The Lessons of Le Kha Phieu: Changing Rules in Vietnamese Politics

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At the Vietnam Communist Party's Ninth Congress, General Secretary Le Kha Phieu was voted out of office, heralding an end to the era of the strongman in Vietnamese politics. Phieu made many mistakes, including being politically corrupt, campaigning openly, abusing power, and equivocating on important economic decisions. However, these alone were not enough to unseat him. Phieu's downfall must be explained by systemic changes in the Vietnamese political system, including his status as a compromise candidate with no broad base of support, and the growth of political power of provincial leaders. This article concludes by analysing newly elected leader Nong Duc Manh's ascension to office and finds that he displays none of the personal liabilities that wounded Phieu, and has taken advantage of the changed political environment to give himself a broad base of support and a mandate to lead.

Introduction

In the run-up to the Vietnam Communist Party's (VCP) Ninth Congress, in April 2001, General Secretary Le Kha Phieu lost in his bid to be either re-elected for a full five-year term or, alternatively, be elected to serve out a five-year term and resign at a mid-term congress in 2003. The Central Committee's rejection of Phieu says a lot about the evolution of the Vietnamese political system.

In February 2001, with the economy stagnant, Phieu was under fierce attack. Following the conclusion of the first session of the Eleventh Plenum in February, press reports stated that Phieu was “99
percent likely to lose his job. A key decision by the Central Committee that no one over the age of 65 would be re-elected at the Congress in order to rejuvenate the leadership seemed to confirm that the 67-year-old Phieu was to be replaced. Yet, Phieu launched a furious counter-attack and soon thereafter, exceptions for the mandatory retirement age were being made for “key cadres.” Capitalizing on the wave of violent demonstrations by ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands in February 2001, the General Secretary was able to convince the leadership that with such serious political unrest, the country was not ready for a leadership change. Playing on the leadership’s overarching concern for stability, by the end of the second session of the Eleventh Plenum, it seemed that Phieu’s job was secure and that he would finish a face-saving full five-year term. In mid-April, two-thirds of the Politburo voted to re-elect Phieu to serve until a midterm congress in 2003, but at the Twelfth Plenum on 17 April, the full Central Committee overturned the Politburo’s decision (in itself a rare event) and voted to oust him.

What did Le Kha Phieu do wrong? Why did he not get re-elected to either a full five-year term, or even a face-saving completion of his five-year term? Is the era of the strongman at an end? Clearly, Phieu had made many mistakes. Years ago, leaders were not punished for poor performance or failed policies, nor were they reprimanded for abusing power. Senior leaders were autonomous and nearly immune from both public and intra-party scrutiny; this is no longer the case. In Phieu’s case, however, it was not just self-inflicted wounds that ended his career. We have to look for changes within the Vietnamese political system itself. This is not a static system and the rules have changed.

This article will begin with an analysis of some of the systemic factors that played a role in Phieu’s downfall, including his inherent political weaknesses, the growth of provincial power, and economic recession, before addressing Phieu’s own mistakes, such as abuse of power, political corruption, and wanton ambition.

Systemic Factors

A Compromise Candidate in a Changing Political Environment
Le Kha Phieu was weak from the start. He began his tenure as General Secretary at mid-term after a protracted leadership dispute, and he was clearly selected through default. He had no broad base of support, but was rather a compromise candidate. He was elected amidst political gridlock and a fierce power struggle that was crippling the Vietnamese leadership. Although the stalemate was partly based on ideology, much was the fault of a Vietnamese political system that strives to artificially
create a balance in the system and inherently has a degree of gridlock built into it.

Even before the Eighth Congress, in June 1996, the leadership was mired in a political stalemate. None of the ruling troika, General Secretary Do Muoi, President Le Duc Anh, and Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet was willing to voluntarily retire without concurrent moves by the other two. Doing so would have left their less politically skilled protégés weak and vulnerable. Thus, the ruling troika remained in place until the fall of 1998, when President Le Duc Anh and Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet stepped down. General Secretary Do Muoi retired at the Fourth Plenum in December 1997, under intense pressure from the Central Committee who saw him as too ideological and dogmatic to resolve the country’s economic crisis.

Le Kha Phieu was elected as Muoi’s successor, but he was clearly a compromise candidate as the “political gene pool” in Vietnam is very shallow. Successors to Kiet and Anh were easily found and appointed. For the post of General Secretary, however, there were few “eligible” candidates. If one analyses the eighteen-man roster of the Politburo elected at the mid-term Congress in December 1997, this is evident:

- **Le Kha Phieu**: Head of the Vietnamese People’s Army (VPA) General Political Department and member of the Politburo Standing Board. One of two leading candidates for the post of General Secretary.
- **Tran Duc Luong**: Was just elected President at the National Assembly session in September 1997; also a member of the Politburo Standing Board.
- **Phan Van Khai**: Was just elected Prime Minister at the National Assembly session in September 1997; also a member of the Politburo Standing Board.
- **Nong Duc Manh**: Was effectively doing the job as head of the National Assembly; but he belongs to an ethnic minority, and is not an ethnic Vietnamese, which is seen as a liability.
- **Pham Van Tra**: Just assumed the position of Minister of Defence, and was the senior VPA official on the Politburo after Doan Khue’s death.
- **Nguyen Manh Cam**: The Minister of Foreign Affairs was weakened politically after his failed bid for the presidency in 1997. He was seen as an uncharismatic figure and did not have a broad base of support.
- **Nguyen Duc Binh**: Though a very powerful figure as head of the top party school, he was seen as being too ideological, and too old for the position.
• **Nguyen Van An:** Though relatively new to the Politburo, he was the powerful head of the Central Committee’s Organization Department, and was one of the front-runners for the position of General Secretary.

• **Nguyen Thi Xuan My:** Had too little experience on the Politburo. As the first woman in the Politburo, her position there had more to do with tokenism than capability.

• **Truong Tan Sang:** He, too, was fairly new to the Politburo, though he was clearly being groomed for bigger things. An advocate of further economic reform, he is mistrusted by party conservatives.

• **Le Xuan Dung:** The Hanoi Party Chief was in ill-health and had been criticized for his handling of the economic downturn in Hanoi.

• **Le Minh Huong:** Was new to the Politburo and ensconced as the Minister of Interior.

• **Pham The Duyet:** Though a long-serving Politburo member, he was often rotated through positions and was not considered to be overly competent. He was at the time the only Politburo member without a portfolio. Though he clearly aspired to the post, he did not have the support needed to be elected General Secretary.

• **Nguyen Tan Dung:** The Deputy Prime Minister was also the Bank of Vietnam Governor, and was clearly being groomed for bigger things. He was young and did not have a lot of experience on the Politburo, though he was on the Politburo Standing Board.

• **Phan Thanh Ngan:** Elected to the Politburo at the Fourth Plenum.

• **Phan Dien:** Elected to the Politburo at the Fourth Plenum.

• **Nguyen Minh Triet:** Elected to the Politburo at the Fourth Plenum.

• **Nguyen Phu Trong:** Elected to the Politburo at the Fourth Plenum.

When one took into consideration their current posts, ideological position, rank, age, and experience on the Politburo, there was only a choice between Nguyen Van An and Le Kha Phieu for the post of General Secretary. In the end, Phieu was able to cobble together more support than An, who himself, was a relative newcomer to the Politburo. Phieu, who was very ambitious, and already running the day-to-day operations of the party in his capacity as the secretary of the Politburo Standing Board, was in a better position and certainly worked hard to win the support of the other members of the Politburo.
However, the Politburo remained clearly divided along factional lines. Le Kha Phieu attempted to straddle the fence, pleasing neither camp. Phieu was elected more or less by default, not because he had a large base of support or was able to cobble together a coalition of various factions. On the contrary, no faction was able to dominate the carefully and artificially crafted Politburo.

_A Broad-Base of Power_

Besides being elected by default, Phieu had another inherent weakness, which had more to do with the maturing of the Vietnamese political system. Without a broad base of power, Phieu entered office handicapped. The current generation of leaders, of which Phieu is one, are technocrats with neither broad-based experience nor the resulting patronage networks. Le Kha Phieu, like Prime Minister Phan Van Khai and President Tran Duc Luong, really did not have the authority (and more importantly the patronage networks running through the party, government, and military) that his predecessors possessed.

The Vietnamese political system is based on patron–client ties: the relationship between two or more individuals of unequal rank or stature. In return for support and protection, the client owes his patron unquestioned loyalty and support. Because General Secretary Do Muoi, President Le Duc Anh and Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet came to power during the war years, they all wore a combination of party, military, and government hats. The party-military-government elite at that time was really an elite. There were ideological and strategic differences and personal rivalries to be sure, but it was a small group, who went through a formative period together. And they all had very broad experience. The current leadership, the fourth generation, came of political age during a period of stagnation when their predecessors refused to give up power — most importantly their patronage networks — the _nomenklatura_. They were brought up through the ranks because they were “clients” who never had enough authority or opportunity to really be “patrons” in their own right. What gave Le Duc Anh authority and power as president was not his positional power, in Putnam’s terms, but his decisional power. As a senior general and former Minister of Defence, he had vast patronage networks throughout the military. Though constitutionally as powerful as his predecessor, the current President, Tran Duc Luong, has little power over the military that he technically commands because he does not control any of the patronage networks throughout the armed forces. He has never promoted protégés or done anything to ensure unwavering loyalty to him.

Likewise, Phieu had no such base of power. Born in 1932 in Thanh Hoa province, Phieu joined the Communist Party in 1949, and became a
political officer in the Vietnam People's Army. He served in both the anti-French and anti-American wars, and later as the deputy political commissar of several military regions before becoming the chief political commissar and deputy commander of Vietnam's forces in Cambodia in the mid-1980s. His military career culminated in 1991 when he became head of the VPA's General Political Department, the top communist party official in the military. Lt. Gen. Le Kha Phieu joined the VCP's Central Committee at the Third Plenum in June 1992, and his promotion through the party hierarchy was swift. He became a member of the Central Committee's Secretariat in 1992 and the Politburo in January 1994. He was briefly in charge of internal party security, the only position that put him in a broader political context. At the VCP's Eighth Congress in June 1996, he was elected to the Politburo's Standing Committee, a five-person board that dealt with the day-to-day running of the country. He was elected VCP General Secretary at the Central Committee's Fourth Plenum, on 26 December 1997, a year and a half after the Eighth Party Congress.

Phieu, like his contemporaries, was brought up in "line" as a technocrat — that is, Phieu was just a military political commissar, nothing else. During his entire career, until the end, he was promoted so rapidly that he did not have time to consolidate his power. His predecessors' experience had been wide though not deep. They rotated through different positions across different branches of government, party, and the military during the war years. Do Muoi, for example, served as a labour leader, oversaw the socialization of the south, served in various economic ministries, as Prime Minister, and in various party positions. Nguyen Van Linh served on the Politburo, the Secretariat, as an underground leader in the south during the war, and as Ho Chi Minh City party chief. These long and varied careers introduced them to many people, and power in Vietnam is nothing but personal. The current leadership did not have such a broad experience and it shows. In short, the current top leadership does not have the leverage or personal pull over its colleagues.

Le Kha Phieu was a compromise candidate and came in without patronage or clear support. He was a weak leader who needed to broaden his core constituency beyond the military. Indeed, within the military, his influence was confined to the General Political Department, and it was long reported that he had poor relations with the leaders of the General Staff Department, such as Le Duc Anh and Doan Khue and the nine regional military commanders. Thus, he tried to appeal for the support of both reformers and conservatives. For fear of alienating one group, he tended to sit on the fence, weighing in at the last moment, and tried to build consensus between these disparate factions, endearing himself to neither.
Poor Performance

Traditionally, the Communist Party relied on its leadership during the long struggle for independence, its victories over the French, Americans, and Chinese, and its successful reunification of the country to legitimize its continued rule and monopoly on power. However, following years of economic malaise, triple-digit inflation, food shortages, resistance to collectivization in the countryside, and diplomatic isolation, the regime began to lose much of its legitimacy. The Party adopted an economic reform programme in 1986 known as doi moi that saw the decollectivization of agriculture, the adoption of a quasi-export-led growth strategy of development, the courting of foreign investment, and the breakdown of central planning. As a result of these fundamental reforms, the economy grew at an average annual rate of 8 per cent in the decade between 1986 to 1996. Though still a poor country — Vietnam’s per capita gross domestic product (GDP) remained under US$400 — the economy grew each year and, as a result, the population began to expect a certain rate of economic growth. People began to link the regime’s legitimacy to economic performance and, importantly, their own standard of living. Political legitimacy was no longer rooted in the national struggle, but in economic growth and poverty eradication.

On top of this, the regime is confronted with an increasingly youthful population: by 1999, more than half the population was under 30 years of age and hence had no recollection of the war or the party’s political leadership during that crucial period. With such a young population with greater exposure to the outside world and awareness of Vietnam’s relative socio-economic standing, the party’s constant attempts to justify its continued rule and hold on power, based on historical grounds, was increasingly untenable.

Yet during Le Kha Phieu’s tenure, the economy clearly worsened. A malaise took hold and doi moi, which had such wonderful results initially, petered out for both internal and external reasons. Externally, the Asian economic crisis had a devastating effect on the Vietnamese economy as Asian states accounted for 70 per cent of its foreign investment and absorbed 60 per cent of Vietnam’s exports, and the country’s competitiveness dissolved in the face of the region’s devalued currencies. Vietnam did not cope with the crisis well and responded in piecemeal fashion because of a political deadlock and fierce differences on how to proceed, with liberals promising reform while conservatives argued that Vietnam could weather the storm without changing. Indeed, the Central Committee’s Fifth Plenum, in July 1998, emphasized the mobilization of US$7 billion in domestic capital to supplant the fall in foreign investment. Conservatives within Vietnam’s leadership blamed the Asian economic crisis on capitalism, and believed that Vietnam’s lack of integration was a blessing. Reformers blamed the crisis on
“crony capitalism”, imperfect markets and too much government intervention. Since the Eighth Party Congress in 1996, the Politburo has been deadlocked and unable to implement any bold reforms to stimulate the economy.

Because of Hanoi’s unwillingness to reform, continued operating losses, and rampant corruption, foreign investors began to flee the country. Of the US$7.9 billion pledged in the peak year of 1996, only 33 per cent was actually disbursed. Foreign investment fell by 60 per cent in 1998, and in 1999, declined by another 64 per cent, to US$1.48 billion from US$4.06 billion in 1998.9 By all other measurable accounts, the Vietnamese economy was in poor shape.10 By October 1999, 60–70 per cent of foreign firms reported losses from their Vietnamese operations.11 The economy was growing too slowly to create jobs for the one million new entrants to the work-force each year, while unemployment, in double-digit figures, was a major problem. Exports declined and the dong became over-valued. The trade deficit was more than US$1 billion in 2000, 150 per cent higher than estimated. The banking sector was in crisis and 46 per cent of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were in the red, subsidized at huge public expense.12 Although the economy is currently growing at 4-5 per cent, it is only half the rate of the first half of the 1990s, and barely enough to keep pace with the country’s population growth.13 Unimpressed at the slow pace of reforms, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) held up some US$500 million in loans in 1999 and an additional US$700 million in 2000 until Hanoi agreed to adopt a “more comprehensive approach to reform”. The Prime Minister, Phan Van Khai, raised the alarm, but the Politburo, bitterly divided along factional and ideological lines, was unable to come to an agreement on the direction of the reform programme.14

There is no consensus on which steps to take: reformers understand that economic growth is contingent on exploiting Vietnam’s comparative advantage, joining the global market-place, courting foreign investment, and engaging in trade. Ideological conservatives, such as General Secretary Le Kha Phieu, see these as ways that the First World will continue to exploit Vietnam and keep it poor and underdeveloped. “When imperialism speeds up trade and services liberalization and the globalization of investments”, he warned, “the rich countries become richer and the gap between rich and poor countries widens”.15 Conservatives see economic interdependence as the West’s tool to undermine the VCP’s monopoly on power and reforms, such as privatization of state-owned assets, as a challenge to the authority of the state as well as its ideological underpinnings. Moreover, foreign competition will bankrupt many state-owned enterprises, causing massive unemployment and social unrest.16
The problem was that Phieu provided no leadership in resolving the country’s myriad economic woes, equivocating and weighing in at the last moment, and in the end, endearing himself to neither faction.

For example, in the midst of this debate and the continuing economic downturn, the Politburo rejected a draft bilateral trade agreement (BTA) with the United States that would have seen average U.S. tariffs on Vietnamese goods fall from 40 per cent to 3 per cent—a deal that the World Bank estimated to be worth US$800 million in exports to the United States in the first year of the agreement alone. While Phieu favoured the agreement, his leadership during the debate endeared him to no one. On the one hand, Phieu understood the importance of exports to the Vietnamese economy and the need to penetrate new markets, especially during the Asian economic crisis. Yet, he was more concerned about the market access and “national treatment” provisions of the BTA, which would give foreign firms the same rights and privileges, and end subsidies and protection to domestic firms. In the end, Phieu voted for the agreement, but only after ten months of fierce debates and concessions to interest groups, especially the military and the Ministry of the Interior. With the exception of the telecommunications sector, which received increased protection, the final agreement included many more concessions by the Vietnamese. Throughout the process, Phieu angered reformers by not forcing fellow conservatives to support the agreement, and for the further concessions that Vietnam had to make to conclude the agreement. He angered ideological conservatives, who saw the agreement as a threat to the state-owned sector.

Phieu also equivocated on the issue of SOE reform and privatization. Under Phieu, there was a minimal commitment to the privatization of SOEs. At the time of his appointment, Le Kha Phieu asserted that: “We understand that the way ahead is full of thorns so we have no choice other than continuing the acceleration of the doi moi course in a comprehensive and concerted way in the orientation to socialism if we want to bring our country further forward”. Though inefficient, the 6,000 SOEs are the cornerstone of the socialist economy, despite the fact that between one-third to one-half operate in the red. Many in the leadership, including Phieu, cannot fathom any policy that would limit subsidies to SOEs, or subject them to increased foreign competition because unemployment rates in Vietnam are already more than 10 per cent, and by April 1998, more than 8 per cent of the 1.8 million SOE employees had been laid off. In addition, at current population growth rates, Vietnam needs nearly one million new jobs per year. Some reform-minded leaders want to scrap the inefficient SOE system and free up the private sector. For example, former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, in a controversial October 1995 letter to the
Politburo, called for the “elimination of any form of business by state-sponsored civil organizations, the party, or armed forces”, and urged a greater economic role for private enterprise. Phan Van Khai, likewise, bluntly stated that, “We cannot continue the policy of using state budget and revenues to subsidize loss-making enterprise [sic], it is causing a big burden”.21 Conservatives believe that the collapse of the SOE system will lead to mass unemployment and political unrest. The SOE system is at the heart of the regime’s legitimacy and must be defended at all costs. Conservatives have focused their efforts on making the SOEs efficient, even profitable.

In sum, Phieu was unable to bridge the gap between the conservative and liberal positions and form a consensual policy. Phieu tended to sit on the fence, only weighing in at the last minute. He tried to be all things to all people. Yet, to the liberals, his unwillingness to reform the SOEs and his dogmatic ideological stance in the midst of economic doldrums branded him a conservative, while conservatives saw his support for the BTA as a rejection of core ideological values. In the context of a regime that has squandered so much of its legitimacy performance, Phieu’s lack of leadership and vision was unacceptable and, for this, provincial leaders who were forced to confront the realities of the economic downturn punished him at the Ninth Congress.

The Growth of Provincial Power

Being a one-party state, it was not the masses who rose up or voiced their displeasure at Phieu’s handling of the economy, and his fence-sitting, but rather the provincial party leaders. This was clearly seen at the Twelfth Plenum, in April 2001, when the full Central Committee voted to overturn the Politburo’s decision and unseat Phieu. This is the manifestation of a gradual change in Vietnamese politics: decentralization and the growth of provincial power vis-à-vis the centre.

When the country was reunified in 1976, it was very decentralized: there were some seventy provinces, the country was divided into war zones, and basic infrastructure was devastated, making co-ordination and policy implementation difficult. In 1976, there was an attempt to centralize. The number of administrative units (provinces and central-led municipalities) was reduced to thirty-eight. The party hoped that a smaller number of larger units would be easier for the centre to control and implement policy. Yet, the economy worsened and by 1986 was near collapse, bankrupted by the war in Cambodia, racked by triple-digit inflation, declining agricultural output, and chronic trade and budget deficits. Nguyen Van Linh and the new party leadership, elected
at the Eighth Party Congress in December 1986, apportioned much of the blame for the dismal state of the economy to over-centralization — too much bureaucracy, and not enough concern for regional variations and circumstances, and too much central planning. Linh then sought to decentralize power, for both economic reasons and political ones. As he confronted a recalcitrant bureaucracy that did not want to consider his reforms that would strip them of much of their allocative power, Linh began to appeal to provincial leaders and work outside the central VCP apparatus. Doi moi was a boon for the provinces. Although Linh did not “play to the provinces” to the extent that Deng Xiaoping did in China, he went to great efforts throughout 1986-87 to replace the central leadership with more reformist officials from the provinces, and then further won their support by divesting some central authority to the locales. Stern argues that “Linh’s appeal for a wider use of extra-party entities and his support for increased representation for local-level party bodies in setting the individual reformist agendas, were singularly unpopular with a central committee that was intent upon strengthening tried and true chains of command”.

Provincial power and autonomy grew substantially throughout the early 1990s, to a degree that alarmed the party, both reformers and conservatives. Between 1976 and 1990, there was only a net increase of two provinces. The forty provinces were very large and autonomous. Economic reform had made many of them less dependent on transfer payments from the centre. Indeed, many were so economically successful that they were now resisting paying taxes to the centre, that would be used to subsidize other provinces. The mid- to late-1990s saw a series of contests between the centre and the provinces that were increasingly unwilling to give up their newfound power. For example, then Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet confronted fierce resistance from the provinces when the central government attempted to gain control over provincial-level appointments and sackings. In the end, the centre could not wrest this authority away from the provinces and had to settle for a compromise two-term limit for provincial leaders.

This assertion of authority alarmed the leadership, who oversaw the breakdown of many provinces into smaller units. Between 1990 and 2000, there was a 52.5 per cent increase in the number of administrative units, from forty to sixty-one. With the economic slowdown at the end of the 1990s, provinces again began to assert themselves in an attempt to rekindle the economic reform programme and grow their economies.

Provinces not only had more clout because of their economic strength but they had political clout as well. Since doi moi was implemented, the composition of the Central Committee has shifted away from centre-level officials to provincial leaders (see Table 1), and the
result of this shift in the balance of power has been profound. As David Elliott has noted: "Expansion in the number of province party leaders in the face of retrenchment everywhere else is a confirmation of the fact that power in Vietnam is increasingly devolving into what used to be called in China 'independent kingdoms'."25 At the Fifth Party Congress in 1982, provincial officials had represented only 15.6 per cent of the Central Committee. With Nguyen Van Linh's election to the post of General Secretary, at the Sixth Congress in December 1986 there was a 50 per cent increase, to 23.7 per cent. At the Seventh Congress, in June 1991, the number of provincial delegates hit 52, or 35.6 per cent of the total. The provincial share of seats dropped slightly to 31.2 per cent at the Eighth Congress; but for the first time, regional officials, Truong Tan Sang and Le Xuan Tung, the party leaders of Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, respectively, were elected to the Politburo.26 The Central Committee, elected at the Ninth Congress, was dominated by provincial leaders. Currently, fifty-six of sixty-one provinces and municipalities are represented, and 41 per cent of the Central Committee members are secondary or provincial cadres.27

What this increase in the number of provincial delegates meant for Le Kha Phieu was considerable opposition to his tenure. There has always been a correlation between high percentages of provincial leaders in the Central Committee and economic reform and growth. It is the provincial leaders who feel the pinch when the economy slows. While the provinces lose foreign investment and export revenues, and not the central government, their transfer payments and revenue transfers to the central government do not necessarily change, thereby increasing their fiscal burden.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congress</th>
<th>No. of Provincial Officials in CC</th>
<th>No. of CC Members</th>
<th>Percentage of the Central Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5th (1982)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th (1986)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th (1991)</td>
<td>52 (47)</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>35.6% (32.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th (1996)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th (2001)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1
Provincial Representation in the Central Committee

Often, the provinces are frustrated with Hanoi and either ignore or circumvent official policy. For example, many southern officials feel that the more ideological north and its majority in the party leadership
holds the country back. Hanoi's ideological rigidity and social conservatism infuriate the more freewheeling capitalist south, which believes that politics has interfered greatly with economic development. In May 2000, so frustrated was Ho Chi Minh City over the red tape in Hanoi, which it felt was driving foreign investors out of the country, that it announced it would unilaterally approve foreign investments if the approval process in Hanoi took more than two weeks.24

How did all this affect Le Kha Phieu? Let us revisit what happened in the run-up to the Ninth Congress. As mentioned above, in January and February 2001, with the economy stagnant, he was under fierce attack, and the press reported that Phieu was "99 percent likely to lose his job". Yet, capitalizing on the wave of unrest in the Central Highlands, Phieu was able to play on the leadership's overarching concern for stability and convince it that the time was not ripe for a leadership change. Following the conclusion of the second session of the Eleventh Plenum, it looked like Phieu's job was secure, and in the days before the Twelfth Plenum, two-thirds of the Politburo voted to re-elect Phieu to serve until a mid-term congress in 2003. However, at the Twelfth Plenum, days before the Ninth Congress was to begin, the full Central Committee rejected the Politburo's decision and voted to oust him. Phieu could not even garner 50 per cent of the votes from the 170 Central Committee delegates. With 31 per cent of the Committee comprised of provincial leaders who were steadfastly against Phieu, it was easy to get an additional 20 per cent of the remaining members to vote against the General Secretary.

Clearly, the provincial leaders had felt the pinch from the 5–6 years of economic slowdown, were cognizant that the status quo would lead to a continued economic malaise, and that without a change in leadership there would be no policy innovations. Once quiescent and dutifully following the centre's line, provincial leaders were now far more assertive and willing to advocate on behalf of their constituencies.

There are two flaws in this analysis. First, most of the provincial leaders serving on the Eighth Central Committee themselves lost their seats at the Ninth Congress. There was a massive turnover in the provincial-level leadership. Nonetheless, the outgoing provincial leaders and their replacements did appear to push for a change in the national-level leadership. Secondly, it overstates the reformist nature of provincial leaders. One must be careful not to assume that all provincial leaders are reformist, as this type of analysis tends to do. Clearly, many provincial leaders have hesitated in implementing meaningful market reforms, and there are huge socio-economic gaps among the sixty-one provinces and administrative units. Yet, ideology aside, whether provincial leaders are reformist or more ideologically conservative, one
must understand that provincial leaders act in their provincial interests first, as they have to appeal to their constituency — their base of support.

**Self-Inflicted Wounds**

*Ambition*

Whereas there have been structural changes in the Vietnamese polity that go to understanding Phieu’s downfall, much of it can be explained in terms of self-inflicted wounds. These include corruption, and failures in foreign policy. However, no explanation is more important than Phieu’s ambition. Le Kha Phieu was an inordinately ambitious man. He actively campaigned for re-election to a degree that has never been seen in Vietnam. This in itself is not a bad thing, but how he tried to consolidate power really ran against the grain of the Vietnamese political system.

First, there were widespread reports that Phieu tried to consolidate his power even more by changing Communist Party statutes so that he could concurrently assume the position of President and party General Secretary. Both the General Secretaries of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the Chinese Communist Party, Jiang Zemin, did this so that they could assume a more high-profile international position. It seems that Phieu had similar intentions and by many press accounts, he was infuriated during an official visit to France in May 2000 when he was not treated as a head of state. There was another incident when a foreign diplomat was summoned to Phieu’s office and reprimanded for going to the Prime Minister to complain about deteriorating investment conditions. “It is me who makes decisions”, shouted Phieu. Again, though the General Secretary is *primus inter pares*, there is a tradition of collective leadership and power sharing in Vietnam.

There were reports that opponents to Phieu tried to thwart his ambition by proposing to abolish the post of President altogether, but this was seen as too disruptive, and quickly abandoned. Efforts were then made to thwart Phieu’s unpopular attempt to consolidate power. As the VCP has always prided itself on collective leadership, any attempt by one individual to overtly consolidate power is seen as “anti-democratic” behaviour and eschewed. As a spokesman for the Central Committee diplomatically explained, “In our experience we don’t want one cadre to take both responsibilities to avoid confusion between the leading function and the managerial function.”

The second mistake Phieu made in his efforts to shore up his power was his attempt to abolish the position of Advisors to the Central
Committee, which were occupied by the former General Secretary Do Muoi, the former President Le Duc Anh, and the former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet.

Tensions between the General Secretary and the senior statesmen who had appointed him were rife as they continued to intervene in key decisions. Do Muoi often weighed in on issues, notably during the Thai Binh peasant unrest in early 1998. Muoi was also an outspoken critic of the BTA, which he felt gave too much to the Americans and would leave Vietnamese firms vulnerable to competition by American companies. Le Duc Anh was not as vocal in his dealings with Phieu, but they traditionally shared poor relations going back to their days in Cambodia, when Phieu was the political commissar of Vietnamese troops, ostensibly the number two person behind Anh, though Anh and his protégé and chief-of-staff, Doan Khue, often clashed with Phieu. Vo Van Kiet was under fierce attack by ideological conservatives who circulated a seventeen-page unsigned and undated letter addressed to Le Kha Phieu, Do Muoi, and Le Duc Anh. The letter warned of factionalism and corruption, and lamented the party’s loss of credibility, reiterating fears of peaceful evolution and CIA-sponsored attempts to undermine the leadership of the country, and put all the blame for the country’s problems on the reformers. Yet Kiet remained a powerful figure and the patron of reformist leaders who were critical of Phieu.

For many reasons, Phieu wanted these positions abolished in order to give him a freer hand in policy-making. Did Phieu think that he could simply convince delegates to the Ninth Congress to eliminate the position?

Phieu’s mistake was not that he underestimated their continued influence and power, but that they could act in concert. Muoi, Anh and Kiet were never on the same ideological plane. However, clearly when the three decided that Phieu had to go, the General Secretary had no idea that all three would work concertedly to unseat him.

Ironically, once Phieu was unseated, the new General Secretary, Nong Duc Manh, made the abolition of the post one of his key conditions for accepting the position. Very clearly, Manh did not want party elders weighing in on policy issues, as had been the case with Phieu. Moreover, although Phieu fought to abolish the position, once it was clear that he was not going to be re-elected, he fought to be appointed “advisor”. Manh would have none of it and demanded that Phieu would have no such advisory role.

Regarding their influence behind the scenes before and during the Congress, Kiet was blunt: “We found that the proposed party Central Committee for this congress was even higher than for the last
congress, so we proposed that the average age of the Central Commit-
tee of the new congress must be younger or certainly no higher than
the last congress". Phieu of "failings in party and state management". "It is a
perfectly normal part of our work for one, two, or even all three
advisors to contact party members or write letters to the politburo,
that is normal", stated Kiet.

Phieu was guilty of naked political ambition. His overt campaign-
ing for the job did not sit well with many in the party, but when he tried
to further consolidate his power by concurrently serving as the state
President and by eliminating the power and influence of party elders
who often interfered and served as a check on Phieu, he angered many.
It was not simply his ambition that resulted in his sacking, but the
extent to which he sought to achieve his personal political goals.

Corruption
One of the leitmotifs of Le Kha Phieu’s tenure was anti-corruption and
party rejuvenation. Phieu was truly appalled by the degree of corrup-
tion within the country, and in particular within the Communist Party.
Phieu argued that such endemic corruption was the root cause of the
VCP’s loss of both legitimacy and the people’s faith in the party’s leader-
ship. As Huu Tho, the head of the Central Committee’s Ideology and
Culture Commission admitted: “The Party Central Committee showed
great interest in the deprivation in living styles of a part of our cadres
and party members”, as such practices “will be harmful to economic
development and will make us lose the trust [of] the people".35

Indeed, corruption is endemic in Vietnam, ranked by PERC as the
most corrupt country in Asia in 2000, with a score of 9.75 out of 10.
Corruption pervades almost every aspect of life in Vietnam. Recent VCP
reports stated that there was evidence of corruption in 43 per cent of the
party cells inspected; and in the past five years, 1 per cent of party mem-
bers had been disciplined. In 1999, the Ministry of Finance reported
that it was unable to account for USS6 billion, or nearly one-third, of all
state assets.36

At the Sixth Plenum in May 1999, Phieu launched a two-year
regeneration drive to purge the Communist Party of corrupt cadres and
reinvigorate the party with collective ideals. Soon after the campaign
began, in July 1999, the party had expelled 200 members and
disciplined 1,550. By November 1999, the courts had heard 526 cases of
graft involving 1,100 government officials and businessmen in the first
nine months of 1999 alone, while 1,500 local and provincial officials
were purged in the year after launching the anti-corruption drive in
May 1999. In March 2001, two provincial party chiefs were sacked, but
for the most part, very few senior level cadres were disciplined, the
majority being lower level party officials. Despite these high profile
campaigns and daily attacks on corruption in the official press, 
corruption continued unabated and public perceptions of the VCP 
continued to worsen, most people believing that the party was the 
leading culprit if not the root cause of corruption in society.

Phieu, personally, did have a very clean image. He was never publi-
cy identified with graft and by all accounts he lived a modest 
lifestyle. Unlike most leaders, there were also no corruption scandals or 
nepotism allegations involving his family. Many family members of 
leaders have been able to capitalize on their fathers’ positions for per-
sonal financial gain.

However, whereas Phieu had a clean reputation in terms of never 
using his position for personal financial gain, he was notorious for 
political corruption. He did this in two ways. First, he stacked the 
leadership with cadres from his native province of Thanh Hoa. Every 
time a leadership position became vacant, Phieu pressed for the 
appointment of someone from Thanh Hoa. For instance, when Minister 
of Foreign Affairs, Nguyen Manh Cam retired, most expected that his 
widely respected and very competent top aide, Deputy Foreign Minister 
Vu Khoan would succeed him, yet the aging Nguyen Dy Nien, a Thanh 
Hoa native, was appointed instead. Thanh Hoa natives were also 
promoted to the posts of Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and 
Deputy Minister of the Interior. However, there were limits to Phieu’s 
promotion of Thanh Hoa cronies. For example, while he could 
orchestrate Nien’s assumption as Foreign Minister, he could not get 
Nien elected to the Politburo, and the Foreign Ministry has been 
unrepresented in the Politburo since January 2000.

The second instance of political corruption, and one that Phieu was 
explicitly criticized for, was his use of a military intelligence unit to spy 
on his Politburo colleagues. Through wiretaps, Phieu was trying to find 
out how the members of the Politburo were going to vote and also to 
investigate their lifestyles. Though it is not clear what Phieu intended 
to do with such information, one can surmise that he wanted to use 
political pressure or launch smear campaigns on those who were going 
to vote against him. Phieu was explicitly reprimanded for using the se-
curity agencies for personal gain. As one of the advisors to the Central 
Committee, Vo Van Kiet, stated: “My comment is that it is definitely 
forbidden for anyone, not excluding anyone, to use the [intelligence] 
apparatus for private purposes. It is wrong, it is a mistake.” Kiet made 
it clear that: “Any person among our leadership detected committing 
such violations will receive opinions and be criticized immediately. It 
is forbidden to do that.”
As a result of the phone-tapping revelation, which Phieu never explicitly denied, two of Phieu’s closest allies in the military, Minister of Defence Pham Van Tra and Chief of the General Staff Department Le Van Dung received the highest reprimands the party can give, at the Eleventh Plenum’s second session, in the run up to the Ninth Congress. Citing “management shortcomings”, even Phieu supported the reprimands of his protégés. Both men were scapegoats for Phieu who had hoped that their censure would appease his detractors and not jeopardize his bid for re-election.38

In the end, Phieu’s abuse of power, use of the country’s security services for his own political gain, and political cronyism to further his own political ambitions were too much for the party to countenance. This was manifested at the Ninth Congress. Only five provinces (out of sixty-one) are not represented on the Central Committee, of which Thanh Hoa is one. The head of Military Region 4, which includes Thanh Hoa, is no longer a member of the Central Committee. Le Kha Phieu’s protégé and successor as Head of the General Political Department was unexpectedly eased out of the Politburo, while the military’s representation in general went from 4 of 18 seats, to 2 of 15 seats on the ruling body. However, the military’s representation on the Central Committee, as a percentage of the total actually increased slightly from 8.3 to 9.3 per cent. Moreover, Pham Van Tra kept his Politburo seat (although two ranks lower), and Le Van Dung not only remained head of the VPA’s General Staff Department but was also appointed to the party Secretariat. There are only two explanations for their continued appointments despite the severity of the reprimands they received prior to the Congress: the lack of suitably trained successors and the fact that most of the leadership was cognizant that their reprimands were taken on behalf of their political patron.

Sleeping with the Chinese

One of the most widespread criticisms of Phieu came from both sides of the political spectrum over his foreign policy orientation. Phieu was criticized for not implementing a balanced, or what the Vietnamese term an “omni-directional”, foreign policy,39 and in particular of leaning too much towards China, thereby compromising Vietnam’s independence.

Vietnam’s China policy is very complex. On the one hand, China is a fraternal socialist state, an ideological comrade, and a model for political and economic reform. On the other hand, China is a country that has several thousand years of history of dominating Vietnam, leaving a legacy of mistrust and antipathy. Despite ideological solidarity, China poses a serious threat to Vietnam’s territorial integrity
and the tortuously slow negotiations to resolve the numerous territorial disputes between the two countries, along their land border, the Gulf of Tonkin, and the South China Sea (in particular, the Paracel and Spratly island chains) have reinforced Hanoi's suspicion of China's intentions towards Vietnam and Southeast Asia in general.

In order to manage this complex relationship, Vietnam has adopted a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, it has reinforced ideological and historical ties with China, citing fraternal socialist identity and the dilemmas that both countries have faced as they try to justify continued communist rule concurrent with market reforms and the decline of the ideological basis of their rule. On the other hand, Vietnam has striven not to become dominated by China, and it has adopted an "omni-directional" foreign policy that seeks to balance the historical ties with China. In 1995, Vietnam joined ASEAN in large part to "balance" against China. Although ASEAN is not a formal alliance, Vietnam believes that China deems relations with ASEAN too important for its own development to risk a confrontational policy against one of its members. In short, there would be a "trans-ASEAN" cost that would moderate China's Vietnam policy. Likewise, Vietnam has tried to improve ties with other states, including Russia, Japan, India, and the European Union.

Le Kha Phieu upset this careful diplomatic balance and clearly put much more emphasis on maintaining ties with China. On the one hand, there was an economic rationale for his behaviour. Vietnam was clearly interested in learning from the Chinese reform experience, especially regarding the role of the private sector, and reforming or privatizing state-owned enterprises (SOEs). This could be seen in the number of visits of Vietnamese leaders to China, including a very high profile delegation led by the Politburo's top ideologue Nguyen Duc Binh. On the other hand, Phieu truly seemed more comfortable in dealing with China and believed that closer ties with China would help resolve their longstanding territorial and other bilateral disputes.

Phieu came under attack for this, because most Vietnamese policymakers do not believe that China will ever reward Vietnam for its quiescence and deference. In their eyes, for Beijing, such behaviour is simply expected of a former vassal state. Yet, Phieu went out of his way to defer to China's concerns and, to many in the government, to such a degree that Vietnam's sovereignty seemed to be in doubt. There are many examples of this.

In the days before U.S. Secretary of Defence William Cohen's long delayed trip to Vietnam, in February 2000, Phieu made an unannounced trip to Beijing to meet with the Chinese leadership to provide assurance that Cohen's visit was in no way directed at China and that
Vietnam was not seeking to join in Washington’s “containment” of China. Likewise, one of the explanations of the Vietnamese Politburo’s ten-month delay in approving the BTA was said to be Phieu’s concern about offending China. China was at the time at an impasse with the United States in its negotiations over membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO), and Phieu did not want to one-up Beijing.33

Phieu also came under intense criticism for intervening in the negotiations over the demarcation of the oil-rich Gulf of Tonkin. At a summit in Beijing in 2001, Phieu gave in to Chinese pressure and acceded to the Chinese demarcation. He did this without the prior approval of either the Politburo, Central Committee, or even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which had been conducting the negotiations up to that date. For most in the Vietnamese leadership, Phieu’s unauthorized actions amounted to a sell-out of Vietnam’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, a treasonous act. If nothing else, the fact that he made the agreement without prior authority or approval from the Politburo, Central Committee, or National Assembly, the leading organs of the party and state, suggested that Phieu believed himself to be above these institutions, able to act independently, free from the constraints of collective leadership, which was historically the modus operandi of Vietnamese politics.

During this trip to China, Phieu also signed a long-term cooperation agreement that was very pro-China and explicitly anti-American. On most international issues, in particular the tumultuous bilateral relationship between the United States and China, Vietnam has tended to side with China and be opposed to the American position.

It did not help Phieu when the Chinese actively lobbied for his reappointment, and it did not go unnoticed at the Ninth Congress, when Phieu sat beside Hu Jintao, a senior Chinese leader and likely to be the next General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, who headed the Chinese delegation to the Congress.

Phieu was also roundly criticized for his behaviour during President Clinton’s historic visit to Vietnam in November 2000. Clinton, who was the first American President to visit since the reunification of the country, was upbraided by Phieu, who proceeded to give Clinton a 45-minute lecture on American imperialism, Vietnam’s victory over the United States, and the triumphs of socialism. That Phieu would take such an occasion, in the midst of an economic downturn and when the BTA needed to be concluded, to dwell on the past, led many in Vietnam to believe that Phieu was simply out of touch with reality.

Phieu likewise blamed the Americans for the rioting of ethnic minorities in the central highlands in February 2000, which was ostensibly over the allocation of land, corruption, the influx of ethnic
Vietnamese coffee-growers, and the loss of land for traditional slash-and-burn agriculture. Though the United States did accept many of the leaders of the demonstrations as political refugees, following their escape to Cambodia, the U.S. government was in no way involved in provoking the demonstrations. However, that Phieu and others in the leadership explicitly blamed the United States was indicative of the regime’s continued reliance on foreign scapegoats rather than confronting the reality that so much popular discontent was the result of their own policies and corruption within the VCP’s own ranks.

The Draft Political Report that was circulated before the Ninth Congress emphasized that Vietnam’s foreign policy orientation would remain focused on socialist and neighbouring states. This angered many within the party leadership who wanted a clearer statement about an omni-directional foreign policy outlook to reflect the reform process. Phieu, who was in charge of the document’s drafting, was criticized for adopting a very antiquated foreign policy. ASEAN, too, was upset at the curt mention that was given to it, especially as Vietnam was the rotating president of the organization.

Conclusion

Although a resolution was passed in the Central Committee’s Eleventh Plenum in January 2001 that called for an age limit of 65 for all appointments at the Ninth Congress in an attempt to rejuvenate the leadership, an exception was made for “key cadres”. Phieu lobbied hard for his re-appointment, to an unprecedented degree in Vietnamese politics. Yet, Phieu was unceremoniously dumped from the post of General Secretary of the VCP after completing only three years of a five-year term. He was not even offered the face-saving post of Advisor to the Central Committee, which was abolished in order to deny him a platform from which he could continue to involve himself in policy-making.

This article has sought to analyse both what Phieu did wrong and what systemic changes in the Vietnamese political system accounted for his dismissal. Very clearly, the rules of Vietnamese politics are changing, and leaders are more than ever before being held accountable for their performance in office, and from different quarters.

On the one hand, many of Phieu’s wounds were self-inflicted. His ambition, overt campaigning for the job, attempt to grab even more power by concurrently assuming the presidency, his abuse of power, use of security forces for his own political gain, and cronyism, did not sit well in a country whose political culture favours collective leadership, and shuns overt individual political competition. Constrained by ideology, Phieu equivocated on key economic decisions, causing an
economic slowdown, from which the country has yet to recover fully, while he abandoned the country's carefully nurtured foreign policy in favour of a pro-China line.

On the other hand, there are systemic changes in the Vietnamese political system that led to Phieu's downfall. The fact is that the Vietnamese political system does not allow for a varied group of talented individuals to make it to the top. The "political gene pool" is very small because people are promoted on the basis of their loyalty to the party rather than their innovative thinking. Thus, when it comes to making a leadership decision, often there is not much of a choice. Secondly, having a broad base of power is important for any top leader. Phieu's core constituency remained the military, which, in turn was punished at the congress for siding with an individual rather than the collective interest of the party. Thirdly, political power has steadily devolved to the provinces, and provincial leaders now dominate the VCP's Central Committee. Angered by the economic malaise, provincial delegates were willing to punish central-level leaders for poor performance.

After analysing Phieu's mistakes and shortcomings, perhaps in conclusion a brief analysis of the likely performance of his successor, Nong Duc Manh, should be provided. Manh has never been blinded by ambition, which was evident in the process of his selection. He turned down the position of General Secretary when it was first offered to him at the Twelfth Plenum. Only when the party leadership came back to him, did he reluctantly accept it. He certainly did not campaign for the post, nor did he abuse his power for personal gain.

Manh has a broad base of power. He has headed the National Assembly since 1992. He was in that high-profile position for more than nine years, a period of time long enough for him to become well known to both provincial and central-level leaders. That position put him in constant contact with both the party's grassroots and senior leadership. He has the support of reformers because he contributed greatly to the reform process, and in particular was committed to turning Vietnam into a law-governed society. Under his leadership, the National Assembly has evolved rapidly from a rubber-stamp for all party decisions to an active law-making forum where policy is heatedly debated and to which the government is increasingly accountable. Under Manh, popular reforms, such as the live broadcast of Assembly proceedings, have increased transparency in decision-making. Yet, to conservatives, Manh is a loyal party man who ensures that National Assembly proceedings never get out of control and that decisions never go against the party's interests.

Manh was a strong candidate to become VCP Secretary General at the Eighth Congress in 1996 and he has continued to quietly attract
supporters. He has a reputation as a consensus-builder, though he is committed to economic reform and is not hampered by ideology. Moreover, he won a near unanimity of votes, giving him a clear mandate from all factions and interest groups within the party. He has a very strong mandate to reform both the economic and administrative systems. At age 55, he is the country’s youngest leader, which helps in the party’s desire to rejuvenate itself, so as to be more in touch with the country’s youthful population.

Manh has a clean image. Not only has he never been tainted by corruption allegations, but he is also reportedly very strict with his family members, preventing them from entering either politics or business where they could capitalize on his position.

In sum, many of the systemic factors that weakened Phieu have been overcome by Manh. Likewise, Manh, in his ascension, has displayed none of the narcissistic characteristics of his predecessor. In some ways, his power is more steeped in Vietnamese political culture. He has a mandate, the rumours of his parentage give him an aura of mystery, he is morally upright, and has a broad base of support; yet he still operates in the context of collective leadership. The rules of Vietnamese politics have changed, yet they somehow remain the same.

NOTES

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3. “Vietnam Number One in Fightback as Party Sets Date for Congress”. Associated Press (AP), Agence France Press (AFP), 24 March 2001. As a senior party spokesman said, “As we discuss the age limit it’s important that we not be too rigid”.
8. At the Eighth Party Congress, the Secretariat was disbanded as there was a significant degree of overlap in its membership with the Politburo. In its place, a five-member Standing Board on the Politburo was established. This arrangement proved to be unworkable, and after a five-year experiment, the Secretariat was revived at the Ninth Congress in 2001.

16. Peasants began to protest against the appropriation of land by corrupt local officials for themselves, families and friends, and the imposition of arbitrary fees and taxes from land usage to “teacher fees” for their children’s schooling, to corvee — an amount that one Vietnamese researcher calculated reached a total of 40 per cent of a peasant’s income. Peasants, on a nationwide average, must contribute 10 days of labour annually to the state. In all, the total amount of taxes and levies collected between January 1994 and July 1997 was more than 176 billion dong (about $16 million) more than that had been authorized by the central government. At the same time, loans to local farmers and businesses in the province fell by 40 per cent compared with 1996, and unemployment was skyrocketing. Although the protests were quelled after dispatching 1,200 police and several Politburo members, that the VCP’s traditional base of support even began to challenge the state caused grave consternation among the elite. For background information on the protests, see Dang Phong, “Aspects of Agricultural Economy and Rural Life in 1993”, in Vietnam’s Rural Transformation, edited by Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, and Doug J. Porter (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 182–83. A 1996 Oxfam study found in one province eight types of taxed imposed by the central government, including land use rights, fishing, salt-making, and slaughter, as well as six other local “contributions”, including corvee. See Oxfam UK and Ireland. Report on the Financing and Delivery of Basic Services at the Commune Level in K’v Anh, Ho Tin (March 1996).
23. For more on Linh’s strategy, see Lewis M. Stern, Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993).
24. Ibid., p. 39.
26. Though Hanni and Ho Chi Minh City party chiefs now seem to be a regular fixture on the Politburo, there has never been a provincial party chief on the party’s ruling body. This is probably because the party is concerned that regional party leaders are already too powerful, in their own right.
27. Although the largest percentage (47 per cent) of those who were dropped from the Eighth Central Committee were provincial leaders — a very high turnover rate — for them it was simply turnover, and not an overall loss of seats.
30. Only once before had one person held both positions, and that was only temporary. Following General Secretary Le Duan’s death in July 1986, President Truong Chinh assumed his post until the Ninth Party Congress convened that December.
32. The letter, signed by “party veterans”, complained that Kiet left the SOEs “half-dead”, and decried promotions based on merit over party rank. In terms of corruption, the letter quoted former General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh as saying, “If you want to fight against corruption, you have to start from Kiet’s family”.
33. Denying that this had been Manh’s precondition, Kiet stated that “I myself will be stepping down because of my years and because I am past retirement age”. “We advisors could not have any pressure whatsoever whether we will continue or not”, AFP, “Vietnam Kingmaker Denies Coming Under Pressure to Stand Down”, 21 April 2001.
34. Ibid.
39. This was originally outlined in Politburo Resolution 13 of 1988.

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