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By Pham Quang Minh

Faculty of International Studies

University of Social Sciences and Humanities

Vietnam National University-Hanoi

336 Nguyen Trai Road, Thanh Xuan District, Hanoi, Vietnam

Tel. 84.4. 8584599, Fax: 84.4.8583821

E-mail: phqminh@hotmail.com

***Topic: Agrarian reform policy in Vietnam: Dialog between
central and local government in the initial stage.***

From a country that did not have enough food stuffs, Vietnam became in 1990 one of the biggest rice exporters in the world. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has seen this for quite sometime as its own merit. The renovation policy (*Doi moi*) that the CPV officially announced on the Sixth congress in 1986 and especially the renovation in agriculture therefore caused a wide discussion in the works of scholars of different disciplines like economics, political sciences, sociology and history.¹

While some authors and foreign institutions for example the World Bank, saw the renovation as an ambitious program that took place in the short time between 1986 and 1990 and involved dramatical changes as well as

¹ Fforde 1993, Fforde a. Paine 1987, Beresford 1989, 1991 and 1993, Fforde a. De Vylder 1996, Grossheim 1999, Kerkvliet 1993.

impressive results², according to Beresford and Fforde the renovation in Vietnam signifies a transition period that began with the resolution of the sixth meeting of the Central Committee in August 1979. According to them, the changes caused by later reforms in the Vietnamese economy were therefore not so dramatic though they may have appeared as such.³ Furthermore some of them do not agree with each other about the role of the pre-1986 reforms.⁴

Apart from these differences, most foreign scholars share the opinion that this periodisation of reform is based mainly on the decisions of the party leadership or can be lead back to the enforcement of present reform policy. In other words: the process of reform was viewed from the top down.

The main objective of this paper is to show that the agrarian reform policy that the leadership of the CPV designed in 1986 was the result of a long historical process and that local pressure was the main factor that has forced the party leadership to carry out the reform. In other words the renovation policy of the CPV was in fact the reaction of the CPV on the reality in the countryside. The peasants and the local cadres were the forces that have played an important role in Vietnamese politics. They are the force that the leadership should not forget in the process of decision-making.

1. The first attempt of reform 1966-1968 in Vinh Phu province

Shortly after the land reform had been carried out by the Vietnamese communists between 1953 and 1956, whereby the peasants had to pay high price for receiving some land, they were “mobilized” straight away to join the agrarian cooperatives in order to build up socialism in the North of Vietnam.

² Zee 1993: 284, Q. Dinh 1993: 532-553, World Bank 1993: ii-iii.

³ Fforde 1993: 301-303, Beresford 1995: 2-3.

In 1966, when the collectivization campaign of the CPV had been launched for 7 years, the party committee of Vinh Phu province (today Vinh Phuc and Phu Tho) directed the local cadres without permission from the central government to sign an experimental working contract with peasants households.⁵ According to the resolution Nr. 68 NQ/TU of this province, the households were allowed to take care of a certain amount of rice fields and cultivate them until the harvest was finished. This resolution of Vinh Phu province was criticized as a “deviation” from the orthodox theory of the central government on collectivization. The result was that Kim Ngoc, the party secretary of the province, was removed from his position.⁶

The historical context when the Vinh Phu province issued the resolution Nr. 68 was, that the war in Vietnam had reached its peak. On the one hand North Vietnam was short of many working instruments and foodstuffs through American air attacks, on the other hand North Vietnam had to make a lot of people and goods available for the fight in the South of the country. In the time between 1965 and 1970 the number of laborers sank from 5.251.700 to 4.599.000 persons.⁷ In Thai Binh province alone, there were already 400.000 persons of a total population of 1.8 Mio. that served in the army during the Vietnam War and one fourth died.⁸ In Vinh Phu province the situation was almost the same. During one year of the war, about 25.000 persons were sent to the South.⁹ The shortage of manpower in the province was an important reason for the leadership of the province to introduce the household contract. According to the party leadership of the province, the household contract did

⁴ Zee 1993: 272, Andreff 1993: 515-531.

⁵ The Party Executive Committee of Vinh Phu province, The resolution Nr. 68 NQ/TU about some problems of labor management in the cooperatives.

⁶ Kerkvliet 1993, Huu Tho 2002.

⁷ The statistics 1976: 192.

⁸ Pham The Duyet 2000.

not only stimulate the interest of the peasants and included all possibilities of extra work and free time in the families, but also overcame the embezzlement by and the self-interest of the local cadres, who used their privileged position to their advantage in their relationship to the whole population.

This action of the party committee of Vinh Phu province was characterized as “fence-breaking”.¹⁰ The term itself explains on the one hand the reaction of the local leadership, who tried to break the frame of the central plan economy, and on the other hand the characterization of traditional relations between central and local level in Vietnamese politics. It is expressed in the most popular Vietnamese proverb: “The law of the king bows down before the customs of the village”.

The attempt of Vinh Phu province failed partly because of the political situation and, according to the punishment for offence against the party’s ideology, partly because of the attitude to the war. Renovation in politics, economy and wherever was not an easy thing. For it to be implemented, man needs at least strong pressure from the bottom and a tolerant government which could accept the demands from the bottom and which is in a position regarding both the internal and external given realities to carry out the measures. The leadership of Vinh Phu province acted with a good will: the will to increase the working productivity in agriculture and to fulfill the political tasks of the central government. At this point, the conditions for a renovation in Vietnam were not yet fulfilled. The initiative of the party leadership of Vinh Phu could however cause the central party to think about the introduction of a renovation in the middle of the 1980’s.

⁹ Huu Tho 2000: 16-17.

¹⁰ Huu Tho 2000: 16-17, Beresford 1995: 3.

2. The crisis of the cooperative model by the end of 1970's

By the end of the 1970's, Vietnam experienced complete crisis. After 20 years of having carried it out in North Vietnam and three years of experimenting in South Vietnam, the collectivization program was getting into a hopeless situation. In the year 1975, as the war came to an end, there were altogether 16.872 agrarian cooperatives that comprised 95,6% of the total peasant population in North Vietnam.¹¹ The collapse of this system was characterized by the following points. Firstly, the living standard of cooperative members sank with the time, and their income amounted to 0,61 VND for a working day.¹² Secondly, the use of the land was ineffective. The prime minister's office therefore issued one decree on September 24th, 1974 in order to prevent the illegal use of the land by different institutions and persons. As a result, 8.644 ha of acreage were brought back to the cooperatives.¹³ Because of being neglected, appropriation and construction of infrastructure the average acreage per person was reduced from 1.220 m² in the year 1960 to 909 m² in 1975.¹⁴ Thirdly, though attempts were made by the central government, the management of cooperative seemed to be no more efficient. The peasants were indifferent to the collective economy because their work was not correctly valued. Nobody cared about the collective property. They said: "Everybody's business is nobody's business." There were also many surreptitious protests against collectivization.¹⁵ Everywhere, the local cadres tried to control the

¹¹ The National Archive Center Nr. III, Report of the committee for cooperative management about some key points of agrarian cooperatives 1975, UBNNTW, HS 160.

¹² The National Archive Center Nr. III, Report of the committee for cooperative management about some key points of agrarian cooperatives 1975, UBNNTW, HS 160.

¹³ The National Archive Center Nr. III, Report of the central agrarian committee, HS 197.

¹⁴ The National Archive Center Nr. III, Ke hoach cong tac quan ly ruong dat tu nay den nam 1980, UBNNTW.

¹⁵ Adas 1986: 64-86, Scott a. Kerkvliet 1986, Fforde 1989: 48-50, Pham Quang Minh 2002: 282-286.

cooperative economy and make profit for themselves.¹⁶ In addition there was also no correct price policy. Because of the bad economic situation and the low income there were 10.743 households in 1976 in North Vietnam that had left the cooperatives and let the total number of households that were not part of the cooperatives rise to 155.520 households.¹⁷ To put it briefly, the plan economy did not encourage the peasants to work hard and responsibly. In order to prevent this situation from arising, the leadership of two provinces of Hai Phong and Nghe An have tried to imitate Vinh Phu province in 1968 by introducing once again the household contract system. In doing so, they leased the land to peasant families for some time for them to cultivate. This form of contract was named “sneaky contract”. Again, like ten years ago, the local party leadership took the initiative to renovate the economic system. Through their “secret” permission and directions, the “sneaky contract” movement spread widely from region to region.¹⁸ But unlike the time of the first attempt, the central government did not punish such deviation, but studied it carefully. The explanation for this mild policy may be that the party had to deal with the problems of the reunification in the South or it realized that such purely administrative measures were no longer relevant and acceptable at this time, as the country just had of gotten over the long war.

3. The extent of the cooperative model in the South of Vietnam

The cooperative model was faced indeed in 1975 in North Vietnam with a collapse. In addition to that, the other danger was that this model was extended automatically to the southern part of Vietnam. The campaign in the

¹⁶ White 1983: 257-258, Beresford 1995: 4.

¹⁷ The National Archive Center Nr. III, Report of the committee for cooperative management about some key points of agrarian cooperatives 1975, UBNNTW, HS 160.

¹⁸ Chu Van Lam 1992: 50, Truong Thi Tien 1999: 67.

Mekong delta in the 1970's was even less successful than the campaign in the Red river delta in the 1950's-1960's, as it failed already in the preparation phase.¹⁹ According to Beresford, the refusal by peasants of the collectivization campaign of the central government in the Mekong delta between 1976 and 1978 was a decisive factor that forced the CPV to change its agrarian policy in the Red river delta as well as in the whole country.²⁰

I have, however, the opinion that not only the peasants, but also the party members and local cadres denied to implement the collectivization propagated by the central government. As mentioned above, they were the forces that presented a big hindrance for the implementation of the party's policy. Their position was ensured through the election from the bottom and the determination from the top. Like the notables in traditional Vietnam, the local cadres were submitted to the pressure from both sides and therefore had to carry out the policy of the central government on the one hand, but the protection of the interest of their locality including their own interests on the other hand.

The situation in the countryside in the Mekong delta was characterized by the fact that 70 percent of the peasants, among them also party cadres, were well to do farmers. The collectivization campaign that the central government launched after the reunification was based on prejudice against those cadres. This policy was therefore not so welcomed by them. One of the announcements of the Central Committee of the CPV claimed that there was a group of party members that took part in the "exploitation" of poor

¹⁹ This does not mean that the collectivization in North Vietnam went smoothly. Its background was very unstable from the beginning. See Kerkvliet 1998.

²⁰ Beresford 1985.

farmers.²¹ The party strongly believed that the campaign would be successful if those cadres were excluded from the party.²² But it was a dilemma for the central government to do so, because they represented an economical and political power on the local level.²³ A report of the Central Agrarian Committee in 1981 confirmed the complicated and difficult situation in the countryside of South Vietnam:

“It is not acceptable that there are still until today 17% of party members and 14,5% local cadres in the country side of South Vietnam and 18,64% of their families that exploit the others or take part in their exploitation. How smoothly can the (socialist) transformation be carried out if those people still stay in the party or in its leadership and administration? Though the proclaimed policy of the party and the government is good, it is easily ignored, falsified or even utilized by those cadres.”²⁴

In 1979, Vietnam was faced with a deep crisis. At the economic level, the important indices of the second five-year plan had not been achieved. The agrarian production was in a strong decline. At the political level, the central government had to fight with stronger lower organizations and sectional pride that rejected to carry out the directions from the top. The geopolitical changes after the Vietnam War in the South introduced a new regional autonomy. At the international level, Vietnam had never been so isolated as by the end of 1979 through their marching into Cambodia in 1978 and its having to wage two wars with the Khmers in the South and the Chinese in the North.

²¹ The Archive of the Central Committee of the CPV, The conclusion of the secretary committee on the speeding up of the reforms of agriculture in South Vietnam, DV 540, STL 14.

²² The Archive of the Central Committee of the CPV, The direction to complete the new distribution of land, STL 19.

²³ Marr 1995: 24-25.

Facing with this crisis the Central Committee of the CPV meet in Hanoi in September 1979 and issued the resolution Nr. 21 that marked the first action of the party leadership on the way to renovation. This was a turning point that lead to the historical resolutions for the renovation policy proclaimed in December 1986 at the Sixth party congress. But in fact, the local cadres had started this initiative 20 years before. In reality the situation was much more dynamic than the government believed. In this process, the peasants and the local cadres played a decisive role. History shows that the peasants were not passive masses. Without their taking part there, would have been no renovation. The renovation was only the reaction of the central government to reality. In the future, the party should take the peasant's interests into consideration if they would like to keep their power.

²⁴ The Archive of the Central Committee of the CPV, The draft of the report of the Central Agrarian Committee about the program of 1981 and plan for 1982, DVBQ 60.

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