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Communist Vietnam Lunges for Capitalism's Brass Ring

By [SETH MYDANS](#)

HANOI, [Vietnam](#), April 26 — It was Lenin's birthday. The most important Communist Party meeting in five years was under way. And the star of the show was the world's most famous capitalist, [Bill Gates](#).

The president, the prime minister and the deputy prime minister all excused themselves from the party meeting on Saturday to have their pictures taken with Mr. Gates, who has more star power in Vietnam than any of them.

When people heard he was in town, hundreds climbed trees and pushed through police lines to get a glimpse of him. He was the subject of the lead article in the next day's newspapers.

This is where Vietnam stands today, moving cautiously toward a new version of communism while the people and their leaders lunge eagerly for the brass ring of capitalist development.

"That was very symbolic," said Le Dang Doanh, an official in the Ministry of Planning, speaking of the reception for Mr. Gates. "It is a very clear sign of the new mood of society and the people. Everybody wants to be like Bill Gates."

It is 20 years since Vietnam, still struggling in the aftermath of war, began a sort of perestroika that has moved it from a strict planned economy to the more helter-skelter mechanisms of the marketplace. In the past decade, it has been putting its economic house in order — with a bid to join the [World Trade Organization](#) this year. And it is now drawing new interest from foreign investors.

"You'll find tremendous enthusiasm among the foreign community for Vietnam as the next rising star," said Jonathan Pincus, the country representative for the United Nations Development Program.

He said this was partly because major companies like Microsoft as well as Intel, Canon and Fujitsu were leading the way, and partly because Vietnam was seen as a stable hedge for companies that had invested heavily in [China](#).

Since a moment of investor enthusiasm faded a decade ago, he said, Vietnam has improved its legal infrastructure, banking system and regulations, making it a safer and more reliable business environment.

It has entered into so many agreements with other countries, including the United States, that demand internationally accepted business practices that its economic changes now appear irreversible.

"In just about every sector you can think of, there's been an ongoing process of reform," Mr. Pincus said.

The Communist Party Congress that ended Wednesday after re-electing the party's general secretary, Nong Duc Manh, 56, was no longer dominated by the ideological debates of the past but by a drive to become, in Mr. Gates's words, the next Asian economic miracle.

The party's plan for the next five years aims to increase exports, combat corruption and continue its economic integration with the outside world with a goal of maintaining a growth rate of around 8 percent and creating eight million jobs.

It is seeking to move into a higher level of manufacturing, including electronics.

As Vietnam's leaders balance what they call "a market economy with socialist orientation," they are also reshaping the party's relationship with an increasingly materialistic public.

About half the population of 83 million was born after the war with the United States ended 31 years ago. Vietnam is very much looking toward the future, not the past.

Reaching out in an unprecedented way, the party published its draft documents for public discussion early this year and received, by Mr. Manh's count, tens of thousands of comments, suggestions and criticisms from the public.

It is not clear whether any of these affected the final report, but publishing the documents was at least a gesture of inclusion in the closed workings of the government.

Significantly, most of the comments involved ways to improve the party's leadership, rather than challenging its primacy or demanding a multiparty system, said Carlyle Thayer, a specialist on Vietnam at the Australian Defense Force Academy in Canberra.

When people here say they want more democracy, several analysts said, they are not for the most part calling for political pluralism but for a more open and responsive Communist Party leadership.

In another response to public opinion, Mr. Manh and other leaders also emphasized combating corruption, a result of news media coverage of a scandal that forced the resignation of the minister of transport recently.

And in a sign that the party is distancing itself from its orthodox past, this is the first party congress since the meetings began in 1951 not to invite delegations from foreign Communist Parties, Mr. Thayer said.

As recently as 2000, the party's general secretary, then Le Ka Phieu, told [Bill Clinton](#) that socialism was only in temporary decline and remained the wave of the future. Those words sound odd in today's context.

When officials talk of socialism today they are more likely to be referring to a downside of economic free play, a widening gap between the very poor, who make up 20 percent of the population, and the toweringly rich, who are growing richer. That social divide has for years been a major concern of the party.

Vietnam's leaders are known for caution, and as they seek to get communism right, where it failed elsewhere in the world, they hope to get capitalism right as well.

This mixture of the two systems can produce paradoxical results. A large chunk of Vietnam's foreign exchange earnings comes from \$6 billion sent home each year by Vietnamese overseas. Most of these are refugees who fled the victory of the Communists in 1975.

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