could have posed a threat to its rule. The ICP faced a plethora of rivals in 1945. In the north, it competed with nationalist groups like the VNQDD and Dong Minh Hoi; in the south, it confronted the nationalist Dai Viet party, a well-organized Trotskyite movement, and, most importantly, three powerful political-religious "sects": the Cao Dai, a 500,000-member religious movement with a 7,000-man army and "state-like ambitions"; the Hoa Hao, led by the mystic Huynh Phu So, which built a 300,000-member following in western Cochinchina; and the Binh Xuyen, a mafia-like organization that controlled gambling operations and the local police in Saigon. Collaboration with the Japanese enabled the sects to build powerful militias and carve out autonomous enclaves in several southern provinces.

The arrival of French troops in September 1945 provided a justification for the ICP to wage war on its political rivals. The Viet Minh quickly set up "traitor elimination committees" and "secret investigation squads" and launched a terror campaign in which an estimated 5,000 "enemies of the revolution" were killed. Dozens of nationalist, Trotskyite, Catholic, and sect leaders were assasinated between 1945 and 1947. In the south, the Trotskyites were wiped out. More than 200 Hoa Hao cadres, including founding leader Huynh Phu So, were assassinated. In the north, Viet Minh forces waged a brutal campaign against the nationalist VNQDD, which retained a degree of popular support. Hundreds and possibly thousands of VNQDD cadres were arrested or executed, and by late 1946, most nationalists had fled to China or were in hiding. By 1947, all rival nationalist groups had been vanquished in the north, which allowed the communists to monopolize the resistance to French rule.

The Reactive Sequence: Radicalism, War, and Revolutionary State-Building

Vietnam's revolutionary regime was born out of the 1954 Geneva Accords, which partitioned the country into North and South. The Viet Minh had expected to rule all of Vietnam, but Russia's and China's acquiescence to partition forced it to accept "socialism in half-a-country."

Unlike the stillborn 1945 regime, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was born strong. The liberation war transformed the ICP—now the VCP—into a powerful mass organization, with 500,000 members and branches that reached into every corner of the country.

The VCP was also highly cohesive. The party's founding generation, which included Ho, Giap, Pham Van Dong, Truong Chinh, Le Duan, Pham Hung, Nguyen Chi Thanh, Le Thanh Nghi, and Le Duc Tho, was a "tight-knit group" that was "hardened by the struggle against French colonialism." The liberation war generated a "deep sense of party solidarity" and a "formidable sense of discipline" among party leaders. Cohesion was reinforced by Ho Chi Minh, whose prestige allowed him to serve as a "kind of unique umpire," whose decisions were accepted by all factions.

The new regime also emerged from the liberation war with a powerful coercive apparatus. By the time the PAVN became North Vietnam's regular army in 1954, it was a prestigious and battle-tested institution with 350,000–400,000 experienced soldiers.

The PAVN was also highly disciplined. It was commanded exclusively by Viet Minh guerrilla veterans who, having fought together for decades, shared a "common sense of psychological identification." Moreover, the PAVNs extraordinary victory over the French endowed army commanders with considerable prestige, which brought "unquestioned loyalty" from the rank and file.

Party and army were fused. All the PAVN's founding generals had been party members since the 1930s. Thus, they were "not military leaders so much as … uniformed party leaders." Party and military roles were "blurred," as army commanders shuttled "back and forth between PAVN and civilian duties." For example, Vo Nguyen Giap, Vietnam's top military commander, was a high-ranking Politburo member and served as deputy prime minister.

The VCP reinforced partisan control by establishing a dual command structure in which party agents were integrated into the military hierarchy—down to the "lowest echelon units." The Central Military Party Committee, directly controlled by the Politburo, oversaw military decision-making, effectively fusing civilian and military commands. Political commissars—equipped with their own security forces—operated within each brigade, battalion, platoon, and squadron. Party cells (*chi bo*) operated in intelligence agencies, armaments plants, and military courts.

Finally, the VCP confronted few domestic rivals when it took power in 1954. The Viet Minh's "campaign of demolition" during the war had cleared the terrain of political challengers, so by the time communists returned to power, "all opposing organizations … were in ruins."

Independent power centers were weak. The monarchy had been emasculated by the French and abolished by the Viet Minh in 1945. French domination of the colonial economy had crowded out Vietnamese capitalists, leaving behind an underdeveloped bourgeoisie. Many landowners fled during the war, which diminished their collective power.

Religious institutions were also weak. Buddhist associations had little history of political activism and were "enfeebled" by the French. The Catholic Church could have posed a more serious threat. Although it represented only 10 percent of the population, the Church was well endowed and had boomed under French rule. Most Catholic leaders were stridently anticommunist, and a few powerful bishops had established armed enclaves during the liberation war. Nevertheless, the Church was weakened by the massive exodus of Catholics in the aftermath of partition. Some 600,000 Catholics—nearly half the Catholic population—fled to South Vietnam in 1954. A majority of bishops and two-thirds of the country's priests abandoned the country. The exodus cleared a "vast reservoir of potential anti-communist subversive elements" from North Vietnam.

Overall, then, the balance of societal forces heavily favored the revolutionary elite. The destruction of independent power centers during the liberation war left the VCP in a near-hegemonic position. By 1954, there was "no organized force to give articulation to protests and demands" in North Vietnam.

EARLY RADICALISM

The post-1954 government was radical. VCP leaders were ideologues; they considered it a "self-appointed duty" to "overturn the old social order" and create a "new Vietnamese man." The communist government launched a series of measures aimed at overturning the social order. One was a far-reaching land reform, which began in late 1953. The reform redistributed more than 800,000 hectares of land (out of about two million hectares under cultivation) to 2.1 million families, or more than half the peasant workforce. The reform "leveled the structure of land ownership," leaving poor peasants and landlords with "nearly equivalent standards of living." Landowners suffered a "catastrophic loss," effectively disappearing as a class. Agriculture was eventually collectivized; by 1968, 90 percent of peasant families were in cooperatives.

The VCP used land reform to provoke a "class war" in the countryside. Land reform cadres, "armed with ideological zeal and determined to build the brave new world," were sent to more than 15,000 villages with a mandate to overturn centuries-old power structures. Cadres classified families by their class position, ranging from "friends" to "enemies" and "traitors." Those considered "exploiters" were purged from positions of authority and often imprisoned or killed. At the same time, poor peasants were mobilized as *cốt cán* (backbone elements) and given positions of authority.Landowners lost their land, power, and status; thousands of them were killed and tens of thousands imprisoned. Land reform cadres also attacked local party structures, declaring them infiltrated by landlords. The process descended into a chaotic witch hunt, in which anyone who was not a poor peasant—including party officials—could be denounced as a "landlord" and purged. Local party structures were ripped apart. Estimates of the number of deaths range as high as 50,000, although most scholars place the figure between 5,000 and 15,000.

The brainchild of VCP general secretary Truong Chinh, a committed Maoist, the land reform undermined regime legitimacy, decimated the party organization (which lost nearly half its members), and triggered massive peasant resistance. In late 1956, a large-scale peasant uprising broke out in Nghe An, a heavily Catholic province, where churches were stripped of their property, leaving many unable to function. It took the army a month to restore order. Between 1,000 and 5,000 peasants were killed, and thousands of others were deported or sent to reeducation camps. The crisis led to Truong Chinh's removal as general secretary, and Ho was forced to publicly apologize and launch a rectification campaign. Nevertheless, the land reform achieved the VCP's goal of destroying the landowning class and eliminating potential sources of opposition.

The revolutionary government also radically restructured the economy. Inspired by China's Great Leap Forward, the VCP launched a radical socialist turn in 1958.129 Private firms were expropriated and most peasants were forced from private farms onto cooperatives.130 By 1965, private industry had been eliminated and the state controlled more than 90 percent of agriculture.131 Although the rapid transition to socialism imposed heavy costs on both peasants and capitalists, neither group had the capacity to put up much resistance.

The communists also dramatically transformed cultural life. Most religious associations, lineage halls, and spirit shrines were disbanded or placed under state control. State officials took over the officiating of weddings, funerals, and death anniversaries. Many traditional religious practices disappeared from public view. The regime also stripped the Catholic Church of most of its property, closed parochial schools, and expelled non-Vietnamese clergy. The crackdown generated some resistance, but by 1954 neither the Buddhists nor the Catholic Church had the capacity to mobilize much opposition.

The VCP's most radical initiative, however, was its pursuit of a revolutionary war in the south. The VCP had expected the regime in the south to collapse quickly. When it did not, a faction led by Le Duan pushed the party to support revolutionary efforts to overthrow it. Through 1957, North Vietnam was restrained by the Soviet Union, which was committed to peaceful coexistence with the West. VCP leaders criticized the Soviet position,however, and in January 1959, the party decided to launch a guerrilla war in the south, resulting in the creation of the NLF. The initiative was extraordinarily bold, because it was opposed by the United States, the Soviet Union, and China.

COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY REACTION: THE AMERICAN WAR

The NLF's early success—by 1962, it controlled roughly half of South Vietnam—ushered in a mounting U.S. military presence. The U.S.-led counterinsurgency made it clear that promoting revolution in the south could bring a costly war against the world's leading military power. Nevertheless, Le Duan and his allies advanced a "go for broke" strategy aimed at creating a "bigger war." They did so in the belief that Western capitalism and imperialism were in decline, and that Vietnam could accelerate that decline. Several party leaders, including General Giap, resisted Le Duan's strategy in favor of a "North First" approach aimed at consolidating the revolution at home. However, Le Duan pursued the "go for broke" strategy with "dogged persistence."

The "go for broke" strategy provoked a massive U.S. intervention. The Americanization of the war—the number of U.S. troops increased from 16,000 in 1963 to more than 500,000 in 1967—blunted the NLF advance, resulting in a costly stalemate. A massive U.S. aerial bombing campaign killed more than 50,000 people, forced an evacuation of major cities, and destroyed much of North Vietnam's industry, dramatically setting back development.

Despite these costs, however, the VCP maintained the "go for broke" strategy. In January 1968, it launched the Tet Offensive, a "risky strategy with little chance of success." The offensive, which aimed to seize major cities across South Vietnam, was a military failure. North Vietnamese forces suffered 40,000 deaths, and the NLF was decimated. Nevertheless, the offensive demoralized the United States, ultimately contributing to its decision to pull out of Vietnam.

Following a third "go for broke" offensive (the Spring Offensive) in 1972, Vietnam and the United States negotiated the Paris Peace Accords. South Vietnamese forces weakened dramatically following the U.S exit, shifting the tide dramatically in the communists' favor. In early 1975, the South Vietnamese army disintegrated amid a final Spring Offensive, and in April

1975, it dissolved, as soldiers dropped their weapons, shed their uniforms, and fled. The South Vietnamese state collapsed, opening the door for a rapid communist-led reunification in 1976.

PARTY- AND STATE-BUILDING

The American war was extraordinarily costly for Vietnam. More than a million North Vietnamese were killed,160 and much of the country's industry and infrastructure was destroyed.

Yet the war also strengthened the regime in important ways. For one, it reinforced elite cohesion. The party remained on "war footing" for more than three decades. The external threat generated a siege mentality and a strong sense of discipline, which compelled internal critics to close ranks rather than defect. Thus, even though the VCP was "wracked with dissention" over the 1964 Sino-Soviet split (with some leaders seeking to abandon the USSR for China) and the war in the south (Le Duan's "go for broke" strategy versus Giap's "North First" approach), it suffered no schisms. Party leaders fell "quickly into line" once decisions were made, and those who lost out in power struggles, including powerful figures like General Giap, remained in the leadership. Likewise, the death of founding leader Ho Chi Minh in 1969 did not trigger internal conflict or defection. Unlike postcolonial Algeria (see below), then, the VCP leadership remained remarkably stable. There were no schisms or high-level defections between 1954 and 1975. Indeed, save for two deaths, the entire thirteen-member Politburo of 1960—and nearly the entire 1951 Central Committee—remained intact in 1975.

The war also facilitated state-building. When the VCP took power in 1954, the colonial state was disintegrating. State capacity increased dramatically over the next two decades. Tax capacity increased significantly, as did the state's capacity to penetrate, mobilize, and control society. During the 1950s and 1960s, the VCP institutionalized mass conscription, carried out large-scale population transfers, developed a national system of household registration, equipped the population with identification cards, and implemented an effective rationing system.

Three decades of war also gave rise to a powerful "garrison state." Facing the threat of U.S. invasion, the government armed and trained village militias across the country, creating "combat villages." The PAVN grew from 250,000 troops in 1965 to 650,000 in 1975, as the entire population of young men was mobilized for war. By the late 1960s, North Vietnam was spending a greater share of its GDP on the military (25 percent) than any other state in the world. Army effectiveness also increased. The PAVN emerged from the war "numerically formidable and battle-hardened."

The war also strengthened the internal security apparatus. The public security agency (Cong an) developed a vast network of agents and informers that penetrated "every corner of society."181 These included neighborhood "block captains," factory-level "vigilance committees," and "hardcore" citizens in rural hamlets who served as "eyes and ears" for the government.

The war also reinforced military cohesion and loyalty. Decades of existential threat generated a bunker mentality that muted dissent within the army's ranks. Thus, although Giap and other generals opposed the strategy of ramping up the war in the south, they fell in line after Ho announced the party's decision. And although the mounting costs of war fueled public discontent in the late 1960s and early 1970s, triggering fears of possible military unrest, there were no hints of rebellion in the armed forces. Indeed, studies carried out by the Rand Corporation during this period concluded that PAVN morale remained high.

Finally, the war accelerated the destruction of independent power centers. In the north, as noted above, the associational landscape was already barren before the war. In South Vietnam, where pluralism was initially greater, two developments undermined independent power centers. First, the Ngo Dinh Diem government attacked and weakened the sects, the most powerful anticommunist organizations in the south. Second, the war weakened South Vietnam's rural elite. Land reform—first by Diem and later by NLF guerrillas—drove most large landowners out of the country, and NLF assassinations of as many as 20,000 local officials wiped out an entire class of village notables. By the time the VCP gained control of South Vietnam, then, centers of societal opposition were weak.

The Party-State Complex

By unification in 1976, then, three decades of war had produced the regime legacies predicted by our theory: a powerful and cohesive party-state complex and the destruction of independent centers of societal power.

First, unified Vietnam was governed by a strong ruling party. The VCP emerged from the war with a powerful grassroots organization. Party membership tripled, from 500,000 in 1954 to more than 1.5 million in 1976.193 The number of party cells also tripled, and by the 1980s the VCP had 40,000 branches operating in every corner of the country. The party was "ubiquitous, its cadres and members found everywhere."

The VCP was also cohesive. Its leadership was still dominated by the generation of revolutionaries who created the party in the 1930s and led the liberation struggle against France. This founding generation was characterized by a high degree of cohesion. One scholar described it as a "cult of solidarity." The wars against France and the United States gave rise to an enduring "siege mentality,"which discouraged defection even in the face of intense power struggles and policy disagreements.

Second, the regime had a powerful coercive apparatus. Vietnam emerged from the revolutionary wars with a "military machine … of monstrous size." With more than a million regular soldiers and another 1.6 million paramilitary and regional force troops, the Vietnamese armed forces were the third largest in the world in the 1980s.

The regime also boasted a vast internal security apparatus. Vietnam became a police state. The Cong an emerged from the war as a highly effective instrument of control, with a vast capacity for low-intensity coercion. With as many as one million agents, many of whom had extensive wartime experience, the security services penetrated Vietnam "down to the smallest alley." Informants operated in workplaces, classrooms, and neighborhoods. Every neighborhood was overseen by a state or party "warden," who met regularly with each family. Agents kept tabs on every active dissident in the country, monitoring mail, phones, and later email.

The security forces were remarkably cohesive. The PAVN was led by revolutionary veterans "whose loyalty was never suspect." Nearly all top military officers were lifelong party cadres and members of the party's Central Committee. This fusion of party and army helped to coup-proof the regime. Because military commanders were proven revolutionaries and active party leaders, the party "had little need to worry about the loyalties of the military leadership."

Third, the VCP faced a barren associational landscape after 1975. The landowning class was extinct in the north and nearly so in the south. Industrial and commercial interests in the south were weakened by emigration and quickly succumbed to nationalization. Old regime elements attempted armed resistance but failed to establish a foothold and were quickly reduced to the status of “émigré opposition,” seeking to orchestrate uprisings from abroad. Religious organizations were also weak. Buddhist organizations, which had long been politically feeble, were easily subordinated. The Catholic Church remained staunchly anticommunist, but due to Catholicism’s minority status, it could not serve as a mobilizing structure for a broad opposition movement. Indeed, the Church put up little resistance after unification, limiting itself to spiritual activities. The sects, which had been weakened by the Diem government, were quickly shackled.

In the aftermath of unification, then, there existed few autonomous organizations or institutions that could serve as bases for opposition mobilization.222 As a result, Vietnamese society was marked by “remarkable placidity” for decades.223

Regime Durability, 1975–2020

The Vietnamese regime proved extraordinarily durable after 1975. Despite a series of crises and periods of widespread public discontent, there were virtually no ruling party defections and no military rebellions. Moreover, despite a loosening of totalitarian controls and more than three decades of economic opening, persistent state-society power asymmetries limited anti-regime mobilization, confining opposition groups primarily to the internet.

THE POSTUNIFICATION CRISIS

Vietnam fell into severe economic crisis soon after unification. Overoptimistic after its military victory in 1975, the VCP initiated a radical transformation in the south. For example, it launched an ambitious effort to transform South Vietnamese culture and create a “new man.” The school system was shut down until teachers could be reeducated, and “cultural army units” were set up in each neighborhood to wipe out “neocolonial culture.” At least 300,000 people were sent to reeducation camps, and hundreds of thousands of others were relocated or arrested.

The VCP also attempted a rapid transition to socialism.In 1978, the government abolished private commerce, nationalized all industry, and began to force peasants into cooperatives. Between 30,000 and 50,000 businesses—many of them Chinese owned—were confiscated. The government also attempted to relocate more than a million southerners to New Economic Zones, mostly in the countryside, where they would work in state enterprises and cooperatives. The results were disastrous. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Chinese fled the country, badly disrupting the economy. The New Economic Zones and the agricultural cooperatives were failures. Production collapsed, plunging Vietnam into an unprecedented economic crisis. Public discontent soared, throwing the regime’s survival into question.

The crisis was exacerbated by renewed military conflict. Vietnam plunged back into war soon after reunification. Facing mounting aggression by the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge, Vietnam sent 180,000 into Cambodia in December 1978, beginning an eleven-year occupation. Described by one scholar as “Hanoi’s Vietnam,” the war took 25,000–50,000 Vietnamese lives and further undermined the country’s crisis-ridden economy.

The invasion of Cambodia triggered a brief war with China. Sino-Vietnamese relations had deteriorated rapidly after 1975, as China, concerned about the power of a unified Vietnam, withdrew its long-standing support, pushing Vietnam firmly into the Soviet orbit. Seeking to “teach Vietnam a lesson” after the Cambodia invasion, China sent 100,000 troops across the border in February 1979, advancing forty miles into Vietnam (and carrying out a massive bombing raid) before pulling back. Although the PAVN successfully resisted the incursion, Vietnam suffered as many as 50,000 casualties and widespread destruction along the border.

The crises of the late 1970s and early 1980s posed a serious threat to the VCP. Indeed, both the U.S. and Chinese governments expected the regime to collapse. It did not. Although this outcome can be explained, in part, by massive Soviet assistance, three revolutionary legacies of revolution were arguably critical to regime survival. First, party leaders remained united. The regime suffered only one significant defection: pro-China Politburo member Hoang Van Hoan, who was removed from the leadership and later fled to China. Second, military loyalty and discipline remained intact. Despite considerable rank-and-file hardship, low pay, and plummeting morale in Cambodia, the PAVN experienced virtually no open dissent or insubordination in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Third, widespread public discontent failed to generate organized opposition. Although there were small outbreaks of religious and ethnic protest in the south, they never posed a serious threat to the regime.

THE CRISIS OF COMMUNISM AND THE PASSING OF THE FOUNDING GENERATION

The Vietnamese regime confronted three fundamental challenges during the 1980s and early 1990s. One was generational. The death of longtime VCP general secretary Le Duan (in 1986) and Prime Minister Pham Hung (in 1988) marked the demise of the legendary "Dien Bien Phu generation," which had led the struggle against France and founded the revolutionary regime. The global collapse of communism posed another challenge. The demise of the Soviet Union, which provided more than a billion dollars a year in military and economic assistance (about 40 percent of the national budget) during the early 1980s, eliminated a vital source of external support.

The Soviet withdrawal and a mounting economic crisis convinced VCP leaders to abandon socialism for a market economy. Following a period of limited reform in the early 1980s, new party leader Nguyen Van Linh launched a far-reaching economic reform program (Doi Moi) in 1986. Central Central planning was eliminated, prices were freed, small-scale private enterprise and individual landholdings were permitted, and the economy was opened to foreign investment. By 1989, Vietnam could be described as a market economy.

Finally, the wave of democratization in Eastern Europe generated pressure for political reform. The regime had begun to liberalize in 1986, releasing many political prisoners, loosening media restrictions (permitting the spread of "unlicensed" newspapers); relaxing controls on religion, especially Buddhist spiritual activities; and permitting independent associations as long as they steered clear of politics and did not criticize the government. Beginning in 1989, however, the party faced unprecedented calls for democratization. Most prominently, Politburo member Tran Xuan Bach, a rising star who was viewed as a possible future party leader, praised the process of democratization in Eastern Europe and called for similar reforms in Vietnam. Bui Tin, a war hero and deputy editor of the party newspaper, also called for democratic reform.

Unwilling to abandon single-party rule, VCP leaders closed ranks in defense of the status quo. Tran Xuan Bach was removed from the Politburo, Bui Tin was expelled from the party and exiled, prominent democracy advocates were arrested, and the government cracked down on emerging independent media.

By any measure, the VCP succeeded in navigating the transformations of the 1980s and 1990s. The party suffered no schisms or defections, and although market reforms reportedly triggered opposition among army officials, there were no military rebellions.Finally, unlike Eastern Europe and even China, the VCP faced no significant pro-democracy mobilization in the 1980s and 1990s. The few dissident organizations that emerged, such as the Club of Former Resistance Fighters, a group of southern revolutionary veterans that tepidly pushed for political reform in the late 1980s, were easily silenced. Ultimately, then, the Third Wave of democratization hit Vietnam "without much force."

The regime survived for several reasons. First, the effects of generational change were mitigated by the fact that "second generation" leaders were also revolutionary war veterans, nearly all of whom had played prominent roles in the American war. A second factor contributing to regime stability was persistence of a vast state-society power asymmetry. The regime maintained an extensive apparatus with a high capacity for low-intensity coercion. Cong an agents continued to operate in every corner of the country, tracking, harassing, blacklisting, and occasionally arresting dissidents, which helped the government nip emerging protest movements in the bud. At the same time, society's capacity to mobilize remained low. Although there is evidence of broad public discontent in the 1980s, regime opponents lacked mobilizational structures. Unlike in Third Wave democratizers such as South Korea and Taiwan, no student protest movement or independent labor movement emerged, which limited dissidents' capacity to broaden their support bases. Opposition was thus confined to "isolated pockets" and never threatened the regime.

A third reason why the regime survived was economic growth. Vietnam's economy grew at an annual rate of 7 percent between 1985 and 1995.275 During the critical 1991–1995 period, when the Soviet Union collapsed and many of its client states fell into crisis, the economy expanded 8 percent a year.276 Rapid economic growth helped to dampen public discontent and generated resources that could be used to buy off potential regime critics.

THE REVOLUTIONARY REGIME IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The Vietnamese regime underwent a far-reaching transformation in the early twenty-first century. Beginning in the late 1990s, the VCP's second-generation leadership was replaced by younger, more technocratic figures who had not played a leading role in the revolutionary wars. By 2011, the country's leadership "troika"—Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, President Truong Tan Sang, and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung—were all too young to have fought in the liberation war or to have held leadership positions in the American war. Moreover, the middle ranks of the party and government were increasingly filled with Western-trained cadres who were born after the war. Likewise, in the army, revolutionary veterans were replaced by younger Vietnamese who lacked the same commitment to the party and the revolution.280 The final passing of the revolutionary generation was marked by the death of General Giap, aged 101, in 2013.

By the early twenty-first century, then, VCP leaders were no longer bound together by revolutionary struggle or an existential military threat. Instead, the VCP evolved into a more traditional ruling party machine, bound together by the spoils of office. Rent seeking replaced a siege mentality as the primary source of cohesion. This transformation left the regime more vulnerable to elite schisms and likely weakened its capacity for high-intensity coercion.

Nevertheless, the regime remained stable. Between 2012 and 2015, the party was ridden with factional conflict between Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and a more conservative faction led by VCP general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, which culminated in Dung's removal from power. Although several of Dung's allies lost their cabinet positions, his defeat did not trigger any ruling party defections.

Regime opposition remained weak. Notwithstanding a proliferation of civil society organizations,pro-democracy consistently failed to take hold. In 2006, a group of 118 dissidents—known as Bloc 8406—launched a campaign for civil liberties and democratic elections. By late 2006, the movement had 2,000 supporters and, modeling itself on Burma's opposition, worked with Buddhist groups to create the Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights. In 2007, however, the government cracked down, arresting dozens of Bloc 8406 members and intimidating others though home raids, firings, and blacklisting. Bloc 8406 was decimated and the Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights was "stillborn."

Other pro-democracy initiatives emerged in the 2010s, as rapidly expanding internet access opened new avenues for opposition activity.In 2013, a group of prominent ex-party officials, veterans, and intellectuals known as Group 72 organized an online petition—signed by 15,000 people—calling for the adoption of a Western-style constitution. However, pro-democracy activities were "confined to the digital space."Party leaders ignored the petition, and over the next few years, dozens of bloggers were arrested, deported, or subjected to attacks by government-sponsored thugs.

The regime's continued stability was rooted, in part, in economic growth. Vietnam's GDP grew at an average annual rate of nearly 7 percent between 2000 and 2018.295 The poverty rate, which had been 75 percent in the mid-1980s, fell to just 6 percent in 2014. As democratization in South Korea and Taiwan made clear, however, economic growth is no guarantee of regime survival. In Vietnam, persistent state-society power asymmetries continued to favor regime stability. Despite its upper-middle-income status, Vietnam had a weaker civil society than Burundi, Gambia, Tajikistan, and Yemen in the early twenty-first century. In the face of persistent low-intensity coercion, dissident groups remained small, "compartmentalized," and mostly confined to the internet, leaving regime opponents without the "unity, organization, or strength to challenge the party-state."

In sum, Vietnam's postcolonial regime was revolutionary. The VCP ascended to power via armed struggle, built its own army, and launched a series of radical initiatives—including support for revolution in South Vietnam—that plunged it into a costly war with the United States. Three decades of war gave rise to a powerful and cohesive party-state complex and destroyed all independent centers of social, economic, and cultural power. The result was a regime that has endured for nearly seventy years, despite a traumatic unification, the passing of the founding generation, and the global crisis of communism.