



Victor Mallet: Vietnam next to feel winds of change

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>Published: August 15 2005 20:05 | Last updated: August 15 2005 20:05

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Ho Chi Minh, father of communist Vietnam, cannot turn in his grave because his corpse is on show in a mausoleum in Hanoi. Still, it is easy to imagine Ho shifting uneasily in his glass sarcophagus at the thought of Phan Van Khai, the current prime minister, ringing the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange.

Mr Khai performed this symbolic act of free-market capitalism a few weeks ago, two days after meeting President George W. Bush during the highest-level Vietnamese visit to the US since the end of the Vietnam war.

Ho died in 1969, but for two decades after his passing Vietnam remained a desperately old-fashioned communist state. My 1993 edition of the Vietnamese-English handbook for government translators is packed with quaint phrases: “Combine patriotism with proletarian internationalism”; “Carry out this line unswervingly”; and the over-optimistic “The socialist system has tipped the world balance of forces in its favour”.

Vietnamese society today would be unrecognisable to the solemn authors of a phrasebook that carefully distinguishes “Kantianism” from “neo-Kantianism” for the benefit of foreign visitors.

Bars, restaurants, ice-cream parlours, cars and motorcycles have proliferated in the previously empty avenues of Hanoi. Half the population of 83m is under 30 years old and has no direct memory of the war. When VinaGame launched the country’s first multi-player internet game, a beta version of China’s Swordsman Online, the company’s financiers were astonished to find that up to 50,000 users were playing at one time. Vietnam already boasts 10 golf courses, and 20 more are planned.

With a population larger than any country in western Europe, Vietnam is tiptoeing up the economic ladder from the poverty and hunger of the 1980s towards a 21st-century vision of itself as an industrial and agricultural exporter, a provider of information technology services and a destination for tourists. It wants to join the World Trade Organisation in order to sustain economic growth of 7 per cent a year and discreetly regain its vigour without offending the US or China.

These are laudable ambitions. Vietnam’s modernisation, however, must involve deep political as

well as economic reform if it is to succeed.

The Communist Party of Vietnam toyed cautiously with political reform in the early 1990s, when it allowed members to discuss the demise of communist ideology and the possibility that the CPV would eventually convert itself into a nationalist and “soft authoritarian” ruling party. Party leaders, unnerved by the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis and unrest in central Vietnam, put a stop to the debate a few years later.

Now reform is back on the agenda for next year’s 10th party congress. The government is not unpopular, but – as in China – rampant corruption and disputes over land provoke sporadic protests. Communist leaders speak of enhancing local democracy, building an “open society” and giving more authority to the National Assembly, whose members can already question ministers in televised debates.

As Vu Khoan, deputy prime minister, explained in an interview in Hanoi, today’s economies need to be legally regulated rather than directed by decree. “A market economy requires a lot of regulations and laws to govern it,” he said. “We need the elected bodies to make the laws.”

Much of the reform rhetoric should be taken with a hefty pinch of salt. Vietnam still jails its dissidents and controls the media. The National Assembly meets only twice a year and remains under the thumb of the party. Diplomats say the goal is not democracy but “one-party pluralism”.

A little liberalisation is nevertheless better than none. The Vietnamese realise that the old ideology has run out of road. Ho Chi Minh, furthermore, was a lot more pragmatic than his communist heirs have been inclined to admit.

When he declared Vietnamese independence in 1945, Ho pointedly borrowed the passage on “unalienable rights”, among them “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” from the 1776 US declaration. Perhaps he would not have minded Mr Khai’s ringing of the New York Stock Exchange bell after all.

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