

Thought of Vietnamese Nationalist Party on National Issues

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Abstract: Based on the Political Platform and Regulation of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNP), this research paper analyses and clarifies the basic tenets of its political thought in order to answer the question of whether nationalism² and national consciousness were the basis and the key element in the political thought of this party in the period prior to 1930 or not. It also brings to light the differences between the nationalism of the VNP and that of Sun Yat-sen, the founder and supreme leader of the Kuomintang in China.

Keywords: Vietnamese Nationalist Party, nationalism, national consciousness.

Subject classification: History

1. Introduction

The Vietnamese Nationalist Party was a patriotic and revolutionary organisation, which was founded in Hanoi in 1927. Although, in terms of the social class, most of its members belonged to the petty bourgeoisie, the party represented the interests and ideology of the bourgeoisie. How was its view on nationalism? What were the similarities and differences between its nationalism and the patriotism and nationalism of other contemporary political organisations in Vietnam? These are the issues worth studying to clarify their role and contributions to the country's history.

2. Opinions on defining and assessment of political ideology of Vietnamese Nationalist Party

First of all, it is necessary to take note of some different opinions and views regarding the assessment of the political ideology of VNP, which was one of three major political parties in Vietnam in the 1920s. Until now, research on VNP has dealt with various aspects and at different levels of the party's policy to achieve national salvation, and its political ideology. However, apart from some commonly shared opinions, there are still differences and points of contention in assessing the political views of this party. Generally, there exist three types of opinion:

The first type contends that the VNP was not a purely nationalist party, but an organisation with socialist leanings. Tran Huy Lieu and Bui Cong Trung represented this type. Based on the party's first Political Platform and Statutes, which highlighted "First to carry out the national revolution and then carry out the world revolution," Tran Huy Lieu in his book *History of 80 years of Resistance against France* wrote that "As for the VNP, the key sentence of the above-mentioned platform showed that it was not a pure nationalist party as many people believed. Instead, from moral perspectives, it advocated a world revolution to fight imperialism. In the second *Political Platform and Statutes* drafted in late 1928, the party's doctrine was spelled out as democratic socialism accompanied by a footnote 'Not the same as German democratic socialism.' The motto was 'to promote national revolution, to build direct democracy and to support oppressed peoples. So it could be said that VNP was not a purely nationalist party but also had socialist tendency" [8, pp.282-283].

From the starting point that VNP had adopted the San-min doctrine since its inception, Bui Cong Trung in his book *A Small Contribution on History of Vietnamese Modern Revolution*, affirmed that "When the Vietnamese Nationalist Party was established, it immediately adopted Sun Yat-sen's San-min doctrine that was the revolutionary way of the weak bourgeois class of a colonised state which was being profoundly affected by the Russian October Revolution. Therefore, the character of national revolution was no

longer in the area of democracy, but it covered the domain of the people's livelihood, and thus unwittingly became a part of the world's proletarian revolution" [12, p.83].

The second type of opinion about the VNP deliberately tried to erase class consciousness by contending that the party's ideology before 1930 contained elements that were anti-French, anti-feudalist and anti-communist. This was the opinion of some researchers in the south of Vietnam before 1975 such as Hoang Van Dao. In the book *Vietnamese Nationalist Party - History of Struggle of Period of 1927-1954*, he wrote: "In the political arena to fight colonialism, feudalism, communism and dictatorship, the VNP was the largest pioneering force and also the last stronghold of the struggle for freedom and democracy" [2, p.23].

The third type of opinions about the VNP was not totally homogenous, but shared similarities in their examining and assessing the core political ideology of VNP. Typical of these opinions is the book *Modern History of Vietnam's Revolution*, Vol. 4 (on the period of 1919-1930) by Tran Van Giau, Dinh Xuan Lam and Kieu Xuan Ba, published in 1963. The authors wrote: "The VNP was a revolutionary organisation most representative of the national revolutionary tendency." Following this line, the authors of *Vietnam's History*, Vol. 2, also affirmed: "The VNP which was founded by Nguyen Thai Hoc and Pham Tuan Tai was the organisation representative of the tendency of bourgeois democratic revolution in Vietnam" [4, p.174]. With the same type of

view are a number of other books, e.g. *Development of Ideology in Vietnam from the 19th Century to the August Revolution* of 1974 by Tran Van Giau, in which he explained further that “the nationalist tendency was essentially bourgeois revolution”, on page 583; or *Modern History of Vietnam (1917 - 1965)* written in Russian by C.A.Mkhitarian as the chief author, on page 59; and *Indochine, la colonisation ambiguë (1858 - 1954)*, by P.Brocheux and D.Hémery (1995), written in French, on page 299. In their book *History of Vietnam*, part 2, published in 1995 in Russian by the Lomonosov Moscow State University Publishers in Russia’s capital, the authors, O. V. Novakova and P. Iu. Tsvetov, wrote that the precursor of the VNP is a party of the same name founded by Phan Boi Chau in 1924 in Guangzhou (China), and the Programme of the VNP was the same as that of the precursor party which was based on the three principles of the San-min doctrine (p.80). This opinion is not convincing due to lack of supporting documents.

Recently, there emerged some opinions to the effect that VNP was a patriotic organisation of the intelligentsia [6, p.491].

From these divergent opinions, some questions have arisen: In terms of political ideology, was the VNP an organisation with revolutionary tendency or was it an organisation that represented nationalist revolution tendency? What was the nature of the party’s nationalism and what were the differences between this party and other political organisations inside and outside the country during this period? In order to elucidate these questions, we have to examine and analyse the platform, the

political views and activities of the VNP in order to obtain a fair and more objective overall picture.

3. Changes in Political Policies and Views of Vietnamese Nationalist Party

Because of its weak social base and since it was born at a time when Marxism-Leninism had begun to take roots in various strata of the population, the VNP was not able to offer a consistent and clear platform during the two years of its existence.

According to the party’s leading figures Tran Huy Lieu and Pham Tuan Tai, the primary objectives of the VNP adopted at the party’s inaugural conference on 25 December 1927 was “first to carry out a national revolution, then a world revolution” [7, p.31]. The concepts of “political platform”, “party principles”, or “ideology” were absent in the draft outlines of the party’s *Political Platform and Statutes*. Moreover, the concept of “world revolution” of the VNP members was not enunciated in clear terms.

Their view on world revolution was simplistic: after carrying the national revolution, they would join the other small and weak countries in making a world revolution [7, pp.32-33].

About its objectives, the VNP clearly stressed the need to overthrow dictatorial democracy and to set up a nationalist republic of Vietnam; the people would be given the freedoms of expression, of movement, of gathering, and of religion.

In order to achieve these goals, the VNP proposed to carry out the revolutionary

process in three stages. The first stage was the nascent or secret stage; the second one was the preparatory or semi-open stage; the third stage was ripe for uprising or the open stage. In the last stage, relying on well-prepared manpower, the VNP would form suicide squads and cooperate with Vietnamese soldiers serving in the colonial French army to stage uprisings in urban areas, led by military officers previously trained abroad [7, p.49].

In late 1928, the party realised that the first version of the Political Platform and Statutes was too vague and at the suggestion of Nguyen Khac Nhu, the VNP drafted the second version which was longer and more detailed than the first. In the new Political Platform and Statutes, the party declared its ideology was social democratic; its objective was to unite all forces regardless of gender [7, p.93] in order to: a/ promote national revolution; b/ develop direct democracy; and c/ support the oppressed peoples.

In concrete terms the VNP wanted to use force to fight foreign aggression, to achieve national independence and to build a republican state; then it would lend support to other colonised countries to rise up and make a revolution for national liberation. However, the VNP did not stop there; in early 1929, it continued to adjust and change its *Political Platform and Statutes*, re-affirming its goals to: a/ promote national revolution; b/ develop direct democracy; c/ support the oppressed nations [7, p.113].

The last version of the VNP's Programme was drafted before the Yen Bai mutiny broke out, clearly upholding the

principles of Liberty-Equality-Fraternity and its goals of national revolution, political revolution and social revolution [7, pp.121-122]. In order to achieve these goals, the VNP advocated a revolutionary process in four stages: nascent (secret), preparation (semi-secret), open activity, and reconstruction (seizing power).

Up to the time of the armed uprising, the leaders of the VNP still wanted to re-adjust the political platform but since time was running out, they trimmed down Sun Yat-sen's San-min doctrine to make it the party's own guiding principles. In the part entitled "Applying the San-min doctrine" on the VNP, the author of *Reference Documents of Modern History of Vietnam's Revolution*, Vol. 5, wrote: "At this time, while preparing for a battle fraught with risks and uncertainties, VNP leaders certainly had no time to discuss about ideology or to adjust their political platform, they only could simply "co-opted" the entire San-min doctrine, making it their own. Since then San-min doctrine became the official ideology of the party" [7, p.55].

After the Yen Bai mutiny was suppressed, a number of VNP members were jailed; many times they engaged in heated discussions on the ideology of their party. Those members who were arrested before February 1929 only knew the first version of the party's platform and charter. Those who were arrested immediately before and after the Yen Bai mutiny only recognised the San-min Doctrine. In 1926, two key figures of Nam Dong Publishing House, Pham Tuan Lam and Pham Hoang Tran compiled and published the book

“Biography and Doctrine of Sun Yat-sen” [11, p.270]. In the introduction, the authors wrote: “We compiled this book only to pay homage to our hero. The hero’s spirit has not died, his accomplishments live on, and introducing the hero to everyone is a way to say to those who have not known him that: there was such a hero” [11, p.270]. These authors also added that they wanted to translate Sun Yat-sen’s works into Vietnamese. However, their wish was never fulfilled since the publishing house was forced to close down by order of the French colonial authorities.

The documents above show that the ideology of VNP was based on the three principles: Liberty-Equality-Fraternity, but actually the content of these principles was the same as the three basic tenets of the San-min doctrine. Sun Yat-sen himself affirmed this in his speech of 16 March 1924: “In the French revolution, the motto was Liberty-Equality-Fraternity just as the motto of Chinese revolution today being Nationalism (Min Ts’u), Democracy (Min Ch’uan) and Livelihood (Min Sheng) [13, pp.50-51].

However, there are some considerable differences between San-min doctrine and the principles of the VNP. Sun Yat-sen advocated a revolution carried out in three stages: 1/military unification by using military power to eradicate obstacles to build the nation’s foundation; 2/ political tutelage by using dissemination, encouraging the people to get rid of feudalism, establish self-ruled local councils (parliamentary representation style); 3/ constitutional democracy by instituting a Five-Power Constitution

(executive, legislative, judicial, control and examination) [10, pp.341-367]. In order to reach the goals of nationalism, Sun Yat-sen proposed three missions including: 1/ to mobilise the Chinese population against the Manchu dynasty; 2/ to initiate a revolutionary movement that can be achieved through violence; 3/ to conduct a revolutionary movement to overthrow the Manchu regime.

This was different from the revolutionary approach of the VNP whose aims were to make a national revolution, to establish a constitutional republic and to help oppressed peoples to rise up with their own revolutions.

4. National revolution doctrine - core element of VNP’s political ideology

Under the influence of Sun Yat-sen’s San-min doctrine, the VNP sided with the position of the nation’s bourgeoisie class to deal with national issues. In all of its political platforms and charters, the VNP concentrated on national issues, considering the fight against national oppression and national liberation as its primary responsibility. The foremost responsibility in its first charter (1928) was “to promote national revolution” and in its amended Statutes and Programme (1929) was “to promote national revolution, to build directly a republic, to support oppressed nations” (the party’s platform in 1929). Then it is clear that its ultimate aim was to use violence to overthrow the colonial rule of the French empire in order to gain national independence, establish a

republican government and institute people's rights and democracy and pave the way for capitalism to develop in Vietnam. Although the party's political platform did refer to the reconstruction period, this was done in a vague manner, mentioning such tasks as "propagating knowledge, educating the people by public talks, granting freedom of speech." In this regard, the colonial newspaper *La Revue Française annamite* issued on 4 August 1929 wrote: "If all the big words of the Chinese revolutionary party are removed from the Vietnam Nationalist Party's platform, there is nothing left except one sentence: you Frenchmen, go away! The people of the party do not know what to do after finishing their job, there is no social programme, no political programme" [1]. The reason of this shortcoming was the weak social base of the bourgeoisie nationalist movement, or, in other words, it was because that Vietnamese bourgeoisie had to reckon with a feeble economy and a weak political base. Relying on a bourgeois class in such a weak position, the VNP adopted the San-min doctrine and applied it in a specific way. First of all, the party's view about national issues and nationalism was not similar to Sun Yat-sen's nationalism at the early stage. Sun Yat-sen had said: "Considering the situation of social customs in Chinese history..., nationalism is the doctrine of the people of the nation" (implying the Han Chinese). He had also emphasised: "To talk about nationalism is to talk about the doctrine of the people of the nation. This is only true for China, not true for other countries" [13, p.189]. In contrast,

the goal of the party's nationalism was to fight against national oppression and slavery by a foreign colonial empire. Of course, Sun Yat-sen's view of nationalism was later re-adjusted, amended and developed into The Three Great Policies: alliance with Russia and tolerance of the communists, support for the worker and peasant classes, equalising land ownership and restraining capitalism.

The party's nationalist standpoint was not only expressed in its guiding principles, but also in the way it assessed potential revolutionary forces in both its guiding principles and actual deeds.

In both its political platform and its actual revolutionary deeds, the VNP had no intention to engage in class struggle. It always took the bourgeois nationalist standpoint in assessing and coordinating revolutionary forces. The basic guidelines of the two platforms and statutes written in 1928 and 1929 highlighted the party's basic motto of national solidarity uniting all forces regardless of gender, social class, belief and age in order to carry out the party's objectives. However, there was a gap between the party's pronounced objectives and what happened on the ground since in reality the party attached more attention to the role of some social classes while downplaying the roles of others. This could be seen in the party's development process. It gave top priority to recruiting Vietnamese soldiers serving in the French colonial army, followed by members of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, intellectuals living in urban areas; then notables, local officials and wealthy people in rural areas. As for the

worker and peasant classes, the VNP merely wanted to organise them into groups of party's sympathisers. It is worth noting that the way revolutionary forces were organised and built up by the VNP was different from that of the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth Association founded by its leader Nguyen Ai Quoc. The Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth Association, a revolutionary organisation with socialist tendency since its inception, focused on mass mobilisation, dissemination and education and the organisation of the worker and peasant classes. In contrast the VNP downgraded and denied the leading role of the worker class in the revolutionary process. This stance of the bourgeois class had been pointed out by F. Engels: "The interest of the bourgeois class is to hide the existence of a worker class" and "to hope for the existence of a bourgeois class without a worker class" [3].

It is fair to say that, on the one hand, the way the VNP arranged and built up its forces reflected the influence of the San-min doctrine which did not advocate class struggle but preferred to regulate the various classes. On the other hand, it was impacted by the fierce ideological struggle which was going on between the VNP and the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth Association regarding the position and role of the Vietnamese worker class. The articles by Dat Cong (Pham Tuan Lam) on the newspaper "*Thuc nghiiep dan bao*" clearly expressed the view that rejected class struggle and deny workers' leading role in the nationalist movement. In that context, the Nam Dong Publishing House also lent support to the policy of class regulation. Therefore it is understandable why the VNP

did not advocate class struggle in the first place, and why later on it moved closer to revolutionary nationalism.

Since the VNP did not realise the strength of the masses, it did not believe in it and did not want to rely on it, but sought individual strength, personal heroism, enthusiasm and eagerness, which characterise the petty bourgeoisie class. The party regarded the masses as a mixed bag of people, and as such they cannot win. In its view, in order to have independence, it was necessary to defeat the enemy. And in order to defeat the enemy, it was necessary to have weapons and military training. The VNP therefore gave priority to military matters and made bombs to prepare for great events in order to make a name for the party. This was evident by the fact that the party's Assassination Committee, which was located right next to its central office and led by Doan Tran Nghiep ("Ky con"), constantly carried out assassinations and terrorist acts against individuals [5].

Because they did not realise the strength of the masses, after the assassination of Bazin in February 1929, to mitigate the effects of the French brutal retaliation, instead of relying on the masses to maintain their activities and rebuild their base, in their desperate situation, the VNP leaders made every effort to prepare for a last-ditch act of violence spurred on by the ideal of individual heroism that "even if we do not succeed, we [would still] become [true] persons."

In short, although the VNP's basic political thought changed overtime, its core ideology remained nationalism. However, the party's nationalism was not entirely similar to the San-min doctrine of Sun Yat-sen. Sun Yat-sen found that the spirit of

Chinese people had waned under political oppression and economic power of the West, so he advocated a renewal of national power; the people had to regain national sovereignty and to rebuild the country by themselves. Sun Yat-sen's doctrine also aimed at achieving ethnic equality between the Han, the Mongols, the Tibetans..., but deep in his heart, he wanted the Han people to hold the reins of government [13]. Thus his nationalism was actually Han hegemonism. In contrast, the core nature of the party's nationalism was patriotism and national self-reliance.

The VNP's view also differed from the views on national issues of the two organisations, namely the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth Association and the Tan Viet Revolutionary Party, the revolutionary ideas of which are part of the proletarian ideology aimed at totally liberating the nation from the oppression of colonialism, proceeding with proletarian revolution, then allying with the world's proletariat to overthrow capitalism and build a communist society.

Obviously, the VNP was neither a secret organisation nor a revolutionary organisation with socialist tendency. So, it is fair to say that the VNP was always a revolutionary party representing the ideology and interests of the Vietnamese bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie in the 1920s.

Although the VNP did not opt for proletarian ideology as a way to achieve national liberation, its ideology and political policies before 1930 never were against the communists.

Due to limitations of revolutionary logic, the VNP principles "were not as

thorough and penetrating as the political platform of the Indo - China Communist League later on, but they did not contradict the content of first period of the new-styled bourgeois democratic revolution led by the Indo-China Communist Party..." [9, p.204]. The ideological foundation and the core content of the VNP's view was patriotism and national consciousness. On this score there was no difference between the VNP and the communists. When assessing and seeking contact with the VNP, the Youth Association - the organisation representing the proletarian revolutionary tendency in the years before 1930 - was critical of the party's risky and adventurous acts, (typical were the assassination of Nhu and Uyen, the two traitors sent by the French *Suret * to capture Nguyen Thai Hoc in May 1928 in Hai Phong) while, on the other hand, it wanted to associate and coordinate with the party's members in its activities.. On its part, the VNP did not conduct adversarial acts against the Youth Association; it even sought to unite the two parties organisationally in the years after its founding.

Being subject to the changing circumstance of the nation and the world after World War II, the VNP's nationalism carried new features and meanings totally different from the nationalism of the feudal era. During the era, under the influence of the strongly changed context of both the nation and the world after World War I, the party's nationalism had new contents and was dissimilar with Vietnamese feudal nationalism. In feudal times, nationalism was premised on Confucian ideology with

the idea “The countries (i.e. Vietnam and China) are separate, customs of the North (i.e. China) and the South (i.e. Vietnam) are different” (Nguyen Trai, “Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Wu [invaders]”), but at the moment nationalism was associated with the demand to fight colonialism, to gain national independence, liberty and self-reliance in order to make the country strong and the people prosperous.

5. Conclusion

As such, the Vietnam Nationalist Party was a patriotic bourgeois political party that pursued revolutionary nationalism and was an important component of the nationalist movement in Vietnam in the 1920s. With its actions, the party made important contributions to the formation and development of modern Vietnamese nationalism as well as to the momentous steps in the national liberation movement in Vietnam in the years before 1930.

Note

² There are various types of nationalism:

a/ Ethnic nationalism; b/ Civic nationalism; c/ Expansionist nationalism; d/ Radical nationalism, e/ Left-wing nationalism.

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