

The New York Times

June 6, 2013

Vietnam's Angry Feet

By TUONG LAI

HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam — LAST month, Vietnamese courts imposed heavy sentences on two patriotic students in their early 20s who had been charged with “speaking ill of China.” These charges touched the most sensitive nerve in the nation’s psyche — our patriotism and spirit of nationalism — and publicly exposed the government’s shady collusion with foreign aggressors.

Vietnam’s greatest tragedy is that the illusion of a common socialist ideology has been used by the Vietnamese government as an excuse to allow Chinese expansionism to run rampant and to stifle democracy, censor and suppress information, and psychologically terrorize its citizens. Earlier this week, the police in Hanoi broke up an anti-China demonstration and sent the organizers to jail.

We Vietnamese are rightfully proud of building and defending our nation for thousands of years despite its perilous position, bordering a gigantic neighbor that has never abandoned its expansionist dream of devouring Vietnam. We endured 1,000 years of Chinese occupation. During that long and painful night, China constantly sought to assimilate the Vietnamese people. But they failed.

Vietnam fought off the Mongols in the 13th century and defeated other foreign aggressors during the 15th, 18th and 20th centuries. Our character was forged by these ferocious struggles. Yet today, in defiance of international law and trampling on principle and morality, China’s territorial claim stretches into the South China Sea like an ox tongue trying to swallow up waters that hold in their depths a vast reserve of petroleum to feed an energy-hungry economy that dreams of attaining superpower status. It is also a vital maritime artery that would enable China to achieve its ambitions.

In response to China’s actions, so-called angry feet have pounded Vietnam’s streets in demonstrations that have united intellectuals and urban youth. They have been joined by farmers, who have been forced into lives of poverty because the government, under the banner of people’s ownership, has expropriated their fields

without providing adequate compensation. Meanwhile, Internet communications networks have sprung up like mushrooms after a heavy rainstorm, displaying a spirit of patriotism that ignores all repression.

The people's anger is rising at a time when Vietnam's leaders are showing themselves to be timid and weak. And factional fighting has been fierce and getting nastier between an anti-Chinese camp and the more doctrinaire old guard.

The "socialist-directed market economy" that Vietnam's leaders now talk about is vague and unclear. They are trying to cling to a political system that is outdated. If it hadn't been for the market reforms of the 1980s, centralized planning would have driven Vietnam's economy to the brink of collapse. However, those economic reforms stalled because there was no accompanying political reform. Our leaders never built a state that was governed by the rule of law and enjoyed a genuine civil society.

In the wake of its victory over the United States in the 1970s, Vietnam gained the sympathy, respect and admiration of peace-loving people around the world. But because our leaders insisted on maintaining a moribund political system and a dogmatic ideology, Vietnam's economic fortunes declined and our government became the target of international criticism for its repression of democracy and violations of human rights.

Vietnamese leaders became overly subservient to China, falling out of the orbit of democracy and far behind the rest of the world, a world into which Vietnam now desperately needs to integrate itself so that it can grow and develop.

China's leaders long ago discarded socialism for an unbridled right-wing capitalist system that nourishes the expansionist dreams that their forefathers never abandoned. And Vietnam's leaders are using the smoke screen of shared socialist ideology to protect their own hold on power. Their hypocritical words about being friendly neighbors are a farce.

To protect a small political elite and vested interest groups, our leaders have turned their backs on the people. A number of intellectuals, including me, have put forward a series of petitions to enshrine human rights protections in the Constitution and make it genuinely democratic. Yet our proposals have been met only with insults and slanders in government-controlled newspapers.

Our leaders must recognize that the confluence of patriotic opposition to foreign aggression and demands for democracy and human rights will lead to dramatic and unpredictable changes. The more the Vietnamese government employs violence and repression, the more it reveals its own inhumanity.

A leader who has a firm understanding of this new situation, rapidly responds to the people's will and places the national interest above all else will receive popular support as well as the sympathy of Vietnam's friends abroad.

If, however, in their effort to hang on to their crumbling thrones, our leaders turn their backs on the people, if they hide behind the tenets of an outdated ideology, if they stubbornly cling to an obsolete model of anti-democratic governance and lead our nation into a blind alley from which there is no escape, their demise will be inevitable.

Tuong Lai, a sociologist also known as Nguyen Phuoc Tuong, was an adviser to two Vietnamese prime ministers from 1991 to 2006. This essay was translated by The New York Times from the Vietnamese.