

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

OPINION

## Hanoi Party Tricks

By CARLYLE A. THAYER - June 19, 2008

Vietnam has earned a reputation as a progressive, reform-minded nation that is fast shedding its Communist roots. Foreign investment is pouring in, and Vietnam's economic growth outstrips that of its neighbors. Much of this progress can be attributed to its dynamic prime minister, Nguyen Tan Dung, who has made reform and anticorruption efforts a priority since taking office in 2007. But despite Mr. Dung's progressive image, he is fighting an uphill battle -- and often losing.

Take, first, the key battleground between conservatives and progressives: the media. Progressives don't by any means favor a fully independent media. But they do view a somewhat free media as a potentially useful tool for policing corruption and thus minimizing potential sources of popular discontent with party rule. Conservatives view even that as an unacceptable challenge to the party, and for now conservatives seem to be winning.

Last month, two journalists -- Nguyen Viet Chien of Thanh Nien (Young People), and Nguyen Van Hai of Tuoi Tre (Youth) newspapers -- were arrested and charged with abuse of power. Both had been investigating a corruption scandal in the Ministry of Transport which involved misappropriating \$7 million that was bet on European football games. Under Vietnamese law the journalist may be held for four months before charges are brought and if convicted face a minimum of one year imprisonment.

These arrests signal much more than just a media crackdown. They underline Prime Minister Dung's loose control over the institutions of power that really matter within the Party bureaucracy. Conservative factions, for instance, control the Ministry of Information and Communication, which also oversees press censorship. In 2007, they blocked Mr. Dung's attempts to promote younger protégés to the Cabinet. They also blocked the appointment of former prime minister Vo Van Kiet's secretary as minister of the newly created Ministry of Information and Communications. A conservative party veteran from Ho Chi Minh's home province of Nghe An, Le Doan Hop, was appointed instead.

Led by Party Secretary-General Nong Duc Manh, Vietnam's conservatives have a solid political base. They form a dominant bloc on the Politburo and party Central Committee, where the public security sector has strong representation. Public Security Minister Le Hong Anh received the second highest number of votes after Mr. Manh from the newly elected Central Committee at the last national party Congress in 2006. Of eight new deputy ministers elected to the Central Committee three were from the Ministry of Public Security. They value political stability and their continuation in office above all else, and are worried about the inability of Prime Minister Dung to deal effectively with rising inflation and other social ills.

Mr. Dung is also rapidly losing popular support. Many urban Vietnamese have become disenchanted with Mr. Dung's inability to deal with pollution, traffic gridlock or corruption.

Most recently, inflation has hit their pocketbooks hard. This, of course, isn't entirely Mr. Dung's fault. Since taking office last year, he has appointed a high-level steering committee to tackle corruption and publicly insisted that the Ministry of Public Security step up its investigation into so-called high-profile cases. But these efforts soon stalled, due to opposition from hardliners.

There is a lot at stake in this power struggle. Party conservatives have constrained Vietnam's opening up by asserting that human rights and religious freedom issues are part of the plot of peaceful evolution. In other words, they have tried to scare the broader party leadership with the idea that economic opening, especially toward the U.S., will inevitably lead to political opening. According to this proposition, hostile overseas forces have linked up with domestic dissidents to overthrow Vietnam's one-party system. The net effect has been a start-stop reform process.

Party conservatives also have taken a strong role in shaping Vietnam's relations with China. Late last year unprecedented anti-China student demonstrations took place in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city over South China Sea issues. When Mr. Manh visited Beijing for high-level discussions, party conservatives used the opportunity to intensify party-to-party relations including ideological relations.

For several months now there have been rumors that internal party rifts have become so intense that a mid-term party conference might be convened to resolve them. Only one such conference has been held in the party's history, in 1994. If this meeting were held Prime Minister Dung would find his leadership and policies under attack. It would also represent a setback to Vietnam's long-standing attempts to loosen party control over the state and develop a system of ministerial responsibility.

For Vietnam to succeed in its present course, it is vital for National Assembly deputies, not back room party conservatives, to assert their authority to review government policy and the stewardship of the prime minister. If they don't, Vietnam's recent successes could soon be curtailed.

Mr. Thayer is professor of politics at the University of New South Wales's Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra.

[Copyright © 2008 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved](#)

