

‘It’s time for the Indochinese Revolution to show its true colours’: The radical turn of Vietnamese politics in 1948

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Cold War historians have neglected the significance of the year 1948 for Indochina. Based on new sources, this paper shows critical shifts in politics within the Vietnamese nationalist movement in 1948. These were the result of converging developments during late 1947 and early 1948, including changes in international politics, in French–Vietnamese relations, and in the relationship between non-communist and communist leaders within the Việt Minh state. By late 1948, Party ideologues were already looking beyond national independence towards building a new socialist regime. The nationalist coalition that had led the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was seriously damaged in 1948, even though civil war would only break out several years later. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, 1948 thus marked a new period: the beginning of the end of the ‘united front’ period and cooperation with bourgeois nationalists.

Introduction

Cold War historians have neglected the significance of 1948 as a key turning point in Indochina. They have instead focused on 1950, the year when the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) successfully secured support from China and the Soviet bloc and when the French and the US-led anti-communist camp concluded an agreement with Vietnamese Emperor Bảo Đại and established the State of Vietnam as an alternative to the communist-led Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Based on recently released internal party documents, Vietnamese newspapers, and memoirs and interviews of non-communist ministers in the DRV government during 1945–50, I hope to show the critical shifts which occurred in the politics of the Vietnamese nationalist movement in 1948 that heretofore have been widely ignored.¹

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¹ See Kim Ninh, *A world transformed: The politics of culture in revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), chs. 2 and 3, which focuses on the shifts in cultural policy

These shifts were the result of two converging trends during late 1947 and early 1948. One involved the establishment of the Cominform, the announcement of the Zhdanov doctrine, the military victory of Chinese communists in Manchuria and their new land redistribution policy, the electoral loss of the Left in France, and the success of the ICP's nationalist arch-rivals such as Bảo Đại and Trần Trọng Kim in securing French support. While many of these external events are well known, the rising internal conflict within the DRV government between communist and non-communist leaders – the second trend – has thus far escaped observers' attention. Stimulated by this conflict and encouraged by changes in international politics, ICP leaders decided to take their revolution down the radical road congruent with their belief in communism.²

This change was shown in important shifts in land policy and efforts at party consolidation during 1948. A Plenum in early 1948 decided to reinvigorate land policy and intensify peasant mobilisation. The Party also planned (but later would have to delay) the convening of a Party Congress in late 1948 to re-establish the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) that had been publicly dissolved, but in fact gone underground, in late 1945. Party newspapers authorised open criticisms of prominent non-communist leaders in the Việt Minh state, leading to intense debates and open rifts between communists and non-communists. By late 1948, Party ideologues were already looking beyond national independence towards building a new socialist regime. The coalition that led the DRV was effectively destroyed in 1948, although we only see this being manifested gradually in 1949–50 as power was taken away from non-communist ministers and many non-communist DRV officials left the *maquis*³ to 'dinh tế' (leave for French-controlled cities) in frustration. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, 1948 thus marked the end of the open united front period, here meaning the end of the nationalist coalition that had risen to power in Vietnam in 1945. Yet unlike elsewhere, the internal politics of the DRV during the 1945–50 period remained obscure until recently as non-communists had been either silent or ignored, and important communist documents had not been released.⁴

and on the ensuing clash between party ideologues and cultural intellectuals during 1948–50, and which agrees with the argument here that 1948 represented a watershed in the Vietnamese revolution.

2 A full review of changing ICP policy on class struggle over time is beyond the scope of this paper. Essentially the ICP placed a heavy emphasis on class struggle during its first decade of existence, but downplayed it from 1941 to 1948. Prior to 1948, ICP policy on class struggle had always been strongly influenced by Comintern policy directions while also reflecting the internal debates about specific policy measures between radical and moderate leaders. For a standard treatment of ICP policy and the Comintern-ICP relationship in the 1930s, see Huỳnh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982). Elsewhere I have analysed in detail ICP policy during the 1940s and 1950s concerning the relationship between national revolution and class struggle; see Tuong Vu, 'Paths to development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming)'; and Vu, 'From cheering to volunteering: Vietnamese communists and the arrival of the Cold War, 1940–1951', in *Connecting histories: The Cold War and decolonization in Asia (1945–1962)*, ed. Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). Still, we know more about the internal debates between radical and moderate ICP leaders in the 1930s than in later periods.

3 Guerrilla forces. For an account of an intellectual who left the *maquis*, see Phạm Duy, *Hồi ký: Cách mạng và thời kháng chiến* (Memoir – The revolution and resistance period) (PDC Musical Productions, 1991).

4 This paper benefits especially from two memoirs recently published by Mr Vũ Đình Hòe. These memoirs incorporated the unpublished memoirs of several of Mr Vũ's close associates such as Phan Anh and Vũ Trọng Khánh. Mr Vũ Đình Hòe, born in 1912, is the only non-communist minister in

The paper is divided into four sections. The first discusses the compromises which the ICP had to make in late 1945 when they seized power. Understanding these compromises, which were deliberately erased from public memory by communist leaders until recently, is key to understanding the significance of 1948. The second part reviews developments during 1947 regarding the war between France and the DRV, as well as other international events. The third focuses on the troubles inside the Việt Minh state that developed after two years of collaboration between the communist and non-communist leaders. The fourth analyses the breakup of the coalition in 1948 due to the ICP's new policies. In the conclusion, I will speculate on why events in Vietnam unfolded more slowly than those in other Southeast Asian countries.

The forgotten compromises

With Vũ Ngự Chiêu's path-breaking work, scholars of Vietnam's modern history have begun to question the assumption that the Việt Minh government represented a radical break with the Trần Trọng Kim (TTK) government that had existed before it for a short time (April to August 1945).⁵ This assumption is due in part to the lack of records relating to the TTK government. More likely, observers may have (consciously or unconsciously) believed Việt Minh propaganda and communist historians (e.g. Trần Huy Liệu) that the TTK regime was only a puppet government that virtually collapsed in August 1945 as the communists swept to power on a popular mandate. Here is another case of the winners writing history that covered his own tracks. I intend to show that, in order to secure their ascendancy and survival in late 1945, the communists had to make compromises with supporters and members of the TTK government, with the colonial elites and colonial bureaucracy, and with local mass groups. Understanding these compromises will help us understand the significance of 1948, when these compromises fell apart and contributed to the subsequent civil war between North and South Vietnam.

The story of these compromises began with Japan entering French Indochina in 1940 through negotiation. Facing the Japanese threat, the Vichy government agreed to make Indochinese ports, roads, labour and materials available for Japanese wartime needs. In return, the French were allowed to maintain their rule over Indochina.⁶ Only in March 1945, after the fall of Vichy in France and in anticipation of an imminent Allied landing in Indochina, did the Japanese decide to overthrow French rule.

the Việt Minh government (1945–54) who is still alive. I thank Mr Vũ and his son, Professor Vũ Thế Khôi, for granting numerous interviews since 2003.

5 Vũ Ngự Chiêu, 'The other side of the revolution: The Empire of Vietnam (March–August 1945)', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 45, 2 (1986): 293–328. Vũ Ngự Chiêu shows how the TTK government created favourable conditions for a successful Việt Minh seizure of power in August 1945. See also Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese revolution of 1945* (London: Sage Publications, 1991); and David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The quest for power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

6 The role of the Japanese in the Indochinese future was less straightforward than was the case in Indonesia. In the Dutch Indies, Japanese forces landed, quickly defeated the Dutch colonial army, and brought back prominent indigenous nationalists to work as advisors to the Japanese military government with a promise of future independence. However, in Vietnam, with the French still in place, the Japanese did little besides keeping their options open by establishing contacts with Vietnamese groups such as Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài, and by protecting a few nationalists from French suppression.

After internment of French colonial administrators and soldiers in March 1945, the Japanese allowed the Vietnamese Emperor to declare an independent Empire of Vietnam (EVN) and set up a Vietnamese administration in the following month. Rather than selecting experienced anti-colonial nationalists (as they did in Java), the Japanese picked a group of successful but politically inexperienced professionals and intellectuals to form a new government in Vietnam.⁷ The Prime Minister of this government, Trần Trọng Kim, had been trained in France and was known primarily as a school inspector and historian.⁸

Although its leaders had limited political experience and this government lasted only four months, its historical role was by no means inconsequential.⁹ Rallying to its side were many influential urban groups such as the nationalist Greater Viet Party¹⁰ and the *Thanh nghị* [Commentaries] group.¹¹ Phan Anh and Vũ Văn Hiến, two French-trained lawyers from *Thanh nghị* served as Minister of Youth and Minister of Justice respectively. The *Thanh nghị* group set up the New Vietnam Party [*Tân Việt Nam Hội*] to mobilise mass support for the new government.¹² The Central Committee of this Party included 33 prominent intellectuals and professionals who were part of a broad network of like-minded friends who founded or contributed to *Thanh nghị*.¹³ In its brief tenure, the TTK government greatly expanded the opportunities for mass political action by removing press censorship, releasing thousands of political prisoners from colonial prisons and launching a vigorous youth movement in the cities. Without these moves, the massive spontaneous uprisings that resulted in the seizure of power when the Japanese surrendered in August 1945 would not have happened.

The Japanese coup of March 1945 catapulted the TTK government to power but this event was at the same time a gift from the Japanese to the underground communist movement.¹⁴ The French colonial police and intelligence up till then had been effective in suppressing communists. In 1940, the colonial police and army crushed a rebellion led by the ICP in southern Vietnam and executed nearly all its leaders. In 1941, Hồ Chí Minh returned to the border area of Vietnam and China and sought to revive the movement. He and surviving leaders of the ICP's underground northern branch set up *Việt Nam Độc lập Đồng minh* (Independence League of Vietnam or Việt Minh), a front organisation controlled by communists

7 For discussion of the many hypotheses regarding Japanese motives in doing this, see Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese revolution of 1945*, pp. 282–6; Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, pp. 116–17.

8 Nguyễn Quốc Thắng and Nguyễn Bá Thề, *Từ điển nhân vật lịch sử Việt Nam* [Dictionary of Vietnamese historical figures] (Hà Nội: Văn Hóa, 1997), pp. 894–5.

9 Vũ Ngự Chiêu, 'The other side of the revolution'.

10 See François Guillemot, 'Vietnamese nationalist revolutionaries and the Japanese Occupation: The case of the Đại Việt parties (1936–1946)', in *Imperial Japan and national identities in Asia, 1895–1945*, ed. Li Narangoa and Robert Cribb (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 221–48.

11 This was composed of many lawyers, doctors and professionals who published the journal *Thanh nghị* in Hanoi from 1940–45. *Thanh nghị* is often translated literally as 'Clear discussion'.

12 In my interview with Mr Vũ Đình Hòe (Hanoi, Dec. 2003), who was the secretary of this party, he explained that 'Hội' at the time also meant 'party' and not just 'association'.

13 Vũ Đình Hòe, *Hồi ký Thanh nghị* (Memoir about *Thanh Nghị*) (Hanoi: Văn Học, 1995), pp. 182–9. The New Vietnam Party would be suppressed by the Japanese in July 1945 and many of its leaders would join the Việt Minh.

14 Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese revolution of 1945*, p. 247.

but open to all.¹⁵ Following the Chinese strategy, ICP leaders sought to build up a guerrilla force and succeeded to some degree in mobilising local support for their cause.¹⁶ Under the sponsorship of Zhang Fakui, a Guomindang (GMD) general, Hồ reluctantly worked with Vietnamese nationalist groups in southern China to form a similar front, but this amounted to little.¹⁷ Yet before March 1945, the Việt Minh had little formal organisation and maintained a precarious resistance in the face of fierce French repression.¹⁸ This changed after the Japanese overthrew the French in March 1945. By that time, Japanese military commanders were concerned mainly about preparing for an invasion by Allied forces, not about preventing a domestic rebellion. The countryside was thus left open to agitation and the Việt Minh quickly filled this space.¹⁹ While publicly the Việt Minh denounced the TTK government as a Japanese puppet,²⁰ behind the scenes the communists sought to convert its officials to their cause.²¹ This paved the way for later compromises.

The TTK government was only four months old when the Japanese surrendered. In the wake of massive unrest following this event and a Việt Minh challenge in the northern part of the country, this government resigned and agreed to transfer power to its rival without a fight. This compromise was significant because this government could have attempted to suppress the communists: in Hanoi, where the Việt Minh was strongest, pro-Việt Minh groups had fewer than 1,000 supporters with about 100 rifles, whereas the TTK government had at its disposal 1,500 armed civil guardsmen.²² In return for their compromise, many EVN officials were subsequently offered positions in the Việt Minh government as ministers and deputy ministers. These included Phan Anh (Minister of Youth), Phan Kế Toại (Viceroy of North Vietnam), Nguyễn Văn Hưởng (Phan Kế Toại's Chief of Staff), Tạ Quang Bửu (Phan Anh's assistant), Vũ Trọng Khánh (Mayor of Hải Phòng), Nguyễn Mạnh Hà (economic chief of Hải Phòng), Hoàng Minh Giám (chief of the Japan-Vietnam Liaison Team in North Vietnam) and others. The colonial bureaucracy, including colonial laws, procedures and employees, was incorporated almost intact into the new state.²³ Thousands of colonial troops would defect and join the Việt Minh military in late 1945.²⁴ The birth of the Việt Minh state occurred through this important

15 Ibid., pp. 114–25.

16 Ibid., pp. 125–32 and 144–7.

17 Ibid., p. 122. Hồ Chí Minh travelled to southern China in 1943, was arrested by GMD forces, and held in prison for a year before being released and asked to collaborate with other nationalist groups.

18 Ibid., p. 131.

19 Ibid., p. 249. In an article in *Việt Nam độc lập* [Independent Vietnam], the Việt Minh's newsletter (30 Apr. 1945), it was acknowledged how the movement had benefited from the fall of the French.

20 See *Việt Nam độc lập*, 21 Apr. 1945.

21 Lê Trọng Nghĩa, 'Các cuộc tiếp xúc giữa Việt Minh với Chính phủ Trần Trọng Kim' [The meetings between the Việt Minh and the Trần Trọng Kim government], in *Lịch sử, sự thật và bài học* [History, truth and lessons] (Hanoi: Trẻ, 2000).

22 Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, p. 393.

23 David Marr, 'Beyond high politics: State formation in northern Vietnam, 1945–1946', in *Naissance d'un état-parti: Le Viet Nam depuis 1945 / The birth of a party-state: Vietnam since 1945*, ed. Christopher Goscha and Benoît de Tréglodé (Paris: Le Indes Savantes, 2004), pp. 25–60.

24 John McAlister, *Vietnam: The origins of revolution* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1969); Greg Lockhart, *Nations in arms: Origins of the People's Army of Vietnam* (Wellington: Allen & Unwin, 1989), pp. 150, 175–6.

but overlooked compromise. When Hồ Chí Minh was sworn in as president of the DRV in early September 1945, nearly half of his cabinet positions were given to non-communists.²⁵ Communists took control of Foreign Affairs, Defence, Interior and Information portfolios in the coalition government while yielding real authority to the non-communists in the ministries of Economy, Agriculture, Education and Justice.

The Việt Minh government is commonly thought of as a united front with the ICP at the centre leading non-communists and other ‘fellow travellers’ in the front. On a closer look, this is not quite true. Accepting political compromises while lacking their own qualified personnel, ICP leaders had to grant non-communist leaders, mostly former members of the *Thanh nghị* network, full sectional authority as provincial heads and ministers of certain ministries. Rather than simply occupying positions on one of the concentric circles surrounding the ICP as the theoretical model of a united front would describe,²⁶ non-communist leaders formed the centres of certain loci of autonomous activities. Although these loci were not in the realms of foreign policy or defence, they involved key sections of socio-cultural-economic policy at both national and local levels. While communist domination could never be challenged, communists had little control over many key state apparatuses. As ICP leader and Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng would lament in early 1950, ‘Currently our Party controls only key government agencies but not most state apparatuses and technical departments. Even for an especially important agency such as police, we don’t have full control from the top to the bottom. Our grip on the judicial system is weak. Educational institutions are beyond our direct supervision.’²⁷ We will see below why Phạm Văn Đồng was upset; in late 1945, however, compromise seemed to be the only way for a weak ICP to rise to and stay in power.

In fact, without this initial compromise the ICP might not have survived the challenge from the right after having seized power in August 1945. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was about five weeks old when GMD troops marched into Hanoi to disarm Japanese forces under the terms of the Potsdam Agreement.²⁸ Accompanying these troops from southern China were two prominent groups in exile, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Việt Nam Quốc dân Đảng or VNP) and the Vietnamese Revolutionary League (Việt Nam Cách mạng Đồng minh Hội or VRL). The VNP, which went into exile in southern China after being crushed in its failed revolt in 1930, was led by Nguyễn Tường Tam, a prominent French-trained

25 Non-communists included Vũ Đình Hòe (Education, and later Justice), Dương Đức Hiền (Youth), Vũ Trọng Khánh (Justice), Nguyễn Mạnh Hà (Economy), Nguyễn Văn Tố (Social Affairs) and Nguyễn Văn Xuân (non-portfolio). More non-communists would be added later, including Nghiêm Xuân Yêm (Agriculture), Nguyễn Văn Huyền (Education), Trần Đăng Khoa (Irrigation) and Phan Anh (Trade and Industry).

26 For a description of the theory and the ICP practice of united front in the 1930s, see Huỳnh, *Vietnamese communism*, pp. 137–41.

27 Phạm Văn Đồng, ‘Phải kiện toàn chính quyền cộng hòa nhân dân’ (We must strengthen the Republican People’s government), speech at the Third National Cadre Conference, 21 Jan.–3 Feb. 1950. Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam [Communist Party of Vietnam, hereafter ĐCSVN], *Văn kiện Đảng toàn tập* [Collections of Party documents], vol. 11, p. 185.

28 Peter Worthington, ‘Occupation and revolution: The Chinese Nationalist Army in northern Vietnam, 1945–1946’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Hawaii, 1995).

intellectual and novelist.²⁹ In the 1930s Tam was the leader of the Self-Strength Literary Movement in Hanoi but went abroad during World War II to join the VNP. The VRL was led by Nguyễn Hải Thần, who had been active in anti-colonial organisations in southern China since 1905, and who once studied and taught at Whampoa Military Academy.³⁰ The VNP and VRL seized power in many provinces with their own militias and demanded that the Việt Minh government step down. Việt Minh forces still controlled Hanoi but daily skirmishes occurred between the two rivals.

The Chinese generals were mainly interested in keeping order and disarming the Japanese. Unlike the Americans in South Korea or the British in Saigon, the Chinese in Hanoi recognised Hồ's government. As noted above, during 1943–44 these GMD generals had sponsored some collaborative efforts among various Vietnamese groups in exile, including Hồ Chí Minh as the representative of the Việt Minh. Now they simply continued this effort by pressuring him to share power with the VNP and VRL. Too weak to stand up to the Chinese, the communists offered their opponents the Vice-Presidency, several ministerial portfolios, and 70 seats in a newly elected National Assembly. Hồ Chí Minh was also forced to appoint 'non-partisans'³¹ as Interior and Defence Ministers. Because ICP leaders wanted to deny accusations from their enemies that the Việt Minh government was controlled by communists, they made a gesture of compromise by ordering the dissolution of the ICP in November 1945. The Party was in fact never dissolved; it only operated in secret from then on. At one point, Chinese pressure was so intense that Hồ Chí Minh even considered bringing the former Emperor back to lead the government while he would resign to be an 'adviser'.³² What the ICP offered the exiled groups was not a real compromise because the communists never really handed much power to their opponents or to the non-partisan ministers.³³ As soon as the Chinese withdrew in mid-1946,³⁴ Hồ Chí Minh's government purged most of VNP and VRL leaders; those who escaped fled to southern China and elsewhere.³⁵

The rivalry between the ICP and the exiled groups strengthened the compromise between communists and non-communists within the Việt Minh government. With the VNP and VRL intensifying their mobilisation among the urban elites, the ICP

29 Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 113–14, 176–81.

30 Nguyễn Quốc Thắng and Nguyễn Bá Thế, *Từ điển nhân vật lịch sử Việt Nam*, pp. 953–4.

31 'Non-partisans' means they belonged to neither the ICP nor the VNP and VRL.

32 Vũ Đình Hòa, *Pháp quyền nhân nghĩa Hồ Chí Minh* [Hồ Chí Minh's humanist legal principles] (Hanoi: Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2000), p. 58.

33 On the communist efforts to take control of the Interior Ministry from the non-partisan appointee, see Lê Giản, *Những ngày sóng gió: Hồi ký* [Those stormy days: A memoir] (Hanoi: Công An Nhân Dân, 2000).

34 Chiang Kai-shek's government yielded to US pressure to let the French army replace Chinese troops. The French in return offered Chiang certain trade privileges in northern Vietnam. See Worthington, 'Occupation and revolution'.

35 Those who stayed on did not fare well. For example, VNP leader Chu Bá Phượng, the Minister of Economy, was sent to a concentration camp for trying to flee the Việt Minh area; see Văn phòng Quốc hội [Office of the National Assembly], *Đại biểu Quốc hội từ Khóa I đến Khóa X* [Representatives of the National Assembly from the First to the Tenth Session] (Hanoi: Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2002) for the fates of many of these VNP and VRL leaders.

came to rely more on prominent intellectuals and businessmen in the coalition government to reach out to urban constituencies. Former EVN officials played a critical but as yet unacknowledged role in generating support for the Việt Minh. These officials were influential in colonial elite circles; their family or business ties to former mandarins, local elites and colonial bureaucrats helped lure these to the side of the Việt Minh.³⁶ In addition, the Việt Minh government carried out numerous arrests of VNP and VRL members on the pretext that these men and women had broken the laws. The participation of non-communists in the government, especially in the Ministry of Justice, helped deflect the charges that the arrests were a communist purge. The Chinese could have used these charges as an excuse to overthrow Việt Minh rule. Besides their political role, these non-communists who were knowledgeable in technical fields were useful to the ICP in numerous difficult administrative tasks, including drafting a new Constitution and new laws, selecting and appointing new officials, fighting illiteracy and a raging flood, and implementing agricultural policy to prevent famine.

Another important compromise was made at the local level. While early research assumed the Việt Minh's centralised leadership of the revolution, recent works reveal a more complex situation. Before August 1945, Việt Minh leaders mistakenly expected a US-China invasion to expel the Japanese. They thus concentrated on building a militia to fight alongside the Allies.³⁷ This invasion never occurred. When the Japanese suddenly surrendered and a power vacuum opened up in the cities, it was local groups that seized power spontaneously and bloodlessly. Many local groups were organised by local underground or recently released communist cadres, but many were also mobilised by local elites or bourgeois groups. In Hanoi, for example, the Democratic Party (Đảng Dân chủ or DP),³⁸ not the local ICP branch, had the most guns.³⁹ Non-Việt Minh groups there also raced to seize power but for one reason or another lost out to pro-Việt Minh ones such as the DP.⁴⁰ Most local communists acted autonomously without the central ICP's instructions. In most of the provincial centres in central and southern Vietnam, it was Vanguard Youth groups organised earlier by Phan Anh, the Minister of Youth in the EVN government, which seized power.⁴¹ Việt Minh central leaders and their militias arrived days or weeks later and took control of a few main cities; in most other places, these mass groups or militias claimed to be and were simply accepted as local Việt Minh governments.

36 Vũ Đình Hòe, *Pháp quyền nhân nghĩa Hồ Chí Minh*, pp. 68, 96–100. A prominent example was Nguyễn Văn Huyền, the DRV Minister of Education (until 1975), who was a son-in-law of the mandarin Vi Văn Định, the provincial chief of Thái Bình.

37 Tønnesson, *Vietnamese revolution of 1945*, p. 336.

38 A loose party of French-trained intellectuals and student leaders that the ICP helped set up in June 1944 to mobilise support among urban elites. The ICP maintained its influence on the DP through (close) communists planted in the DP leadership. The DP was treated as the minor party in the Việt Minh government.

39 Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, p. 393; Vũ Đình Hòe, *Pháp quyền nhân nghĩa Hồ Chí Minh*, p. 63.

40 Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, pp. 375–7.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 464–6. For the local dynamics in a Mekong Delta province, see David Elliott, *The Vietnamese war*, 2 vols. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2003).

In his detailed account of local mass uprisings throughout Vietnam in late 1945, historian David Marr describes how ‘The administration established by the Việt Minh in Hanoi became as much a prisoner of the thousands of revolutionary committees emerging from around the country as the directing authority.’⁴² The central government incorporated most local groups that seized local power in late 1945 regardless of their revolutionary quality or political loyalty. Policies issued by local ‘revolutionary’ governments responded more to local interests and conditions than to central orders.⁴³ The problem of ‘revolutionary mandarins’ was widespread after the birth of the Việt Minh state. Village-level People’s Committees in particular gained notoriety for their arrogance, nepotism, collusion, arbitrary arrests and abuses of public property.⁴⁴ Internal fighting among local militias was common. In most cases, local Việt Minh militias did not fight the Japanese. Instead, it was ‘old Việt Minh’ groups fighting ‘new Việt Minh’,⁴⁵ Việt Minh militias exchanging fire with DP ones,⁴⁶ and People’s Committees challenging the authority of Việt Minh committees.⁴⁷ We shall see that these insubordinate local authorities would become a main bone in the split between communist and non-communist leaders of the Việt Minh state in 1948.

In sum, Vietnamese communists rose to power with little bloodshed and established a new state in a short time. The price to pay was the accommodation of the colonial elites, the colonial bureaucracy and local mass groups. Communists did not accommodate everybody: Trotskyites and many VNP and VRL leaders who were archrivals of the ICP were brutally eliminated.⁴⁸ At the same time, accommodation at the elite level in Vietnam was substantial and different from the token presence of non-communists in the communist government after 1949 on mainland China.⁴⁹ These ‘patriotic personalities’ played no direct role in the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) victory in the civil war and were brought into government afterwards primarily for propaganda purposes. By contrast, EVN officials and other urban intellectuals who collaborated with communists were crucial to the latter’s ascendancy and retention of power from late 1945 to mid-1946. At the mass level, the Việt Minh state incorporated numerous local mass groups. We shall see that

42 Ibid., p. 402.

43 Marr, ‘Beyond high politics’.

44 See Hồ Chí Minh’s letter, ‘Thư gửi Ủy ban nhân dân các kỳ, tỉnh, huyện và làng’ [Letter to Regional, Provincial, District and Village People’s Committees], n.d., ĐCSVN, v. 8, pp. 16–18; also the series of articles in a newspaper of the VNP, ‘Xưa và nay: Nhìn qua các Ủy ban hành chính địa phương’ [Before vs. now: A glimpse at local Administrative Committees], *Việt Nam*, 25 May–5 June 1946.

45 Ibid.

46 Vũ Đình Hòe quotes from a 1948 report by Phạm Tuấn Khánh, DP General Secretary (Vũ Đình Hòe, *Pháp quyền nhân nghĩa Hồ Chí Minh*, p. 141). Conflicts broke out in Hải Dương province and in southern Vietnam. See also Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, pp. 409–10.

47 See ‘Chỉ thị của Ban chấp hành Trung ương’ [Instructions of the Central Committee], 25 Nov. 1945, ĐCSVN, v. 8, p. 30.

48 This was not unique in Vietnam: in Indonesia Sutan Sjahrir compromised with and cooperated with Sukarno and Amir Sjarifuddin but not Tan Malaka. See Tuong Vu, ‘State formation and the origins of developmental states in South Korea and Indonesia’, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 41, 4 (2007): 27–56.

49 After 1954, non-communists who cooperated with communists in Vietnam would be similarly marginalised in two token political parties (the DP and the Socialist Party) in the DRV.

accommodation worked only briefly and serious cracks within the coalition were visible by 1948.

War and geopolitical contexts

The situation in Vietnam during 1947–48 was strongly influenced by the dynamics of the war between France and the Việt Minh government, which underwent a key turning point during 1947. After war broke out in December 1946 between the DRV and France, the French were able to seize control of most cities and towns within a short time. In northern Vietnam, the DRV government withdrew into the mountainous areas in the northeast and carried out the strategy of ‘empty fields and houses’ [*vườn không nhà trống*] to deny their enemy access to resources and populations.⁵⁰ On 25 April 1947, barely four months after the war began, the DRV sent a letter to the French government proposing negotiations for a truce. It is unclear why Hồ Chí Minh’s government sued for peace so soon, and it may have made the offer out of a sense of weakness. In an internal document, ICP leaders explained that they supported Vietnam being part of the French Union as long as it was guaranteed real independence and territorial unity. They appeared to put great hope in the possibility of the French Communist Party soon forming a new French government, and did not want ‘Vietnam to be separated from the French Union only to fall into the hands of Britain-United States’.⁵¹

In response, in May 1947, French High Commissioner Émile Bollaert through a representative offered the DRV autonomy within the French Union without independence in defence and foreign relations.⁵² Still hopeful, ICP leaders reshuffled the DRV government on 19 July 1947 to add several non-communist personalities whose number now grew to 15 out of 27 minister-level officials.⁵³ This move was to signal their interest in negotiation and to counter French propaganda that the DRV was nothing but a communist gang. Among the additions were two Catholics and a former mandarin. Võ Nguyên Giáp remained the commander of the DRV military but Tạ Quang Bửu, a former EVN official, was promoted to Minister of Defence. Yet this symbolic effort brought nothing but disappointing results. In his public speech in Hà Đông on

50 From various sources, it appeared that most of the personnel in the Việt Minh government were able to leave the towns before or right after war broke out. It is not known how many chose to stay, or were stranded or killed while fighting.

51 ‘Nghị quyết Hội nghị cán bộ Trung ương’ [Resolution of the Central Cadre Conference], 3–6 Apr. 1947. ĐCSVN, v. 8, pp. 178–9. See also ‘Chỉ thị của T. U.’ [Instruction of the Central Committee], 22 May 1947. *Ibid.*, pp. 207–13.

52 ‘Chỉ thị của T. U.’, p. 207. One of the best accounts of events in 1947–50 from the French perspective is Ellen Hammer, *The struggle for Indochina 1940–1955* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1955). A recent analysis of French politics in connection to Indochina policy is Martin Thomas, ‘French imperial reconstruction and the development of the Indochina War, 1945–1950’, in *The First Vietnam War: Colonial conflict and Cold War crisis*, ed. Mark Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 130–51.

53 Tân Trào (Trường Chinh), ‘Việc mở rộng chính phủ’ [The broadening of our government]. *Sự thật*, 19 Aug. 1947. In this article, Trường Chinh suggested that the move was only symbolic and warned readers not to have any illusions about negotiations. In an internal document, the Party told its members that they would have to ‘fight harder’ if the French were to be brought to the negotiating table. See ‘Thông cáo của T.U. về việc thay đổi một số nhân viên chính phủ’ (Announcement by the Central Committee about cabinet reshuffle), 27 July 1947, signed by Lê Đức Thọ (ĐCSVN, v. 8, pp. 248–9).

10 September 1947, Bollaert reiterated the French position to offer Vietnam 'freedom within the French Union'. He even refused to accept the DRV as the legitimate government of Vietnam while declaring that the union of Cochinchina with the rest was to be decided by a referendum.⁵⁴

While ICP leaders failed in their diplomatic manoeuvres, former Emperor Bảo Đại and his supporters in exile in Hong Kong and elsewhere scored some gains.⁵⁵ After fleeing communist repression in late 1946, the VNP and VRL regrouped together with southern religious leaders and founded the Front for National Unity in May 1947. They presented themselves as the truly nationalist alternative to the Việt Minh government and were able to attract French attention. Soon the two sides started to negotiate with each other. In October, French troops parachuted into the base area of the Việt Minh government, beginning a major offensive. The French military campaign ended in two months without a clear victory for either side. French-controlled areas were expanded but the attack failed in its primary goal of destroying the DRV leadership and core Vietnamese forces. After initial losses, Việt Minh troops were able to fight back and score some small victories. By the end of 1947, the war had reached a military stalemate. While French forces still had the upper hand, both sides realised that it would be a long and drawn-out battle.

The French offensive and Bollaert's negotiations with exiled and other anti-communist groups signalled to ICP leaders that their pursuit of negotiation had reached a dead end. Another political setback for the ICP was the rising power of the Gaullists in French politics at the expense of the French communists in late October 1947.⁵⁶ The hope that the ICP leaders had in French communists did not completely fade away but there were now fewer justifications for negotiation.⁵⁷ Most importantly, the legitimacy of Hồ's regime was threatened by the success of its previously defeated Vietnamese enemies in regrouping and competing for international and popular support. On 2 December 1947, a major breakthrough occurred with the meeting between Bảo Đại and Bollaert in Ha Long Bay. Bảo Đại had earlier rejected French offers of limited independence for Vietnam in the French Union, but he now agreed to meet Bollaert. In May 1948, for the first time since 1945, there were two Vietnamese governments in Indochina: one led by Hồ Chí Minh in the jungles of northern Vietnam and the other by General Nguyễn Văn Xuân under French tutelage in Saigon.⁵⁸

54 For the DRV reactions, see 'Bô-la nói gì? Ta phải làm gì? Chỉ thị của T.U.' [What did Bollaert say? How should we respond? Instructions of the Central Committee], 15 Sept. 1947. ĐCSVN, vol. 8, pp. 289–303.

55 Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina 1940–1955*, pp. 209–22.

56 Thomas, 'French imperial reconstruction', pp. 142–6.

57 The ICP hoped that the French Communist Party would lead a civil war in France. They predicted that in such circumstances, General Franco of Spain might intervene in France to support the conservatives while the United States might intervene in Indochina. They thus predicted a new 'revolutionary movement' in Europe and the joining of the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions against the alliance between the US and conservative France in the Asian theatre. See 'Thông cáo của Thường vụ T.U.' [Announcement of the Central Committee Executive Body], 2 Dec. 1947, signed by Phương (Trưởng Chính). ĐCSVN, vol. 8, pp. 337–9.

58 Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina 1940–1955*, pp. 221–3.

While French support for its Vietnamese nationalist rivals was a great concern for the ICP, developments in the emerging Soviet bloc in late 1947 offered many opportunities. In Warsaw in September 1947, the Cominform was founded with the participation of nine European communist parties. The CPSU chief in charge of ideology, Andrei Zhdanov, spoke at the meeting and denounced the Truman doctrine as a new American plot to dominate the world. Zhdanov observed the formation of the two opposing politico-military blocs led by the US and the Soviet Union and vowed that the imperialist camp would be defeated. Zhdanov also mentioned Indonesia and Indochina as members of the 'anti-imperialist and anti-Fascist front'. He called on all communist parties to seize the leadership of anti-imperialist movements in their countries.

A second development that would increase in significance over time was the formation of a communist guerrilla base in southern China together with the victory of CCP forces in Manchuria. On 20 December 1947, Mao Zedong read an important report at the Central Committee Plenum of the CCP, announcing a new phase of the civil war in China in which the Chinese Red Army would take the offensive. In his speech, Mao reviewed the military situation since the war began, laid out the People's Liberation Army's strategy to fight an initially stronger enemy, and credited the CCP's land policy for the successes. Two months earlier, a CCP land conference had approved a new land law in which land redistribution policy was consolidated for the first time since the start of the civil war. Thanks to their superb contacts abroad, both Zhdanov's and Mao's reports reached ICP leaders in little time.⁵⁹

As the next sections will demonstrate, these shifts in the Soviet bloc had considerable impact on the thinking of Vietnamese communists. The idea of two opposing ideological camps struggling for dominance was not new to them and they had long supported the Chinese communists since the 1930s.⁶⁰ Zhdanov's report signalled for the first time that Soviet policy towards the DRV might have been reversed; up till then Stalin had ignored all the requests and appeals by Hồ Chí Minh for diplomatic recognition and assistance. The formation of the Cominform suggested a more unified communist bloc and a more determined Soviet Union confronting the imperialist camp. The CCP's victories in Manchuria and its new base in southern China brought up the still vague but exciting possibility of physically linking communist Chinese and Vietnamese forces. Furthermore, Mao preached that a winning strategy did not require the appeasement of the landed classes, a policy that the DRV had pursued up to then. In fact, Mao argued forcefully that to mobilise landless peasants was a precondition for victory.

The anti-French war, events in China, and the beginning of the Cold War in Europe thus combined to create conditions more conducive to the adoption of radical domestic policy in Vietnam. Just as Hồ's government had given up hope for a quick negotiated solution and prepared for a long-term fight, exciting opportunities

59 Zhdanov's report was translated and published in several issues of *Sự thật* beginning on 19 May 1948, while Mao's report and the CCP's new land policy were also translated and published serially in *Sự thật* beginning 15 Apr. 1948.

60 See Tuong Vu, 'From cheering to volunteering'; and Vu, 'Dreams of paradise: The making of a Soviet Outpost in Vietnam', *Ab Imperio: Studies of new imperial history and nationalism in the post-Soviet space*, 2 (2008), pp. 255–85.

emerged for radicalising domestic politics and for fighting the war on a larger scale. Yet, as I have shown elsewhere, ICP leaders were not nationalist lambs being turned into communist wolves due to the force of circumstances.⁶¹ On the contrary, it was the force of circumstances in 1945 that made them put on nationalist fur; with the new developments of 1947, they had no qualms in shedding that cover. The next section will examine domestic politics inside the coalition that made up the Việt Minh government during 1948. Given the politics, it is possible to argue that a Vietnamese civil war would have occurred even in the absence of the above international events.

Troubles inside the Việt Minh coalition government, 1945–47

Thus far I have shown how the ICP rose to power thanks to accommodation, but it had to make many concessions in its social revolutionary programmes. Even more important, it had to share power in many policy areas with non-communists who did not agree with its radical vision. It had to embrace colonial bureaucrats who as a group were conservative in their outlook. It was forced by circumstances to accept local authorities it did not trust. It had to open up party ranks to members of upper classes. These were the price to pay for its ascendancy to and retention of power during 1945–46. The communist strategy of using ‘fellow travellers’ to be discarded when no longer needed seems sound in theory,⁶² but we can see below in the Việt Minh case that reality was a little messier than theory. Accommodation created many problems for the Việt Minh state and by 1948 these had become acute in three inter-related areas: land policy, leadership conflicts and the consolidation of state and party organisations.

When the Việt Minh front was founded in 1941, ICP leaders decided to put the issue of land redistribution on the back burner in order to foster a national coalition. At the same time, they also believed that national liberation did not need to delay social revolution; conducive international conditions could allow for both to take place at the same time.⁶³ As they then reasoned, delay would not be necessary because once the Party, the vanguard of the proletariat, had seized the leadership of the nationalist revolution, the Party could easily direct this revolution to serve the socialist cause; in the nationalist revolution the Party would take control of the government and use it to carry out a social revolution; and once the Indochinese revolution succeeded, ‘the world would be like a boiling pot’. This situation would allow the Indochinese revolution to leap forward to launch a proletarian revolution and build socialism.

This thinking was expressed in land policy when the ICP established the Việt Minh state in late 1945. Although the communists did not call for land redistribution, they issued laws that required landlords to reduce rents by 25 per cent, to reschedule debts and to abolish certain rents for their tenants.⁶⁴ These land laws suggested that,

61 Ibid.

62 In Leninist theory, ‘fellow travellers’ are those who agree with the Communist Party’s short-term objectives but prefer not to march under its banner. They are to be incorporated into mass organisations in a united front. See Huỳnh, *Vietnamese communism*, pp. 138–9.

63 ‘Trung ương Hội nghị lần thứ Tám’ [The Eighth Central Committee Plenum], May 1941. ĐCSVN, v. 7, pp. 120–1. See my analysis of this document in Vu, ‘From cheering to volunteering’.

64 Bộ Canh Nông [Ministry of Agriculture], *Giảm tô giảm tức, thể lệ lĩnh canh* [Rent and interest reduction and tenancy regulations] (Việt Bắc, c. 1950), pp. 7–12.

while the ICP was forced to accommodate landlords in the Việt Minh national front, it had not sacrificed its radical vision but was only biding its time.⁶⁵ Yet even this limited progressive agenda was not implemented.

Resistance to the land rent reduction policy was apparent as soon as the policy was issued. In response, ICP Secretary General Trường Chinh mounted public criticisms against separating the two revolutions as early as in September 1946:

Now a mistaken view about the stages of the Vietnamese revolution needs to be criticized. Some people believe that our revolution has to go one step at a time: (anti-imperialist) national liberation first, then (anti-feudalist) land revolution, then socialism. This step-by-step view that strictly divides the revolution into three stages is not correct. Externally, the Soviet Union, a socialist country, has emerged victorious and the new democratic movement is growing fast. Internally, the leadership of the revolution is firmly in the hands of the proletariat and the democratic progressive forces are united. Under these historical conditions, our national liberation revolution can accomplish anti-imperialist tasks and fulfil *part of* our anti-feudalist responsibilities.⁶⁶ (Italics in original)

Trường Chinh's criticisms reflected a certain division of opinion within the ICP, although we do not know who in the party leadership was criticised. Despite Trường Chinh's passionate appeal, things changed little for reasons having to do with the earlier compromise in 1945, to be explained below. In a comprehensive review of Party policies in the countryside in 1950, Trường Chinh would note that the rent reduction programme since 1945 was still unfinished business even in the areas under full Việt Minh control. The transfer of land confiscated from the French to peasants was either neglected or carried out too slowly.⁶⁷ In extreme cases, tenants reportedly sent hundreds of letters to provincial and central governments to complain against cadres who were not fair or who refused to listen. Communal lands were not distributed as mandated by law. During the campaign to buy rice for the government, it was noted that the rich were often able to avoid having to sell, whereas the poor had to borrow rice at high interest to fulfil their obligations to the government. Where the rent reduction laws were implemented, they created great tension but were not remarkably effective in helping tenants.⁶⁸

65 'Cách mạng tháng Tám: Triển vọng của Cách mạng Việt nam' [The August revolution: The prospects of Vietnam's revolution], *Sự thật*, 7 Sept. 1946.

66 Ibid.

67 'Chính sách của Đảng ở nông thôn (Việt Nam)' [Party policy in rural Vietnam], Trường Chinh's report at the meeting of the Central Economic Committee, 5–7 July 1950. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, pp. 608–12. The document did not mention the confiscation of land from collaborators. Unlike policy towards land owned by the French, policy up to then regarding collaborators' land was to be made only on a case-by-case basis.

68 For a case of this tension, see Vũ Đình Hòa, *Pháp quyền nhân nghĩa Hồ Chí Minh*, pp. 120–1. Another account in the Party's newspaper observed that the campaign was carried out fully in the south, went sluggishly in the central region, and was ignored or neglected in the north up until 1948. Chí Thanh, *Sự thật*, 30 Oct. 1950. No detailed information about the situation on the ground is available and a case can certainly be made that local officials were being made scapegoats for implementation problems. However, see below for evidence suggesting that the problems did exist within Party and state organisations.

While land policy made little progress, a growing conflict was brewing between communists and non-communists at many levels of government by 1948.⁶⁹ Now that the war was fought in the jungle and the ICP had trained a sufficient number of their own cadres to staff the government, urban intellectuals and French-trained professionals were far less useful to the Party than they had been in late 1945. The conflict between communists and non-communists and its outcome must be seen in this context. Non-communists resented the heavy-handed way communists, who were generally less educated, demanded and exercised authority in their professional spheres ranging from legal to economic to literary policies. With respect to rural policy, non-communists in the Việt Minh government supported land reform but were sympathetic to rich peasants.⁷⁰ Because they sustained control of five state ministries, Justice, Education, Trade, Agriculture and Irrigation, their views were translated into moderate policies. Among these, the Justice portfolio was most important because it was part of the state coercive apparatus. It was also where the bitterest conflicts took place. When the Việt Minh state was established, non-communist Ministers of Justice⁷¹ appointed many French-trained professional lawyers as judges in provincial governments and in lower level judicial positions.⁷² Where the rent reduction policy was carried out, these judges often, based on their own judgement and in the name of the law and judicial independence, sided with landlords against both tenants and local governments. Where they could, the judges ordered the release of people arrested illegally by local police. The judges also did not hesitate to order the arrest and prosecution of many corrupt local officials who were members of the clandestine ICP.⁷³

Tension between communist and non-communist leaders was exacerbated by the Việt Minh state's inheritance of the colonial bureaucracy. Unlike in China, where the CCP got rid of most GMD bureaucrats in the first year, the Vietnamese state kept former colonial officials on its payrolls for years. There were early complaints about many 'counter-revolutionary elements' among those teachers inherited from the colonial regime. Party documents noted that colonial bureaucrats were unenthusiastic and even intentionally sabotaged government policies. Predictably, the marriage of a revolutionary party and a colonial bureaucracy did not go smoothly. As Trường Chinh wrote in 1946, the majority of political cadres were 'loyal, enthusiastic, politically astute and resourceful but uneducated', and perhaps illiterate.⁷⁴ In contrast, state bureaucrats who were professionals, managers and intellectuals trained under the French were 'educated but lacked interest in [revolutionary] politics'. Conflict was brewing by 1948: Việt Minh cadres looked down on and distrusted bureaucrats and professionals; the latter in turn argued that, because Vietnam had achieved

69 See also Dương Đức Hiền, 'Đảng Dân Chủ Việt Nam trong hàng ngũ Mặt trận' [The DP within the National Front], *Độc lập*, 20 Feb. 1951; and Hoàng Văn Đức, 'Hiện trạng đời sống viên chức, trí thức' [The current living conditions of intellectuals and government officials], *Độc lập*, 15 Oct. 1951.

70 For example, Đỗ Đức Dục, a member of the *Thanh nghị* group and a DP leader, called for rich peasants to be protected during the land reform (*Độc lập*, 15 Mar. 1953).

71 These were French-trained lawyers Vũ Trọng Khánh and Vũ Đình Hòa.

72 Vũ Đình Hòa, *Pháp quyền nhân nghĩa Hồ Chí Minh*, pp. 53–6.

73 *Ibid.*, pp. 159–65, 196–7.

74 'Cách mạng tháng Tám: Nhiệm vụ cần kíp của dân tộc Việt nam' [The August revolution: The urgent tasks of the Vietnamese nation], *Sự thật*, 4 Oct. 1946.

independence, it was time for political cadres to be replaced by educated professionals who had the necessary skills to manage the state. The above conflict between executive and judicial officials in the government was known to ICP leaders as early as mid-1946.⁷⁵ In 1950, Trường Chinh would blame the bureaucrats in the Ministry of Agriculture and its local departments for this failure to carry out party policies. In his words, these officials were leftovers from the colonial bureaucracy who did not come from peasant backgrounds, had little understanding of the rural situation, and did not care about peasant interests.⁷⁶

Still, another area where problems emerged concerned the organisation of the ICP. A dilemma for ICP leaders was how to maintain accommodation while being selective in its membership policy. The ICP expanded rapidly from 1945 to 1950. From less than 5,000 members in late 1945, its membership exceeded 760,000 by 1950, an increase of more than 100 times.⁷⁷ It turned out that accommodation trumped selectivity: in a count by Party leaders in 1952, more than 65 per cent of Party members came from petty bourgeois backgrounds.⁷⁸ Vietnam's comparison with China is instructive. With a membership composed of mostly poor peasants, the Maoist state was more firmly rooted in the peasantry. The social character of this membership also made it suitable for implementing radical socio-economic programmes. With a party composed mostly of middle peasants and higher social classes, the radical dreams of ICP leaders were bound to meet internal opposition. The rent reduction policy noted above was not effectively implemented not only because it was stalled by non-communist bureaucrats and local judges, rather, the failure of the policy had its origins right within the ranks of the Party.

In sum, accommodation created many problems for communist leaders espousing a radical vision of social transformation, including difficulties in land policy implementation, the 'contamination' of the Party by bourgeois elements, and simmering conflicts with non-communists in the coalition government and with inherited colonial bureaucrats. These problems already existed in 1946 but became more acute by 1948. As I argue in the next section, these problems preoccupied the minds of ICP leaders when they decided to take their revolution down the radical road in 1948.

The radical turn of 1948

ICP policy was adjusted gradually over 1948 as its leaders reacted to new circumstances. Policy changes took place through key policy debates and two Central

75 'Nghị quyết của Hội nghị Cán bộ Trung ương' [Resolution by the Central Committee Conference], 31 July–1 Aug. 1946. ĐCSVN vol. 8, p. 103.

76 Trường Chinh, 'Chính sách của Đảng ở nông thôn (Việt Nam)' [The party's rural policy (Vietnam)], pp. 612–13. In his speech at the same conference, Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng also regretted that the ICP had retained colonial bureaucrats although he did not elaborate on the problem. See Phạm Văn Đồng, 'Phải kiện toàn chính quyền cộng hòa nhân dân' [We must strengthen people's republic government], p. 185.

77 See 'Nhân dân dân chủ chuyên chính ở Việt nam' [The democratic dictatorship of the people in Vietnam], a report to the Third Plenum of the Central Committee probably in April 1952. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, pp. 95–6.

78 See 'Văn đề chỉnh Đảng' [On Party rectification], Lê Văn Lương's report to the Third Plenum of the Central Committee. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 102.

Committee plenums in January and August 1948. These changes included a more aggressive land policy (or peasant mobilisation, broadly understood) and a more proletarian party. Following the January Plenum, there were sharp public exchanges between non-communist and communist leaders in the government over the issues of judicial autonomy and the role of non-communists in the revolution. These exchanges would drag on until 1950 but had already by late 1948 revealed the deep and unbridgeable chasm between the two leading groups in the coalition government. Non-communists would not be removed totally from positions of authority until 1950 or so, but many of them started to ‘*dinh tê*’ (leave the *maquis* for French-controlled zones) in 1949 due primarily to resentment of the communists. While these events in Vietnam were by no means as drastic and violent as the civil wars in Malaya, Burma and Indonesia, 1948 in Vietnam was still the key turning point on a path that would be irreversible.

Let us begin by examining land policy. On 15–17 January 1948, the ICP held a plenum of the Central Committee to formulate policy in the new situation. The resolution of this plenum indicated Vietnamese communists’ excitement over recent international developments and announced key changes in their land policy, among other policies. The review of the international situation in the resolution noted the formation of the Cominform and highlighted key points in Zhdanov’s speech. It began by saying that ‘The anti-democratic and democratic, imperialist and anti-imperialist forces have gradually aligned into two clear camps: “the anti-democratic imperialist” and the “anti-imperialist democratic” camps’, which was also a key sentence in Zhdanov’s talk.⁷⁹ The resolution observed that ‘the great offensive of the Chinese liberation army was fuelling a peasant rebellion [in the areas under GMD] and a land revolution [in the areas under the CCP] in China. The Chinese liberation army has [just] established a [new] base close to our Northern border.’⁸⁰ Besides stressing that land rent reduction had to be more aggressively implemented, for the first time the Party ordered the confiscation of the land and property of *Việt gian* (traitors) either to redistribute to poor peasants or to let soldiers farm for self-reliance.⁸¹ The Party also ordered the organisation of conferences for peasant mobilisation cadres at zone and provincial levels to escalate rural mobilisation.⁸² Investigations of rural conditions [*điều tra nông thôn*] had been ordered previously but were not really implemented; now this became a priority, in part because the Party needed to know how much land traitors owned and could be confiscated from them.

The plenum also decided on a number of policies to consolidate the ICP as an organisation. The Party had expanded rapidly since 1945: in the last quarter of 1947, Party membership in the northern provinces alone increased by 10,000.⁸³

79 ‘Nghị quyết Hội nghị Trung ương mở rộng’ [The resolution of the expanded Central Committee Plenum], 15–17 Jan. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 16.

80 Ibid., p. 17.

81 Ibid., p. 31. See also the subsequent order to implement the policy: ‘Chỉ thị gửi các Khu ủy về việc tịch thu ruộng đất, tài sản của bọn Việt gian phản quốc’ [Instructions to Zone Party Committees on the confiscation of land and property of Vietnamese traitors], 18 Feb. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, pp. 60–1. The Party did not yet attack landlords at this point.

82 ‘Chỉ thị về vấn đề vận động nông dân’ [Instructions about peasant mobilisation], 19 May 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, pp. 140–1.

83 Ibid., p. 45.

Party leaders were not really happy with this increase, noting that workers still accounted for only 7 per cent and women 6.5 per cent of the total membership, while the majority of members came from the middle peasantry and the petty bourgeois. Party leaders decided to convene a national Party Congress in August 1948 because:

The August [1945] Revolution has achieved success for more than two years, [and] the [war] has been going on for more than one year. International conditions have entered a new phase, with an economic and political crisis spreading widely in the capitalist world. These new developments are posing heavy tasks and our Party needs to review our programs and policies on the revolution. Moreover, the sharing of experiences and the forging of unity of thought and action within the Party are urgent tasks.⁸⁴

Besides a Congress (which eventually would be delayed several times until March 1951), the ICP Central Committee launched an ambitious membership campaign that set a target for party growth at the district level of 30 per cent in the following five months.⁸⁵ Reflecting the Party's concerns about its membership being composed of too many upper-class people, recruitment was to be more selective: the targets were members of the army and local guerrilla forces, workers in state factories, and people in French-controlled zones and in ethnic minority regions. Not only were new members restricted to certain classes, but expansion also had to be accompanied by consolidation through increased training and planned activities. The goal was to have 20 per cent of all Party cells 'consolidated' in five months.⁸⁶

Thanks in part to this membership campaign, Indochina approached global standards by early 1949 in the per-capita proportion of communist Party members. As Hồ Chí Minh proudly cited in his closing speech at the Sixth Central Cadre Conference in January 1949, while there were 20 million communists among 2 billion people all over the world, or 1 per 100; the ratio in Indochina then was 1 in every 112 people.⁸⁷ Party membership increased by 300 per cent in the first 9 months of 1948 and 450 per cent throughout the whole of 1948.⁸⁸ From a mere 20,000 members in late 1946, the Party had 50,000 members a year later, and about 180,000 by the end of 1948.⁸⁹

84 Ibid., p. 44. See also a more detailed decision: 'Quyết nghị của Ban Thường vụ Trung ương' [Decision of the Executive Committee of the Central Committee], 1 Apr. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, 85–8.

85 'Chỉ thị của Ban Thường vụ Trung ương' [Instructions by the Executive Committee of the Central Committee], signed by Lê Đức Thọ, 1 June 1948. ĐCSVN vol. 9, p. 149. Reasons for the delay of the Party Congress were many, but two appeared most important: the difficulties of Party delegates from central and southern Vietnam to travel to the base in Việt Bắc in 1948–49, and the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950. See Vu, *Paths to development in Asia*, ch. 6.

86 There was no mentioning of purging members with suspicious backgrounds, which would not take place until around 1953.

87 'Bài nói chuyện trong buổi bế mạc Hội nghị' [Closing speech], Central Cadre Conference, 14–18 Jan. 1949. ĐCSVN, vol. 10, pp. 166–7.

88 'Báo cáo về tình hình Đảng năm 1948' [Report on Party organisation in 1948], Central Cadre Conference, 14–18 Jan. 1949. ĐCSVN, vol. 10, pp. 120–50. The figure of 450 per cent for 1948 is taken from 'Hoàn thành nhiệm vụ chuẩn bị, tích cực chuyển sang tổng phản công' [Completing preparations for the general offensive phase], Trường Chinh's report at the Third National Conference, 21 Jan.–3 Feb. 1950. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 92.

89 The growth was uneven, however: there were 70,000 members in Zone 3 (provinces in the upper Red River delta) alone. Southern Vietnam had about 30,000 members in total by the end of 1948.

Both land policy and party organisational consolidation indicated more radical steps on the path to a violent class struggle that would become full-blown in 1953. In symbolic significance, however, these policy changes did not match the debate between communists and non-communists in the Việt Minh government over judicial independence and local law enforcement. Beginning in 1948 and lasting till early 1950, this public debate was generally civil and policy-oriented but this did not mean that the stakes were low.⁹⁰ Non-communists had control of government apparatus in the social, economic, cultural and judicial policy realms; urban intellectuals also played prominent roles in all branches of the government and had many supporters in the colonial bureaucracy and even within the ranks of the ICP. The debate was a rare public show of the brewing conflict between communists and non-communists at the top level of the Việt Minh state. Publicly this debate involved only a few people but was in fact closely watched by the top echelons of the leadership, by local officials and by those in law enforcement.

The front man for the communists was Quang Đạm, a protégé of Trường Chinh, an editor of *Sự thật* and the translator of many of Mao's works into Vietnamese.⁹¹ Quang Đạm wrote with authority as a veiled public spokesman for the Party. On their part, non-Communists delegated Vũ Trọng Khánh, a French-trained lawyer and the attorney general of Zone 10, to be their chief representative. Vũ Trọng Khánh had been the Mayor of Hải Phòng under the EVN government and the first Minister of Justice in the Việt Minh government in late 1945. On the same side with Vũ Trọng Khánh was Vũ Đình Hòe, the secretary of the New Vietnam Party that had organised to support the TTK government during April–August 1945. Vũ Đình Hòe was a French-trained lawyer and became Minister of Education in late 1945 and Minister of Justice from 1946. The debate exposed and exacerbated the depth of the ideological cleavage between communists and non-communists, and following it, the ICP gradually withdrew authority from most non-communist officials.

The debate started with communist criticisms directed against the principle of judicial independence. It was with this principle that local judges justified their actions to curb the abuses of power by local government and Party cadres. The judges refused to follow the instructions of local administrative or Party committees and released people illegally arrested for political reasons. In his first two articles that started the debates, Quang Đạm launched two lines of attack, one against the capitalist judicial system and the other against French-trained intellectuals.⁹² First, he argued that law and justice, as part of the state, functioned to serve class interests. Nothing was above class struggle in societies with classes. Judicial independence [*tư pháp độc lập*] and the separation of powers [*phân quyền*] might have helped the European

90 The debate took place in *Sự thật* (Truth), the ICP's journal, and *Độc lập* (Independence), a weekly journal of the DP.

91 See *Quang Đạm: Nhà báo, học giả* [Quang Đạm: A journalist and scholar] (Hanoi: Lao Động, 2002). Quang Đạm was the pen name of Tạ Quang Đệ who had been a clerk in the colonial administration and had no connection with *Thanh nghị*. His brother, Tạ Quang Bửu, was far better known, had served the EVN government and was a Việt Minh deputy minister.

92 "Tư pháp với nhà nước" [The judicial branch and the state], *Sự thật*, 15 Apr. 1948; "Tính chất chuyên môn trong tư pháp" [The specialised knowledge of judicial work], *Sự thật*, 19 May 1948.

bourgeoisie initially to restrain royal arbitrary authority but had since served as a myth to cover up the oppressive nature of the capitalist system there. In colonial societies, the colonial government also touted this myth but its courts never granted any justice to the colonised people and meted out thousands of cruel verdicts against nationalist revolutionaries. Judicial independence and separation of powers were not sacred and neutral principles as their proponents asserted. Quang Đạm focused on attacking capitalist law but made no effort to articulate a Leninist conceptual framework for socialist law. He raised class struggle as a theoretical issue and attacked the colonial legal system, but it was the interests of ‘the people’ and ‘the masses’ which he claimed to defend, not class interests.

Quang Đạm’s second line of attack was directed at non-communist leaders who had been trained in colonial schools. He denounced ‘many intellectual elements’ that stayed aloof from ‘the masses’ and ‘the people’. These ‘elements’ were trained by the French and poisoned by old bourgeois theories that had been designed to serve the interests of colonial rulers and exploiting classes. They were full of self-love and believed in excessive individual freedom. They were motivated by envy, ambition and desire for social status and political power. Their specialised knowledge of law was simply experience in implementing complicated legal procedures and did not guarantee the realisation of justice, but they expected that such specialised knowledge was sufficient to afford them unrestricted freedom from any political control. Advertently or inadvertently they were helping the counter-revolutionaries by their insistence on judicial independence and by their criticisms of local administrative committees. Clearly Quang Đạm was speaking for the uneducated Party cadres who were frustrated with the seemingly arrogant French-trained intellectuals.

In response to Quang Đạm, his opponents denied the relevance and legitimacy of class struggle even as a theory. In particular, Vũ Trọng Khánh argued that law was not only a tool of the ruling class but also a tool to protect the weak against the strong and the powerful.⁹³ Law transcended class struggle. Civil law, for example, was for mediating conflicts among ordinary people and had nothing to do with politics. Law was built on and reflected not only the will of the ruling class but also social customs practised by the masses of ‘the people’. Similarly, judicial independence was to protect ‘the people’ who were above any classes, and to prevent officials from abusing power in any regime, democratic or not. Vũ Đình Hòe pointed out that Vietnam had never had an independent judiciary from the ancient ages to the colonial period.⁹⁴ It was ‘thanks to the August Revolution’ that ‘the people’ now could enjoy this progressive legal system. In other words, Vũ Đình Hòe implied that he was with ‘the revolution’, not against it. Judicial independence was neither feudalistic nor a colonial fig leaf; it was revolutionary.

Vũ Đình Hòe claimed that the judicial system he oversaw since the beginning of the revolution was entirely with ‘the people’. In principle, all judges were appointed by people’s *representative* institutions such as the National Assembly and local People’s Councils. At local levels, he noted that his ministry had already implemented a jury

93 ‘Ý kiến bạn đọc về vấn đề tư pháp’ [Readers’ opinion about the judicial system], *Sự thật*, 19 Aug.–2 Sept. 1948; and ‘Vấn đề tư pháp’ [The judicial system issue], *Sự thật*, 20 June, 10 July and 1 Aug. 1949.

94 ‘Tư pháp trong chế độ dân chủ mới’ [The judiciary in the new democracies], *Độc lập*, July 1948.

system by which ‘the people’ could participate directly in trying specific cases. Vũ Đình Hòe indirectly reminded the communists that according to the Constitution drafted in 1946 that was still in force, popularly elected bodies, not the communist party or the government, held supreme power. Judges were accountable only to these bodies. In other words, the message to the communists was, you are not identical with ‘the people’ and you ought to be held accountable to ‘the people’ too. In Vũ Đình Hòe’s arguments, ‘the people’ as a collective were clearly presented as the sole basis of legitimacy, not social classes. He forced communist leaders to confront their own rhetoric and the still legitimate institutions created by their earlier accommodation with non-communists.

Vũ Trọng Khánh and Vũ Đình Hòe put Quang Đạm on the defensive: the latter had to justify that his side was with ‘the people’.⁹⁵ Quang Đạm argued that the government and ‘the people’ were one because the former was made up of the best representatives of the people. To honour ‘the people’ meant to follow the government, especially local governments. Local committees were closest to ‘the people’; they knew the ‘desire of the people’ even better than the central government. It was not these committees but ‘the people’ who arrested *Việt gian* because they hated them. The arrests did not conform to due process because of special circumstances, but how could legal procedures be more important than ‘the desire of the people’? Local committees did not abuse their power; they were only acting in the interests of the people by helping with the arrests. Judicial officials should support rather than oppose those committees.

Although he launched the debate with class struggle theory, Quang Đạm was now forced to cling to a fuzzy concept of ‘the people’, which took him further away from class struggle. ‘The people’ [*nhân dân*] was imagined by Quang Đạm as a collective [*tập đoàn*], indivisible and resolutely committed to the struggle. The people had a ‘collective will’ that represented the supreme form of justice; and ‘the interests of the people’ should serve as the supreme principle of law. The people had a ‘collective desire’, which was that judicial cadres be loyal to them.⁹⁶ Unable to match his opponents’ theoretical arguments, Quang Đạm turned to threats: ‘Under the Supreme Court which was the People’s Court, under the Supreme Law which was the People’s Collective Will, those who advertently or inadvertently used legal formalities to oppose the spirit of the law will be punished by the people.’

The debate lasted beyond 1948 but after the first round of articles by Quang Đạm and rejoinders by Vũ Trọng Khánh and Vũ Đình Hòe in 1948, it was clear where the differences lay and that they were unbridgeable. Although it was not fully clear that

95 ‘Vài điểm căn bản về vấn đề tư pháp’ [Some basic points about the judicial system], *Sự thật*, 15 Nov., 30 Nov. and 19 Dec. 1948; and ‘Về cuộc thảo luận vấn đề tư pháp’ [On the debate about the judicial system], *Sự thật*, 6 Jan. 1950.

96 Not until 1950 did Quang Đạm write about ‘*nhân dân*’ as a class-based concept, i.e., ‘*nhân dân*’ as a collective composed of two main classes (workers and peasants) which led the national revolution and class struggle. See Quang Đạm, ‘Người trí thức trong xã hội và trong cách mạng’ (Intellectuals in society and the revolution), *Sự thật*, 15 Mar. 1950. The term ‘*nhân dân*’ was not common prior to 1945. Until 1950, it was primarily used by a few authors, one of whom was Trường Chinh. The term became widely used and came to acquire certain Marxist connotations perhaps thanks to Trường Chinh’s efforts to promote it and to the import of the Chinese revolutionary discourse into Vietnam after 1950. ‘*Renmin*’ (transliterated in Vietnamese as ‘*nhân dân*’) was a central term in Maoist discourse.

non-communists would soon be removed from power, it seemed only a matter of time before this would happen. Indeed, many French-trained judicial officials such as Vũ Văn Huyền and Trần Chánh Thành who were involved in disputes with local authorities began to flee the ‘liberated zone’ in 1949.⁹⁷

Even though the ICP could not convene a national Party congress in August 1948 for practical reasons, by then it had firmly formulated a new and clear policy that would guide the revolution until 1953. At the Fifth Cadre Conference in August 1948, Trường Chinh read a lengthy report that, for the first time since 1941, formally placed the task of land redistribution back on par with that of national liberation. The end goal of the revolution was now being formally declared as socialism. The report was entitled, ‘We Fight for Independence and Democracy’, with ‘democracy’ understood as a ‘new kind of democracy’ [*chế độ dân chủ mới*] similar to that established in eastern Europe, North Korea and ‘liberated zones’ in China. Citing Zhdanov, E. Varga (French Communist Party), Gottwald (Czechoslovak President) and Dimitrov (Bulgarian leader and former top Comintern official), Trường Chinh argued that this ‘new democracy’ was a new invention of the world proletariat in applying Marxist-Leninist theory.⁹⁸ ‘New democratic revolution’ was similar to the (old) bourgeois democratic revolution in the sense that both aimed at eliminating feudalism as represented by the landlord class. Yet ‘new democratic revolution’ was led by the proletariat, not by the bourgeoisie. ‘New democracy’ did not sound as advanced as the dictatorship of the proletariat as practised in the Soviet Union, but it still aimed at building socialism and communism. Thanks to favourable world conditions (available help from the Soviet Union and a capitalist camp in crisis), new democracies could develop socialism with less bloody class struggles.⁹⁹ Trường Chinh concluded that ‘it is now time for the Indochinese revolution to show its true colours [*hiện nguyên hình*] ... to be a new democratic revolution’ even though ‘[the DRV’s] anti-French war could still be called a war of national liberation’.¹⁰⁰ In other words, wolves could now be wolves again. While Trường Chinh and the ICP still wanted to preserve the national unity front as much as possible,¹⁰¹ we can see in this speech and its title that they were looking beyond national independence. They were looking forward to a day in the near future when they could achieve the second goal of ‘new democracy’, and they were actively preparing for that day to come through their land and other policies.

Conclusion

Historians have neglected 1948 as a key turning point in the revolution in Indochina. Clearly the changes in Vietnam did not result in the breakout of a civil war as in other Southeast Asian contexts, but they are significant nonetheless in the context of Vietnamese politics. This paper corrects this neglect by discussing

97 Trần Chánh Thành would later become Minister of Information in the Republic of Vietnam under Ngô Đình Diệm.

98 Trường Chinh, ‘Chúng ta chiến đấu cho độc lập và dân chủ’ [We fight for independence and democracy], speech at the Fifth Cadre Conference, 8–16 Aug. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 191.

99 Ibid., pp. 187–92.

100 Ibid., p. 198. Literally, ‘to return to its original or true form’.

101 Ibid., pp. 209–18.

events during 1947–48, and by going back to another neglect, which is the compromise made by the ICP when it seized power in late 1945. This earlier compromise helped us understand the significance of 1948, as the time when the nationalist coalition began to fall apart — not yet a civil war but still an irreversible divergence.

While international developments gave the stimuli for ICP leaders to adopt more radical policies, they were frustrated by the problems facing their revolution: the failure to carry out progressive land policies, clashes with non-communist leaders in the government, and conflict between an inherited conservative colonial bureaucracy and the radical ideals Party leaders held. These problems were all traceable to the accommodation made in late 1945 in exchange for popular and colonial elite support. For the more radical leaders in the Party who formed the majority of the Party leadership, these problems were hindering their desire to embark on a social revolution as soon as possible. They interpreted international changes in the way that supported their world-view of an inevitable confrontation between the two camps.¹⁰²

A big question remains: Why did the ICP not break immediately with non-communists in 1948 and go all the way down the radical path as in other Southeast Asian contexts? This question awaits further research, but I can speculate on some of the reasons. The radicals perhaps needed time to persuade their more cautious comrades in the Party leadership to go along. The cautious could have made many good arguments for a slow move. First, the ICP already dominated the coalition, and non-communists such as Vũ Đình Hòe could never threaten its power. It could afford a little patience while gradually removing its ‘fellow-travellers’ from the government. Second, militarily the balance still favoured the French and this made it foolish for the ICP to dispense right away with the non-communists who still enjoyed tremendous respect. There was also the danger of them being recruited by the emerging Bảo Đại regime. Keeping them under observation while neutralising them was a wiser strategy than letting them run away to help Bảo Đại. Or, even if the ICP was able to effectively eliminate the non-communist leaders, this move could galvanise many who were still sitting on the fence to support Bảo Đại. Third, international support for the ICP appeared to be coming if the Party was patient. Chinese communist forces were on a winning roll by mid-1948 and it seemed only a matter of time before they reached the Vietnamese border. This was another crucial difference in the situation facing the ICP compared to other communist parties in Southeast Asia. If it waited, Chinese support might come soon. If it had acted rashly, the US might intervene while Chinese help was still far away. For other Southeast Asian communist parties, time was not on their side. If they acted while their nationalist rivals were still weak, they had a chance of winning power. No forthcoming outside support could be expected and if they had waited, their chance of defeating their rivals would only have become weaker.

Despite some self-restraint, the radical turn of the ICP in 1948 led to a significant number of intellectuals and professionals leaving the Việt Minh in disgust over the next several years. Not everyone left, and among those who stayed many would suffer greatly in violent purges during the land reform, the ‘party

102 Vu, ‘From cheering to volunteering’.

organizational rectification campaign', and the so-called *Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm* affair during the mid-1950s.¹⁰³ Yet the story did not end there. History would repeat itself in 1975 when urban intellectuals in South Vietnam who had earlier joined the National Liberation Front were quickly sidelined after communist victory. Even though the Vietnamese Communist Party has recently softened its policy towards intellectuals, this troubled past still casts a long shadow over its relationship with them. In this sense, the spectre of 1948 still haunts Vietnamese politics today.

103 For recent accounts of these events, see Vu, *Paths to development in Asia*; Ninh, *A world transformed*; and Shawn McHale, 'Vietnamese Marxism, dissent, and the politics of postcolonial memory: Tran Duc Thao, 1946–1993', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 61, 1 (Feb. 2002): 7–31.