

Observation no: 167

Country-year: Vietnam 1976

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

No

The Viet Minh (a nationalist movement containing both communists and non-communists) defeated the French in 1954. The Geneva conference partitioned the country along the 17th parallel, with the north to be led by Ho Chi Minh until elections in 1955. These elections never occurred, and Ho Chi Minh stayed in power in what became North Vietnam.¹ North Vietnam conquered South Vietnam in 1975, resulting in national unification by military means, but no coups were involved.

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

No

Ho Chi Minh was in power until his death in 1969, after which the North continued to be ruled with a collective leadership style, headed by Le Duan. Verified “no coups” in Powell/Thyne dataset as well.

3. Is the country’s top leader a former military officer?

No

Le Duan was not a military officer, though he did work to advance party causes in the South during the 1950s. He did advocate military solutions to national reunification but was a politician.

4. Are ethnic, sectarian, or racial criteria used to exclude segments of the population from the officer corps?

No

This distinction does not come up in the major works about the North Vietnamese military.²

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

¹ Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1990), chapter 3.

² William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981); and Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1986).

Yes

North Vietnam was a self-consciously ideological state, and it constantly sought to reinforce and verify the ideological purity of its senior officer corps. Although there was more ideological flexibility with respect to junior officers, especially in the 1950s, it was unthinkable that a high-ranking officer in the People's Army of Vietnam could be anything but a committed communist.³

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes

The most senior generals in the North Vietnamese military were also top party leaders.⁴

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

Yes

Indoctrination was not the only aspect of training, but it was very important and widespread.⁵

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

No

I cannot find evidence of this in the major histories already cited. The regime in the North was largely internally stable by the early 1960s.

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?

Yes

The military was heavily involved in occupying and essentially governing the south after its conquest by the north in 1975.

³ A sense of this ideological approach appears in a major book written by a high-ranking North Vietnamese officer, General Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961). It also comes through in North Vietnam's own history of the war, "The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: the Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002).

⁴ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 119.

⁵ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 99.

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

No

I cannot find evidence of this in the major histories already cited.

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

Yes

There were political officers attached to all units, from the squad level up.⁶

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

No

I cannot find evidence of this in the major histories already cited.

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

Yes

The overlapping membership of the party and senior officer corps, combined with party congresses, provided for regular exchanges of information. There are also references to Ho Chi Minh observing training exercises, suggesting further civil-military information exchanges.⁷

⁶ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 147.

⁷ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, pp. 25, 173, 187, 437.