

Observations on the 1997 Thai Binh Uprising in Northern Vietnam

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Introduction

In the spring of 1997 the Vietnamese government was caught off-guard when a large-scale uprising occurred in the northern province of Thai Binh. This province, located some 80 kilometers southeast of Hanoi, had long been regarded as an important bastion of the revolution. Not only had it provided a number of distinguished officials to the government and Communist Party, it has also been a region that during the years of agricultural collectivization (1959–1991) had featured several of the most famous agricultural cooperatives, notably Vu Thang in Kien Xuong district. The government's surprise related not only to the unexpected location for an uprising, but also its ferocity. Angry residents burned down homes, took over public buildings, held police officers hostage, and even conducted symbolic trials of select officials. The uprising also took on an international dimension as Vietnamese living in France, Germany, and the United States organized demonstrations in support of Thai Binh's protestors. The government's response to the uprising relied both on the heavy-handed deployment of security forces and the careful solicitation and redress of local residents' grievances. After a period of almost one year, the uprising had largely played itself out and Thai Binh returned to a tense peace.

This article's purpose is to examine in close detail both the nature and reasons for what is now known in Vietnamese discourse as the "Thai Binh Incident" (*Vu Thai Binh*). The first objective is to provide a detailed chronology of the uprising in terms of the timing of the events and their nature. The second objective is to consider the question of why the Thai Binh uprising occurred when it did. An initial appraisal indicates that such factors as poverty, the existence of agitators intent upon violent confrontation, and official corruption and arrogance all played a role. While all factors will be considered, an argument will be made that the likely most significant factor was the severity of official corruption and the way in which it violated people's expectations regarding the behavior of officials and the potential acceptability of corruption. Since the cessation of the uprising in 1998, the government has been reluctant to allow scholars and journalists into the region to probe more deeply into the uprising. The analysis presented here therefore relies on second hand accounts as presented in both the Vietnamese and foreign press, and other sources. The conclusions should therefore be considered as a tentative explanation that requires first hand research for its confirmation or refutation.

Chronology of the Uprising

The Thai Binh Uprising began in the period between March and May of 1997, but in order to understand its emergence, it is necessary to first examine its historical backdrop. The period between the late-1950's and the late 1970's had represented the high point of the Vietnamese revolution. In line with the policies of economic centralization that had been championed by the Soviet Union and China, the Vietnamese had aggressively pursued a policy of collectivization that, in the rural areas, had led to the establishment of agricultural cooperatives across northern Vietnam. Thai Binh, a predominately agricultural province situated on the rich alluvial soils of the Red River's lower reaches, had been in the forefront of the cooperativization movement. Its cooperatives had been among the most successful and had enjoyed higher yields than those in many other provinces. This is not to say though that Thai Binh represented a pure example of revolutionary fervor. Similar to other regions around the country, many Thai Binh farmers were reluctant to form and resisted working in the cooperatives, and the cooperative administrations also had their share of official corruption (see Fforde 1989). Still, while cooperatives from other regions struggled to produce two tonnes of paddy per hectare, many Thai Binh cooperatives frequently exceeded that.

Following the introduction of the Renovation policy (*Doi Moi*) in 1986 that marked the commencement of the transition to a market economy, Thai Binh's cooperatives were dissolved and the land redistributed to the farmers. The process of redistribution, which was directed by local officials, took place in the early 1990s. From the perspective of many farmers, the redistribution was problematic, if not outright corrupt. More than that, the dissolution of the cooperatives also initiated a process in which state control over local officials decreased. As a result, Thai Binh witnessed not only an increase in official corruption in the form of illegal appropriation of property and revenues, it also experienced an increase in burdensome taxes and other levees. As the 1990s wore on, these burdens grew more onerous. By early 1997, the people of the province were suffering heavily from forced labor contributions and heavy taxation. The event that appears to have triggered the outbreak of Thai Binh Uprising was the imposition by local officials of a set of new taxes in the early spring. Many residents were outraged by this new burden and members of several communities peacefully presented a set of petitions to officials in order to have the taxes dropped. The officials, who many residents already considered corrupt, arrogant, and autocratic, simply ignored their entreaties.

This rebuff appears to have transformed the public mood from one of peaceful negotiation to outright confrontation. Precise details of exactly what happened are difficult to come by, but the protestors' actions seem to have followed two main courses. In the first wave of protests, public anger boiled over and turned violent. During April and particularly May, protestors destroyed the homes of several officials and also damaged numerous public buildings, including the People's Committee for Thai Binh province (the highest level administrative organ for the province) and many police stations.¹⁾ Protestors apparently threw bricks and lit buildings on fire.

Two points of particularly severe confrontation were the districts of Quynh Phu, where protestors fought a series of running battles with the police, and Quynh My, where they attacked several police stations. But protestors did not confine their anger to buildings. They also beat up a number of officials and police officers, and took a number of them hostage. In Quynh Hoa commune, protestors captured twenty policemen and held them hostage for five days. In several locales the protestors apparently conducted trials for corrupt officials (Reuters, October 21, 1999). Concerns at the national level became so strong at this point that the government evacuated a number of officials from the province.

Violent incidents tapered off by mid-June and protestors began pursuing their second course of action, peaceful demonstrations around public buildings. In mid-June, thousands of protestors began a series of demonstrations in front of the provincial People's Committee in Thai Binh city. In spite of the government's attempts to defuse the situation, tensions in the province ran high into July. Thousands of people continued to stage sit-ins in front of the provincial headquarters. The situation was particularly tense in Thai Thuy and Quynh Phu districts as local protests in and around administrative offices were so great that many offices basically stopped functioning. These demonstrations apparently had another unexpected but significant consequence. July 20th was the scheduled date for national elections in which voters would choose both representatives for the National Assembly as well as commune, district, and province level officials. Voting normally takes place in official buildings, such as those housing People's Committees or People's Councils. With large numbers of such facilities under siege, elections could not be held in 52 communes, despite the government's dispatching of several hundred security police to secure the buildings. The residents of the affected communes instead appointed administrators and executives themselves (FVA, July 7, 1997).²⁾

Although the government was caught off-guard by the size and intensity of the protests, they mobilized a response to it relatively quickly. In mid-June they sent their first delegation to the province to investigate the situation. This team was charged with asserting control over local grievances against officials, notably those involving corruption, smuggling, authoritarian attitudes, and land and property disputes. With the situation continuing to linger, the government in July sent Pham The Duyet, a politburo member and Thai Binh native, to help sort things out. At the same time, the government employed its security forces to arrest some one hundred people. On July 24th the government for the first time informed foreign journalists of the unrest in the province and declared that a number of steps had been taken to restore order, including the arrest of a number of lower level officials. Several of the latter, apparently, appeared on television to confess their misdeeds (FVA, July 7, 1997). In August the government stepped up its efforts to calm the situation. It started off by taking a series of measures to punish some lower level officials. It then introduced what it is described as the "10 big policies" that would address many of the protestors concerns, such as tax reduction, the creation of capital for the development of rural infrastruc-

ture, and a licensing system for land use. The government also recognized that poverty, falling commodity prices, and underemployment played a significant role in the creation of rural discontent. It therefore implemented measures to encourage the formation of farmers cooperatives, put export taxes in place to encourage the local processing of agricultural commodities, and called for controls on inflation and exchange rates to make agricultural products more competitive internationally (Reuters, August 8, 1997).

At mid-month accounts began to appear in the state-controlled media about problems in the countryside. On August 8th an article in the newspaper *Cong An Nhan Dan* (The People's Police) revealed that in the previous seven months, police units had discovered "internal contradictions" in no less than 67 communes in Thanh Hoa province south of Thai Binh (Reuters, August 8, 1997). Many of these related to land and corruption problems. One week later, the newspaper *Lao Dong* (Labor) published some of the preliminary results of official investigations in Thai Binh. These revealed a stunning amount of malfeasance on the part of local officials. At the most general level, the government had already criticized officials for engaging in what a Foreign Ministry spokesman described as "some non-transparent activities for projects for rural development" (Reuters, August 7, 1997). One of the most remarkable aspects of the new revelations centered on the issue of educational fees collected from school children. A report in *Lao Dong* revealed that although these fees were supposed to be determined by official regulations, Thai Binh officials collected a wide range of unapproved fees, including labor, hygiene, security, and others. Officials in the district and province education departments then used the proceeds of both legal and illegal fees to finance travel, office parties, entertaining, and cash bonuses. They also used revenues to make technical improvements in equipment they used for their own purposes (Reuters, August 16, 1997). To demonstrate the government's continued seriousness, politburo member Pham The Duyet again visited the province near the end of the month.

The government's dedication to revealing the true dimensions of the problem and their solicitousness toward the protesters derived from a number of different sources. Historically, rural areas have provided a significant base of support for the government. Cognizant of the growing wealth gap between urban and rural areas, the declining level of the standard of living in the countryside, and the increasing levels of corruption and malfeasance by officials throughout the country, the government did not want to risk further alienating their natural constituency. The government also feared that unrest in Thai Binh would provide a catalyst for the spread of unrest in other regions, particularly in the extremely poor provinces between the northern province of Thanh Hoa and the central province of Quang Binh. The 1990's had seen a number of small scale protests erupt across the country, usually related to land conflicts following the dissolution of the agricultural cooperatives. In early 1997 large-scale protests had broken out in Hanoi over plans to construct a luxury golf course (Reuters, June 13, 1997). Although they have not been fully authenticated, it appears

that protests did break out in Thanh Hoa province in May or June, and in Nghe An, Hung Yen, and outside Hanoi (Reuters, August 7, 1997). (At the same time, though for different reasons, protests over land control were taking place in southern Vietnam (see Reuters, November 10, 1997)). A final reason for concern undoubtedly derived from the composition of the protestors. At one level the government attempted to portray the uprising as the work of small bands of disaffected trouble-makers who served as *agents-provocateurs*, but they also recognized that while that description might apply to those burning down houses and holding officials hostage, the groups holding sit-ins in front of the Thai Binh People's Committee and other offices contained large numbers of women, children, and elderly. Their presence signalled to the government that disaffection ran much deeper than a small group of angry men.

As the government tried to sort out its domestic problems, the Thai Binh Uprising also became an international political problem. The government maintained tight controls over press reporting during the uprising. The first foreign journalists were not allowed into the province until February 1998, but reports still leaked out, and many anti-Communist overseas Vietnamese seized the opportunity to protest against injustice and oppression in their homeland. The first demonstration took place in Paris on August 10th. On August 16th residents in Little Saigon, the vernacular name for the Vietnamese area of Orange County, California, held a candlelight vigil. The next day, another demonstration was held in Houston, Texas, which also has a large Vietnamese community. On August 23rd a large crowd demonstrated in front of the Vietnamese embassy in Washington, D.C. They were led by a group of 300 children who carried a banner that read, "Bravo Thai Binh Uprising." Residents of San Jose in northern California organized a "Week for Thai Binh-Xuan Loc" from August 24th to September 1st. These demonstrators met with US officials and the media to give them petitions to increase support for the issue. At the same time as these demonstrations, Vietnamese in Paris organized a three day hunger strike in Trocadero Square. On September 2nd, a group of demonstrators protested and held a hunger strike before the Vietnamese embassy in Bonn, Germany. Finally, on September 7th, another demonstration took place in Little Saigon that featured several thousand protestors and air planes flying over head pulling banners that read "Freedom for Vietnam." It is doubtful that the foreign demonstrations had any demonstrable effect on the decision-makers in Hanoi, but it did bring a measure of unwelcome international attention.

The government's announcement in August of a new set of policies to assist farmers had been designed to further ease the situation, but the trouble did not go away. Groups of protestors remained in front of the provincial People's Committee and violence once again erupted in Quynh Hoa commune where protestors took eighteen police officers hostage (Reuters, February 18, 1998). Several were apparently tied, beaten, and even starved for several days. Residents in Quynh Phu district set up loudspeakers in order to encourage support for their protests (Reuters, August 27, 1997). The government responded more forcefully this time by sending several hundred members of crack police units to trouble spots. Several hundred people were

apparently arrested as well, including some regarded as leaders of the protests, several of whom had previously been expelled from the party (Reuters, August 27, 1997). The government also continued its campaign to clean up the ranks of local officialdom. By September, some 50 officials had been relieved of their positions, another 30 were under investigation for corruption, and yet others had been expelled from the party (AP, November 10, 1997). In a revealing admission of many of the problems facing the country, a September article in *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (The People's Army) commented that over the previous decade such instances of corruption and official malfeasance had increased dramatically in the country's poor central provinces. Not surprisingly, the conservative daily argued that the increase in such negative changes derived from the introduction of the market economy (Reuters, September 16, 1997). In late October the Politburo ordered self-criticism sessions for all party members and officials in the province in order to help restore public confidence in officialdom and force the latter to recognize their mistakes and errors that had produced the situation (Reuters, October 27, 1997). Soon after, prime minister Pham Van Khai, in a bid to raise commodity prices, asked state food companies to purchase rice from farmers in northern Vietnam. Other incentives in the form of low-cost loans to rice-purchasing firms and tax-free exports of unhusked rice to China, Laos, and Cambodia were also introduced (Reuters, October 21, 1999). The purge of local officials concluded in early November when the provincial administration dismissed Vu Xuan Truong, the provincial governor, and Vu Manh Ring, the secretary of the provincial Communist Party cell (AP, November 10, 1997).

On the 21st and 2nd of January the government conducted an open trial of thirteen people involved in the protests in Thai Thinh commune of Thai Thuy district. The government had insisted on the open format in order to make the proceedings transparent and strengthen public confidence. At the trial's end, thirteen defendants were convicted and received sentences of varying lengths. One woman, Ngo Thi Duyen, was convicted of disrupting public order, but then pardoned for helping the prosecution. Six men were convicted of variety of different offences, including disrupting public order, intentionally causing injury, and damaging citizens' property. Of these, one received a five year sentence, three others a seven year sentence, and three more sentence of seven years or more (The sentences for the remaining six were not reported) (BBC, January 27, 1998). Two weeks later, the Communist Party newspaper *Nhan Dan* (The People) published a lengthy front page article that detailed many of the problems in Thai Binh and attributed them to widespread corruption within official circles and also the failure of officials to appropriately respond to the citizenry's complaints. At month's end a new set of government programs were introduced to help the country's rural residents. These included the lowering of electricity prices, easier access to loans for farmers, increased oversight with local taxation, and a reduction of red tape in resolving land ownership problems (Reuters, February 5, 1998).

The government felt that the situation had stabilized enough by February 1998 that the Foreign Ministry organized its first and only arranged visit to the region for for-

eign journalists. As will be discussed below, the comments made to many visitors revealed much about local residents' thoughts on the uprising. What was clear to the visitors was that while the situation may have stabilized, tensions still ran high. Local officials sought to prevent or limit contact between visitors and residents, and the latter were reluctant to fully speak their mind for fear of reprisals. Many commented that a number of people were still in police custody awaiting trial. Others commented that even though a number of officials had been dismissed, there were still individual cases where people sought justice over the actions of particular corrupt local officials (Reuters, February 19, 1998). The following June the provincial Communist Party chief Pham Van Tho commented in a speech to the Thai Binh Farmer's Association that many problems still remained in the province. In the sixteen previous months, the administration had received complaints from people in 251 of the province's 285 communes. Of this number, the situation in 207 communes was what he described as "complicated," while in another 30 it was still tense (Reuters, June 27, 1998). Nevertheless, he did not avoid the fact that a lack of democracy and other shortcomings on the part of local officials had produced the crisis. Since his speech, Thai Binh has remained largely quiet, though conflicts and protests in Nam Dinh province, Ha Nam province, and areas near Hanoi all illustrate that the government has yet to adequately resolve the problems that produced the uprising (see AFP, May 26, 1998; Reuters, June 20, 1998; Reuters, October 21, 1998).

Preliminary Thoughts on the Uprising's Causes

To explain the causes for the Thai Binh Uprising, it is important to recognize that a monocausal explanation is inadequate. A wide variety of factors were at work, many of which had existed in Thai Binh life for years, yet for some reason their particular coincidence in the spring of 1997 seems to have set the process in motion. It is also difficult to assess the relative importance of the different factors. As will be discussed below, poverty, corruption, official arrogance, and the presence of individuals ready to violently oppose local officials, all played a part, but without first hand access to participants, it is impossible to say which factor played the dominant role, or whether different factors had different levels of importance in different communities in the province. Nevertheless, some tentative conclusions can be drawn from the limited data that is available.

The best starting point for understanding the Thai Binh Uprising is to recognize the province's widespread poverty. The implementation of economic reforms since 1986 has brought about a significant increase in wealth in Vietnam, but its distribution has been extremely uneven. The country's major cities, such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, have seen the arrival of international businesses, golf courses, luxury hotels, and restaurants, but the rural areas have experienced either limited or no real growth. A 1997 World Bank study on poverty in Vietnam concluded that at least 45 percent of children under five years of age are malnourished (AP, October 27, 1997). A different study concluded that 57 percent of rural Vietnamese live below the poverty line (AP,

October 27, 1997). One study reckoned that even while the rice export trade had grown so much in the 1990s that Vietnam became the world's second largest rice exporter, those directly involved in rice production usually had annual incomes of only 150 to 250 US dollars. By contrast, average annual income for urban residents was between 750 to 1500 US dollars (AP, October 27, 1997). Wage possibilities in such rural provinces as Thai Binh are so low that large numbers of men illegally migrate to larger cities like Hanoi to eke out a living as pedicab drivers or construction workers. Many others leave because there simply is not enough work to be done in the province. For the vast majority of Thai Binh residents, life is as difficult as it ever was during wartime or under collectivized agriculture. Their incomes remain small, there is not enough high-paying work to be done, food is often scarce or inadequate, their opportunities for socio-economic advancement are limited or non-existent, and while they might spend months working in the fields, they see that the potential benefits of economic reform have largely passed them by. Awareness of this latter point, some observers have commented, featured prominently in the minds of many protestors.

By contrast, residents also saw that many local officials had become quite wealthy since the introduction of economic reforms, frequently through illegitimate means. Many officials took trips, ate well, had nice homes, and drove expensive motorcycles. This turn of events had negative consequences in two main ways. To begin with, the income disparities intensified the sense that the benefits of economic reform were passing the common people by and strengthened the desire of some to find ways to be included in the process. A witness to the uprising commented that in one case, a group of protestors descended upon government offices and declared, "We were all poor five years ago. Now we notice you have become rich. Teach us how you did it so we don't have to be poor anymore" (Time Asia, October 6, 1997). Second, wealth disparities combined with official corruption intensified residents' discontentment with local officials. The government's own investigations revealed the depth of the corruption by local officialdom. Not only were they engaged in smuggling, embezzlement, and other illegal activities, they routinely imposed onerous, unsanctioned taxes on the people. And in return, officials did little to provide the services and programs people needed to improve their lives, but instead used their ill-gotten wealth to travel, hold parties, and entertain guests. For many Thai Binh residents, already extremely poor and short of cash, the collection and misuse of these funds created a considerable source of tension and dissatisfaction.

A third factor that served as a catalyst was the presence of people who were willing to turn the protests into a violent confrontation. It is undoubtedly the case that some people used the occasion of the protests to settle old scores with their adversaries. Given that the protests were local in nature and directed toward familiar officials, this likely played a role in the hostage takings, beatings, and property destruction. The more difficult question to answer is who these people were. Judging from the verdicts in the trial and other limited information, they appear to largely have been men, although it appears that some women played a role. Government press reports, apart

from their consistent references to “bad elements,” commented that some individuals were former party members who had been expelled from the party. Beyond this information, little is known of who these instigators were, yet their presence likely helped to initiate and maintain the protest’s momentum. Nevertheless, the government emphasis on bad elements in their official pronouncements obscured the more troubling reality that they saw at the local level. True, there were undoubtedly violent instigators who stirred up the people, but the uprising maintained its momentum through the efforts and participation of a broad spectrum of the population. It was women, children, and the elderly who maintained the vigils in front of government offices and kept the pressure on local officials. And it was this latter element of local officialdom, and not central government policies, that the government recognized to be at the center of the people’s anger. Mass participation in the protests demonstrates the inadequacy of the *agent provocateur*-type explanation.

The final possible reason for the uprising was the corruption of local officials. This is potentially the most convincing explanation, but it requires proper contextualization. As noted above, corruption has long been a part of Vietnamese political life. An examination of the government gazette and other official documents from the 1940’s onward reveals that corruption has been a consistent part of Vietnamese political life. An argument can even be made that in some cases corruption was culturally sanctioned. An oft-quoted adage from the pre-revolutionary period stated, “If a man becomes a mandarin, his lineage mates can ask for favors” (*Mot nguoi lam quan, ca ho duoc nho*). This set of ideas remains salient today, a point evident in the many lucrative business endeavours controlled by close relations of senior Communist Party officials. Local ideas regarding the behavior of officials have often encouraged them to ignore official dictates in order to bring benefits to their community. Derogatorily referred to as “localism” (*dia phuong chu nghia*) by Ho Chi Minh, this set of values constituted one of the most consistent sources of corruption during the agricultural cooperative period as local officials used their posts to help out their locality, while simultaneously scuttling official policies. Both of these set of ideas and practices have helped maintain a measure of corruption in Vietnamese political life, despite its regular denunciation by the party.

Given then that corruption has always existed and was in many ways tolerated, the only remaining possible explanation is that official behavior and corruption reached a level that was intolerable to the mass of local residents. This explanation appears compelling for a number of reasons. Research from other areas of northern Vietnam has demonstrated that while a measure of corruption by local officials is tolerated, it needs to be kept within specific parameters for it to remain so (see Malarney 1997). The first parameter is that corrupt activities should, if they take advantage of a specific party, take advantage of those from outside the locality. Thus, for example, smuggling can be tolerated, as can the appropriation of state funds or property, if they do little harm to locals. The second parameter is that corrupt activities should be dedicated toward the common good, but if they are not, any individual gain should be

balanced by assistance to the community. To use an example from another locality, the residents of a commune near Hanoi were aware that the chairman of their agricultural cooperative was corrupt and had enriched himself by illegal means. However, residents also recognized that in his capacity as chairman his management practices had made the cooperative very productive, and he also had violated a number of government regulations to the benefit of his community. Conversely, later in his career he stopped helping out the community, further enriched himself and his cronies, and was publically rebuked by his co-residents when they refused to elect him to the office of president of the commune's People's Committee, even when he had the full backing of the local Communist Party units. The third and final parameter is that officials, even if they are corrupt, should remain responsive to the demands and concerns of the local community. To return to the early years of the cooperative chairman's career, one of his greatest assets in local life was the way in which he was accessible to residents and responded to their concerns about the cooperative's management and other issues. It was true that he did use his office for his own gain, but he did not alienate the local population by appearing distant and unconcerned. Instead, he maintained moral links to the community and remained a member of it.

The model of tolerated corruption just discussed presents an image of a local official who can be corrupt, but who must at the same time retain his connection and commitment to the local community. If he loses the latter, those within his community will turn against him. Recent elections, in which corrupt and/or arrogant officials have been voted out of office, demonstrates the power of this model in local life. In Thai Binh province, it seems reasonable to tentatively conclude that one of the primary factors that led such a broad range of the population to participate in the uprising was their own sense that local officialdom, which had become so corrupt and so detached from their own lives and concerns, needed to be brought to book for their behavior. Instead of representing a group of people who were part of a local moral polity, officials had become detached exploiters who cared nothing for the citizenry's concerns and felt no obligation to respond to them. It is significant, I would argue, that the event that set the protests in motion was not simply corruption, but the ignoring by local officials of the request by residents to eliminate a recently introduced tax. It is also significant that in the rhetoric of the uprising expressed both by the government and local residents, such expressions as authoritarian attitudes, high-handedness, lack of democracy, and injustice featured prominently. In a sense, the uprising can be regarded as an attempt by the people of Thai Binh to reassert their control and moral vision over local political life. As the government and participants both noted, the uprising was not about central government policies. It instead grew out of the people's rejection of local officials' behavior. By taking officials hostage, burning down their homes, and preventing the administration from functioning, Thai Binh residents demonstrated to the entire nation that their ideas and values needed to again become part of local political life.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, the conclusions presented in this article should be considered tentative. They have been pieced together from second hand sources and more data is needed to understand such questions as which officials were taken hostage and beaten, whose houses were destroyed, and the nature of individual participants' motivations. Nevertheless, the uprising's protracted nature and widespread support raise significant questions about the state of local politics in contemporary Vietnam. Recent research on the cooperative and reform periods has shown that contrary to the image of a powerful state that was able to impose its will on the countryside, the central authorities have in fact had to contend with a wide range of local desires, and these likely had a demonstrable impact on government policies. Whether regarding agricultural production or cultural practices, central authorities have often had to make significant compromises with local demands (see Fforde 1989; Kerkvliet 1995; Malarney 1993; Malarney 1996). The question this raises now is whether, as the reform process continues and its associated socio-economic problems intensify, those who have been left out will become even more aggressive in asserting their own vision of what the Vietnamese polity should be and how the government will respond.

Notes

- 1) The administrative structure in rural Vietnam divides into three levels: province (*tin*h), district (*huyen*), and commune (*xa*). The latter is normally composed of one or more villages (*thon* in official discourse, *lang* in the vernacular). These three levels each have a People's Committee (*Uy Ban Nhan Dan*) that constitutes the main executive administrative organ for that level.
- 2) The provenance of this information, the fiercely anti-Communist Free Vietnam Alliance, makes its veracity open to question. Other references to the Free Vietnam Alliance should be treated with similar caution.

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