

Hanoi Politburo Avoids Votes Unless 'Necessary'

The writer recently returned from a two-week trip to North Vietnam.

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A rare glimpse of the inner workings of North Vietnam's Politburo shows that the ruling group often operates by majority vote, but the general pattern is to avoid divisive voting whenever possible, according to official sources in Hanoi.

Some North Vietnamese officials were startled initially when asked questions about the operation of their inner ruling group. "This is our private affair," one official replied; "how our Politburo functions is not the business of outsiders."

Other officials, however, were induced to discuss some of the operating methods of the Politburo of North Vietnam's Lao Dong Party, the Communist Party, as the outside world knows it.

Replies were obtained on the contention, raised by this reporter, that if the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is to move toward "peace" with its war adversaries, as pledged by the cease-fire accord signed in Paris on Jan. 27, North Vietnam should open up access to its methods of government.

The habits of a generation of wartime secrecy inevitably linger after the still-tenuous cease-fire. North Vietnam, however, suddenly finds itself in the unaccustomed position of admitting to its jealously-guarded territory not only Henry A. Kissinger, president Nixon's envoy, but American mine-clearing ships and crews, and American military aircraft suddenly descending on bombless missions.

Always quick to adapt to the vicissitudes of war, the North Vietnamese are hesitantly groping now to adapt to prospective peace, which includes the hazards of independent journalistic questioning.

Hoang Tung, an alternate member of the Lao Dong Party's Central Committee of 41 members and 28 alternate members, and editor of the party newspaper, Nhan Dan, agreed to explain in part the operations of the party's top leadership—its Politburo composed of nine members and two alternate members.

Questions of Splits

Sophisticated Tung, deputy chairman of the Lao Dong department of Propaganda training, took in stride questions about "splits" in the North Vietnamese Politburo between alleged pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese factions which for years have been debated by foreign specialists. The answers, not surprisingly, were oblique: All North Vietnamese officials scoff at foreign analyses which speculate that their Politburo is torn between opposing factions in determining Hanoi's war or peace strategy. They label all such analyses "uninformed."

"In the inner activities of our officials," Tung acknowledged, "some differences of views are normal."

"When they once deliberate," he said, "each one has his own view on a specific issue," but there is no disagreement on fundamental "principals."

"If necessary, we take a vote, and if necessary, we work on the basis of a majority," Tung continued.

Because "the leaders have been working together over 30 years already," he said, "and they have carried out their liberation struggle for 40 years, they are all colleagues who know each other well."

Did the Politburo operate in the same way under founder Ho Chi Minh, who died in September, 1969, Tung was asked.

Ho "More Advanced"

"Our President Ho Chi Minh had a special role in the leadership, in terms of morale," Tung replied. "His prestige was absolute, because he was the father of our republic, and he was more advanced in leading the struggle. But the members in the leadership now have nearly the same age and nearly the same history."

President Ho, or Uncle Ho as he is called through North Vietnam, in terms that genuinely convey a filial relationship that is assiduously cultivated, "had a very precious virtue," Tung continued.

"He never imposed his idea on anyone else," said Tung.

The editor evidently was referring to Ho's relationships with his Politburo colleagues, not his adversaries. Ho lived much of his life in exile from Vietnam as a conspiratorial revolutionary operating under innumerable aliases, jailed several times, scheming and maneuvering in the Communist and non-Communist capitals of the world to achieve his vision of Vietnamese independence; sometimes colluding with adversaries to pay them off, alternately fighting the Japanese, the Chinese Nationalists, the French, the regimes in Saigon, and then the Americans.

Ho, The Revered Leader

The ultimate image of Ho in North Vietnam, however, is the revered leader, the gentle Ho, the friend of children, trees and flowers, entombed with his simple, faded khaki suit, his rubber sandals at his feet.

During President Ho's long years of Politburo rule, said Tung, "There were cases when there were votes by a show of hands—but it happened very seldom."

"If a thing did not come to unanimity," said Tung, "he put it off, and after some time, deliberation resumed."

Describing the general practice of decision-making inside the Politburo, Tung said that "If we follow the majority, it is in accord with the principle. But sometimes it does not bring good results. People whose ideas are rejected would not be very happy."

"Nobody," Tung continued, "can have thorough knowledge of everything. If there are people who decide everything, it would do harm to revolutionary work."

'Our Own Ways'

"From a distance," said Tung, "it is very hard for other people to judge us. It is not because we are mysterious, but because we have our own ways."

Tung was asked to what degree the strategy of North Vietnam has been complicated by the bitter Marxist and nationalistic rivalry between its two chief allies, the Soviet Union and China. This is a delicate subject in North Vietnam.

He replied that it is "unfortunate" that there is "this discord, discontent, between our friendly allies, but the lucky thing is that all these countries help us with assistance."

"They have contradictions between them—but all of them support us, the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, and many other Socialist countries. We have signed aid agreements with most of these countries for 1973 . . . All of them said, 'as long as you have war, we will continue our assistance.'"

No Pressure

Tung insisted that North Vietnam's allies did not put pressure on North Vietnam to induce it to make compromises in the recent cease-fire negotiations.

"It never happened so far," he said. "We always have the initiative in our work."

A similar question about Sino-Soviet pressures on North Vietnam produced a comparable reply from Luu Quy Ky, secretary-general of the Vietnamese Journalists Association and a leading exponent of North Viet-

namese philosophy and propaganda.

"During the last decade," said Ky, "we have received much advice and criticism from foreign friends. In this sphere we are quite obdurate."

Ky chose as an illustration the tale of a king who wanted to test the wisdom of the most learned men in his country. The first to be tested was a medical doctor, who was told that if he failed to answer correctly, he would be beheaded.

The question was, "What is the most widely practiced occupation?" The physician unhesitatingly answered, "medicine." Asked to prove it on pain of death, the doctor asked for a day's grace, "because I have a terrible toothache and cannot think clearly."

The king solicitously spoke up, saying that the physician must treat the toothache with herbs, and explained the varieties. No, interjected the queen, aromatic oils were best for toothache. A wave of counter-suggestions swept through the court. "Aha," said the doctor triumphantly, "you see, everyone practices medicine."

"So," concluded Luu Quy Ky in summarizing his long, illustrated answer to the question of outside pressures on North Vietnam, "our friends all give us advice. We thank them all. But we know what kind of toothache we have, and we know how to cure it."