

Socialism and the Path to Socialism-Vietnam's Perspective

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December 30 2012

Nguyen Phu Trong, general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, has paid an official friendship visit to Cuba and gave a presentation at the Nico Lopez Party School of the Cuban Communist Party. Following are excerpts from Party leader Trong's presentation.

Socialism and the path to socialism is a fundamental and practical theoretical topic with broad and complicated content, demanding thorough and in-depth study. I hereby mention just a few aspects from Vietnam's perspective for your reference and our discussions. And several questions are focused: What is socialism? Why did Vietnam choose the socialist path? How to build socialism in Vietnam step by step? How significant has Vietnam's renewal and socialism building process been over the past 25 years? And what lessons have been learnt?

As you know, socialism can be understood in three different aspects: socialism as a doctrine, socialism as a movement, and socialism as a regime. Each aspect has different manifestations, depending on the world outlook and development level in a specific historical period. The socialism I want to discuss here is a scientific socialism based on Marxist-Leninist doctrine in the current era.

Previously, when the Soviet Union and its constellation of socialist countries existed, striving for socialism in Vietnam seemed logical and implicitly validated. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, socialist regimes fell in many countries and the worldwide socialist revolution began to ebb. Now, the cause of socialism has been revived, sparking widespread interest and heated debate.

It is true that capitalism has never been more widely accepted than it is now, and it has achieved great successes, especially in liberating and developing productive capacity and advancing science and technology. Many developed capitalist countries have established social welfare systems which are more progressive than ever before, thanks to strong economies and long struggles by their working class. However, capitalism cannot overcome its inherent fundamental contradictions. We are witnessing a financial crisis and economic decline which originated in the US in 2008, rapidly spread to other capitalist centers, and has impacted every country around the globe.

In addition to this economic crisis with its related food and energy crisis, a depletion of natural resources and deterioration of the environment are posing great challenges to the existence and development of humankind. These are the consequences of a socio-economic development process which champions profits, considers wealth and material

consumption the measures of civilization, and makes individualism the main pillar of society. They are the essential characteristics of capitalism's mode of production and consumption. The ongoing crisis once again proves that capitalism is anti-advancement, anti-humanity, and unsustainable economically, socially, and ecologically. As Karl Marx said, capitalism damages the things that constitute its wealth, namely, labor and natural resources. According to scientists, the current crisis cannot be completely resolved in the framework of a capitalist regime.

Recent social protest movements flaring up in many developed capitalist countries have exposed the truth about the nature of capitalist political entities. In fact, democratic regimes which follow the "free democracy" formula advocated and imposed by the West never ensure that power truly belongs to the people and for the people—the natural factor of democracy. Such a power system still belongs mostly to the wealthy minority and serves the interests of its major capitalist groups. A very small proportion, as small as 1% of the population, holds the majority of the wealth and means of production, controls most of the financial institutions and mass media, and dominates the whole society.

We need a society where development is truly for humans, instead of exploiting and trampling on human dignity for the sake of profits. We need economic development in parallel with social progress and fairness instead of a widening gap between the rich and the poor and social inequality. We need a society which yearns for progressive and humane values, a society of compassion, unity, and mutual assistance instead of rivalry for the selfish benefits of individuals and groups. We need sustainable development and harmony with nature to make our living environment clean for present and future generations, instead of exploiting, appropriating resources, infinitely consuming materials, and destroying the environment. And we need a political system under which power truly belongs to the people, by the people, and serves the interests of the people, instead of a wealthy minority. These are the authentic values of socialism, aren't they?

As you comrades and friends know, the Vietnamese people have undergone a prolonged, harsh, sacrifice-filled revolutionary struggle against colonialist and imperialist domination to win national independence and sovereignty in the spirit of the slogan "There is nothing more precious than Independence and Freedom".

National independence associated with socialism is the basic guideline of Vietnam's revolution and the essential point of Ho Chi Minh's legacy. His rich experience combined with the revolutionary theories and science of Marxism-Leninism led Ho Chi Minh to the conclusion that only socialism and communism can create a truly free, prosperous, happy life for every person in every nation. Advancing to socialism is the objective and the inexorable path of the Vietnamese revolution, harnessing the people's aspirations and historical trends.

But what is socialism? And how does one advance to socialism? This is what absorbs our thoughts—finding our way step by step, creating orientations and guidelines which fit the specific circumstances of Vietnam.

To date, though there remain some issues that need further study, we realize that the socialist society that the Vietnamese people are striving for is a society of prosperous people in a strong nation characterized by democracy, fairness, and civilization. It's a society where the people are the masters, which has a highly-developed economy and is based on modern forces of production and progressive relations of production. It has an advanced culture imbued with national identity, and a prosperous, free, and happy people who are blessed with opportunities for comprehensive development. Ethnic groups in the Vietnamese community are equal, united, respectful and supportive of each other. A law-governed socialist state of the people, by the people, and for the people is led by the Communist Party and has friendly and cooperative ties with countries all over the world.

To achieve these goals, we should speed up national industrialization and modernization; develop a knowledge-based and socialist-oriented market economy; build an advanced culture imbued with national identity; boost human resource development; improve people's living standards; promote social progress and fairness; ensure national defense; safeguard national security and social order; implement a foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, peace, friendship, cooperation, and development; proactively integrate into the world; build a socialist democracy; exercise national unity; expand the national unification front; build a law-governed socialist state of the people, by the people, and for the people; and build a stronger, more transparent Party.

The more we delve into reality, the more we are aware that the transitional period to socialism is a long, extremely difficult and complicated process because it needs to create a profound change in all areas of social life. Vietnam is bypassing the stage of capitalism and moving on directly to socialism from an obsolete agricultural society with low productivity further weakened by decades of wars. Constant attempts at sabotage by hostile forces have hindered Vietnam's path to socialism, which unavoidably involves a lengthy transition period through various stages and forms of socio-economic organization accompanied by inevitable conflicts between the old and the new. By 'bypassing the stage of capitalism', I mean bypassing a regime of oppression, inequality, and capital exploitation, bypassing evils and political entities inappropriate to a socialist regime. This doesn't mean that we must ignore the achievements and civilized values that humankind has achieved during the process of capitalist development. Indeed, the inheritance of these achievements should be based on an attitude of selective development.

The concept of a socialist market-oriented economy is a creative and fundamental theoretical breakthrough for our Party and an important fruit of the 25-year renewal process, which stemmed from Vietnam's reality and accumulated experiences of the world. In our opinion, a socialist market-oriented economy is a multi-sector commodity economy, which operates in accordance with market mechanisms and a socialist orientation. It is a new type of market economy in the history of the market economy's development. It is a kind of economic organization which abides by market economy rules but is based on, led by, and governed by the principles and nature of socialism reflected in its three aspects-ownership, organization, and distribution-for the goal of a

prosperous people in a strong nation characterized by democracy, fairness, and civilization. This is neither a capitalist market economy nor a socialist market economy.

In a socialist-oriented market economy, there are multiple forms of ownership and multiple economic sectors. Economic sectors operating in accordance with the law are major components of the economy and equal under the law in the interest of co-existence, cooperation, and healthy competition. The state economy plays a key role; the collective economy is constantly consolidated and developed; the private economy is one of the driving forces of the collective economy; multiple ownership, especially joint-stock enterprises, is encouraged; the state and collective economies provide a firm foundation for the national economy. The relations of distribution ensure fairness, create momentum for growth, and operate a distribution mechanism based on work results, economic efficiency, contributions by other resources, and distribution through the social security and welfare system. The State manages the economy through laws, strategies, plans, policies, and mechanisms to steer, regulate, and stimulate socio-economic development.

Typical characteristic of the socialist orientation in Vietnam's market economy is the combination of economics and society, the coordination of economic and social policies, economic growth in parallel with social progress, and fairness applied at every step, in every policy, throughout the development process. This means that we neither wait for the economy to reach a high level of development before implementing social progress and fairness, nor "sacrifice" social progress and fairness to the pursuit of mere economic growth. On the contrary, every economic policy should target the goal of social development and every social policy should create momentum to boost economic development. Encouraging people to enrich themselves legally should go hand in hand with reducing poverty and taking care of the disadvantaged and those who have rendered great service to the nation. These are the principles required to ensure a healthy, sustainable, socialist-oriented development.

Our Party sees culture as a spiritual foundation of society and considers cultural development on a par with economic growth and social progress in its fundamental orientation toward socialism building in Vietnam. The culture Vietnam is building is progressive and imbued with national identity, a united-in-diversity culture based on advanced humanitarian values, where Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's thoughts play a leading role in social spiritual life, where we inherit and uphold the fine traditional values of all ethnic groups in Vietnam, absorb humankind's cultural achievements, and strive to build a healthy, civilized society that promotes human dignity, higher knowledge, morality, physical fitness, aesthetics, and a fulfilling lifestyle. We believe that people should play the central role in any development strategy; that cultural development and human resources development are both the target and the momentum of the renewal process; that the development of education and training and science and technology should be priorities of national policy; that environmental protection is one of the vital issues and a criterion of sustainable development; that building happy, progressive families to be healthy cells of society and implementing gender equality are criteria of advancement and civilization.

A socialist society is a society that yearns for progressive and humane values based on people's common interests, which is totally different from competitive societies based on the interests of individuals and groups. A socialist society fosters social consensus rather than social opposition and antagonism. In a socialist political regime, the relationship between the Party, the State, and the people is a relationship of entities unified in their goals and interests. Every Party guideline, every government policy, law, and action is in the people's interest. The political model and overall mode of operation is that the Party leads, the State manages, and the people are the master. Democracy is the nature of the socialist regime and both the goal and the momentum of socialism building. Building a socialist democracy, ensuring that real power belongs to the people, is the ultimate and long-term task of Vietnam's revolution. We intend to unwaveringly uphold democracy, build a law-governed socialist State truly of the people, by the people, and for the people on the basis of an alliance between workers, farmers, and intellectuals led by the Communist Party of Vietnam. The State represents the people's right to mastery and at the same time organizes the implementation of Party guidelines. There are mechanisms for the people to exercise their right to direct mastery in all areas of society and to take part in social management. We realize that a law-governed socialist State is by nature different from a law-governed capitalist State. Legislative power under a capitalist regime is really a tool to protect and serve the interests of the bourgeois class, while legislative power under a socialist regime is a tool to reflect and exercise the people's right to mastery and protect the interests of the masses. By enforcing laws, the State enables the people to wield political power and dictate against all acts that violate the interests of the fatherland and the people. At the same time, we define national unity as a source of strength and a decisive factor for the lasting victory of the revolutionary cause in Vietnam. Equality and unity between ethnicities and religions are constantly promoted.

Being well aware of the Communist Party's leadership as a factor that decides the victory of the renewal process and ensures a national development in line with socialist orientation, we pay special attention to party building, considering it a key and vital task for the Party and the socialist regime. The Communist Party of Vietnam is a vanguard of the Vietnamese working class. The Party was born, exists, and develops for the interests of the working class, the laborers, and the nation as a whole. When the ruling Party leads the nation, it is acknowledged by the entire people as their vanguard. Therefore, the Party is the vanguard of the working class, the laborers, and the Vietnamese nation as a whole. This doesn't mean playing down the Party's class nature, but reflects a more in-depth and more complete awareness of the Party's class nature since the working class is a class whose interests match the interests of the laborers and the nation as a whole. Our Party unswervingly considers Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's thoughts as the ideological foundation and lodestar of our revolutionary activities, and considers democratic centralism as the basic organizing principle. The Party leads with its platforms, strategies, and policy guidelines, with its communications, persuasion, mobilization, organization, and supervision, and with Party members' role models and unified leadership of personnel work. Considering corruption, bureaucracy, and moral deterioration as threats to the ruling Party, particularly in a market economy, the Communist Party of Vietnam demands constant self-reform, self-rectification and

rejection of opportunism, individualism, corruption, bureaucracy, waste, and moral deterioration within the Party and the entire political regime.

The renewal process, including the development of the socialist-oriented market economy, has truly brought about positive changes in our country over the past 25 years.

Vietnam used to be a poor, war-torn country, with devastated human lives, infrastructure, and environment. Food and other necessities were in critically short supply, and people's lives were extremely hard, three-fourths of the population being below the poverty line. That was the reality in Vietnam before the renewal process.

Thanks to the renewal process, the economy has been growing steadily over the past 25 years at an average annual rate of 7 to 8%. Per capita income has increased 11 fold. In 2008 Vietnam escaped from its former status as a low-income country. From a country with chronic food shortages, Vietnam now not only ensures its own food security but also has become a leading exporter of rice and other agricultural produce. Industry has developed rapidly with industry and services now accounting for 80% of GDP. Exports have increased steadily, topping 100 billion USD in 2011. Foreign investment had climbed to nearly 200 billion USD by the end of 2011. Economic growth has enabled the country to escape the socio-economic crisis of the 1980s and improve its citizens' living standards. The poverty rate falls 2 to 3% every year. It went from 75% in 1986 to just 9.5% in 2010. Vietnam completed the eradication of illiteracy and popularization of primary education in 2000 and popularization of secondary education in 2010. The number of tertiary students has increased 9 fold over the past 25 years; 95% of Vietnam's adult population is literate. Many common diseases have been successfully contained. The poor, children under 6, and the elderly are provided free health insurance. The child malnutrition rate has been slashed 3 fold. The new-born mortality rate has fallen 6 fold. Life expectancy has increased from 62 in 1990 to 73 in 2010. Vietnamese cultural life has expanded to include an ever-wider range of cultural activities. Vietnam now has about 25 million internet users and is one of the countries experiencing the fastest growth of IT technology. The United Nations has recognized Vietnam as one of the leading countries in reaching its Millennium Development Goals.

So it can be said that the renewal policy has brought about very positive changes in Vietnam: economic growth, higher productivity, rapid poverty reduction, a higher standard of living, reduced social problems, more political and social stability, ensured security, enhanced national posture and strength, and greater trust in the Party's leadership. Reviewing 20 years of renewal, our 10th National Party Congress remarked that the renewal has recorded "great achievements of historical significance". In fact, the Vietnamese people are now enjoying better living conditions than at any time in the past. That's why the renewal initiated and led by the Communist Party of Vietnam has received the Vietnamese people's full and active support. Renewal achievements in Vietnam have proved that socialist-oriented development not only has a positive economic effect but also resolves social problems much better than capitalist development at a similar development level.

Despite all these achievements, there remain shortcomings, limitations, and new challenges to be overcome in Vietnam's pursuit of national development.

Economically, the quality of growth remains low, infrastructure development is uneven, the efficiency and capacity of businesses-including state-owned enterprises-are limited, the environment is polluted in many areas, and market management and regulation are inadequate. Meanwhile, competition is becoming fiercer with globalization and international integration.

Socially, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, the quality of education, healthcare and many other public services is low, culture and social ethics are deteriorating, and crimes and social vices are becoming more complicated. In particular, corruption, waste, and the deterioration of political ideology and personality morality are tending to spread among cadres and Party members.

We realize that Vietnam is now in a transitional period towards socialism. During this transition, socialist factors have been established and developed, intermingling and competing with non-socialist factors, including capitalist factors. The intermingling and competing are more complicated and aggressive in the current context of market opening and international integration. Along with positive aspects, there will always be negative aspects and challenges that need to be considered wisely and dealt with timely and effectively. It is a difficult struggle that requires spirit, fresh vision, and creativity. The path to socialism is a process of constantly consolidating and strengthening socialist factors to make them more dominant and irreversible. Success will depend on correct policies, political spirit, leadership capacity, and the fighting strength of the Party.

At present, we are revising our growth model and restructuring our economy with greater priority being given to quality and sustainability by focusing on infrastructure, human resources and administrative reforms. Socially, we are continuing to pursue sustainable poverty reduction, improve healthcare, education, and other public services, and enrich the people's cultural life.

Theory and experience agree that socialism building means creating a new type of society, which is by no means an easy task. The challenges and difficulties before us require that the Party's leadership role be matched by the creative ideas, political support, and active participation of the people. The people will accept, support, and enthusiastically take part in carrying out the Party's guidelines when they see that those guidelines answer their needs and aspirations. The ultimate victory of Vietnam's development is deeply rooted in the strength of the Vietnamese people.

At the same time, the Party's directions and policies must originate not only in the reality of Vietnam and its history, but also in the reality of the world and era in which we all live. In today's globalized world, no country can stand aloof from the world community and its complex interactions. We therefore intend to proactively integrate into the world and implement a foreign policy whose pillars are independence, self-reliance, peace, cooperation, and shared development. Vietnam is committed to multi-lateralization and

diversification of its international relations on a basis of equality, mutual benefit, and respect for national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in each other's internal affairs.

Even more important is that we should be consistent and firm on the foundation of Marxism-Leninism, a scientific and revolutionary doctrine of the working class and the masses of laborers. The radical scientific and revolutionary characteristics of Marxism-Leninism are lasting values and have been pursued and implemented by revolutionaries around the globe. It will continue to develop and prove its vitality in the reality of revolutions and scientific development. We need to selectively accept and supplement in the spirit of criticism and creativity of the latest ideological and scientific achievements so that our doctrine will be forever fresh, energized, and filled with the spirit of the era. We are aware that ours is an extremely complex and unprecedented undertaking, which will require us to learn the lessons we will need as we go along. The steps we have already taken are just the first steps of a long journey...The goals of socialism may be the same in every country, but the methods necessary to achieve those goals are diverse, depending on the specific circumstances of each country. Our journey will demand all of our ingenuity and vitality.