

Toward a New Politics?

Jonathan D. London

DOI: 10.1057/9781137347534.0013

Palgrave Macmillan

Please respect intellectual property rights

This material is copyright and its use is restricted by our standard site license terms and conditions (see palgraveconnect.com/pc/connect/info/terms_conditions.html). If you plan to copy, distribute or share in any format, including, for the avoidance of doubt, posting on websites, you need the express prior permission of Palgrave Macmillan. To request permission please contact rights@palgrave.com.

9

Toward a New Politics?

Jonathan D. London

This book has examined institutional foundations of politics in contemporary Vietnam. It has reflected on continuity and change in the character of Vietnamese authoritarianism. It has sought to better situate Vietnam within the sprawling theoretical literature on comparative politics and authoritarian regimes, in particular. And it has shed light on key tensions and contradictions that animate politics in Vietnam today. Through the contributions to this volume, we have peered into the internal dynamics of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the complex relations between central and local authorities in the context of market reforms and economic internationalization. We have scrutinized developments in Vietnam's formal representative political institutions and we have probed the limits of political toleration and dissent. And we have surveyed the country's apparatus of repression. Lastly, we have noted the development of an increasingly vibrant and autonomous associational life and indeed an incipient and a relatively unmediated public political discourse. It will now be useful to reflect on the implications of all this for our understandings of politics in contemporary Vietnam.

In contrast to much of the literature on politics in Vietnam, the chapters in this volume have made conscientious efforts to situate the Vietnamese experience within theoretical literature on comparative politics. Yet, in contrast to much of comparative literature on authoritarian regimes, the contributors to this volume have not sought mainly to understand, explain, or imagine how elections, parliaments, and party organizations serve authoritarian ends. On the contrary, they have sought to observe, understand, and explain the evolution and functioning of Vietnam's political institutions. In so doing, however, the authors have differed from one another; both with respect to their

general and specific interpretations of political processes unfolding in Vietnam today. Where some see weaknesses and decay in Vietnam's political institutions (Vu: Ch. 2), others see resilience and strength (Thayer: Ch. 7). Where some see increased accountability (Malesky: Ch. 4) and toleration of dissent (Kerkvliet: Ch. 6), others emphasize the harshness of state repression (Thayer: Ch. 7). Virtually all authors depict an authoritarian regime characterized by considerable intrastate competition and one that is increasingly subject to pressures for fundamental reforms, both from within and from outside. The truth, of course, is that all of these elements may be observed in contemporary Vietnam.

Despite their differences, the chapters in this volume do convey one common sentiment – that contemporary Vietnam is experiencing important changes in its political institutions. Indeed, as we enter the middle years of the twenty-first century's second decade, it appears that Vietnam has entered a new if indeterminate phase in its political development.

But just what sort of phase are we talking about? And in what meaningful respects is it really new? To conclude this volume, this chapter will revisit and relate the various contributions to this volume. And it will do so in light of the most recent developments in Vietnam's politics, that is, those that have occurred in 2012 and 2013. Along the way, the chapter will highlight substantive issues and questions that this volume has mentioned but has not explored in depth. Finally, the chapter will peer into the future and pose important, yet not immediately answerable questions about what might lie ahead. Before doing so, let us take stock of the contributions to this volume and the questions they raise for current and future understandings of politics in Vietnam.

Taking stock

Politics in Viet Nam is not reducible to the CPV. But the party remains the most essential institutional component of Viet Nam's politics. Tuong Vu's contribution to this volume posed perennial but essential questions about the party's status. In particular, he questions whether the CPV is in decline and whether and how this might matter. Departing from the tendency to view Vietnamese political order in isolation, Vu situates Viet Nam within the contemporary historical universe of single-party states. In these states, he notes the special importance of elite politics, violence, war, and rents. He unpacks the significance of these themes in the evolution of single-party dictatorships and the CPV in particular. Vu characterized the period running from 1986 to the present as one of

“reform and continuing decay,” arguing that “incremental adaptability” (to the market, among others) has nonetheless failed to stem the erosion of the party’s autonomy (from its social environment) and hence its power. Vu warns, however, that “decay does not mean immediate or eventual breakdown” (Chapter 2).

An additional strength of Vu’s chapter is his analysis of the broader party infrastructure. He notes, for example, that Vietnam’s party-controlled mass organizations – once a functional cornerstone of Vietnam’s totalitarian social order – have, in the context of markets and increased personal autonomy, declined in their relevance. (One might speculate whether the appointment of Politburo member Nguyen Thien Nhan in late 2013 represents an effort to reverse this trend.) Thinking comparatively, one is reminded of assertions by Stephen Haggard that North Korea’s communist party (the Workers Party) appears moribund at the grassroots.¹ This is certainly not the case in Vietnam, where the party remains both active and significant. Be that as it may, the CPV, perhaps unlike the Communist Party of China, has publicly raised the alarm about its own development. This was the central if unapologetic message of Resolution 4 (of 2012), which aims to stanch and reverse the Party’s degradation through an increased (albeit all-too-familiar) emphasis on criticism and self-criticism.

Among Vu’s most provocative claims is that while revolutionary violence helped build the CPV’s rural support base, the transition to a market economy is now destroying it, in large part, owing to a widespread perception that higher- and mid-level operatives who manage “development” in Vietnam are mainly interested in the accumulation of personal fortune. Despite emphasis on erosion and decline, Vu finds that Vietnam’s new social order – partly a product of the Party itself – presents ample opportunities for the regime to persist. Looking toward the future, Vu notes the availability of nationalism as a fallback source of regime legitimacy. More provocative still is Vu’s contention that the Party has become “seemingly totally beholden to interest groups” and that its survival is in grave danger.

Yet do we, in fact, know enough? The rumor mill is ripe with stories of how interest groups and party membership intersect. But while there is (as there should be) immense interest in the phenomenon of “interest group” politics in Vietnam and its prospective contributions to regime maintenance or decline, there has been no attempt, to my knowledge, to systematically map this phenomenon, or probe its presumptive or real effects on the Party’s standing. In general, “interest group politics” in Vietnam is construed as some toxic combination of political elitism

and market opportunism. Yet looking forward, it is worth questioning whether the rise of interest group politics in Vietnam necessarily reflects a process of political malaise. Certainly, internal division is nothing new to the CPV. To what extent and how do the “interest groups politics” of today resemble or differ from those of the past?

Let us take, for example, the rather spectacular developments at the 6th Plenum of the 11th Party Congress, in October 2012; an event that will be remembered not only for Nguyen Tan Dung survival of threats to his leadership, but for the Central Committee’s open reprimand of the Politburo. While Dung surely tested the limits of naked personal interest, the use of political capital to accumulate personal wealth has become a deeply entrenched feature of party politics in Vietnam. Whether corrupt or not, how and to what extent does the ongoing embourgeoisement of the CPV’s elite ranks contribute to the development and character of interest group politics? However corrupted by interests it may be, the CPV’s particular brand of interest group politics stands in contrast with China’s “one-man show” of Xi Jinping. Does the (apparently) comparatively more decentralized power of Vietnam’s party state make interest group politics any more harmful to regime survival? With the improving availability of information – perhaps itself a product of interest group competition – conditions in Vietnam today allow for finer-grained studies of politics, even at the elite level.

One area where interest group politics are widely and with some merit presumed to be undermining party rule concerns the efficacy of the Party’s economic stewardship. Thomas Jandl’s contribution to the volume is the only one that explicitly addresses economic themes. And while his focus is not specifically focused on interest groups, he is concerned centrally with the political dynamics of market-based economic growth in Vietnam. All market economies are, of course, politically instituted. And in his chapter Jandl unpacks the dynamics of central–local relations in the context of market reforms, with particular attention to foreign direct investment (FDI) and to the politics of state finance. His analysis construes central–local relations as patron–client relations and perceptively identifies the complexities of these relations in the context of uneven development. Jandl demonstrates key differences between China and Vietnam. Notably, his analysis reminds us that Vietnam’s political economy is significantly more *redistributive* than China’s, in the sense that equalizing transfers – from wealthy to poorer provinces through the central government – are proportionally larger in Vietnam as a proportion of GDP. Jandl also points out that in Vietnam, at least in the first decade or more of reform, local “risers” (rather than

central state insiders) have played a relatively more important role than in China in introducing and championing reforms. On the other hand, the very success of provincial elites in championing reforms and rising to the upper echelons of national power circles begs the question of whether it is still meaningful to construe central state and provincial authorities as a patron–client relation; particularly when so many central state leaders have been cut from local cloth. With respect to the broader aims of the volume, Jandl’s analysis reminds us of the necessity of understanding Vietnam’s economic development as a politically mediated process.

There is, of course, no shortage of economic issues that would benefit from explicitly political analysis. As several chapters in this volume have shown, economic issues concerning land and property rights remain as relevant as ever and stand to benefit from further analysis. As indicated at the outset of this volume, there is already a significant body of scholarship devoted to the political determinants of economic institutions. There has been perhaps less attention to the political effects of economic institutions, economic behavior, and its effects. Vietnam’s faltering economic performance since 2008 has brought several interesting issues to the fore, including the politics of (bad) public debt, problems in industrial policy, inadequate skilling, and the political economy of “equitization” and privatization, to name a few. And yet relatively few studies have probed the impacts of how these economic realities have affected the selection and conduct of state policies and the nature of politics in Vietnam more generally. As Jandl’s analysis reminds us, the process of administrative and political decentralization that has unfolded in Vietnam has greatly increased the power of provinces and provincial elites, especially those who through trade and investment have come to command large-scale economic resources. In contrast to the China literature, however, comparative research on the local politics of economic governance in Vietnam remains underdeveloped.

Since 1945, Vietnam’s formally representative deliberative body, the National Assembly (NA), has been haunted by the possibility that it is a farce. Indeed, the NA has been and remains subordinate to the CPV, formally and practically. The body remains overwhelmingly constituted by Party members and “party people.” Be that as it may, Eddy Malesky reminds us that the NA plays a unique functional role in Vietnam’s political economy, and the character of this role has evolved significantly in recent years. Moreover, Vietnam’s “authoritarian parliament” differs fundamentally from patterns observed in other countries. Perhaps most importantly, the NA is a body in which state officials in Vietnam are

increasingly (if unevenly) held to account. In his two contributions to this volume, Edmund Malesky has subjected the body's recent evolution to rigorous empirical scrutiny. In his original contribution to this volume, Malesky discusses the NA's development in light of the historic and unprecedented confidence votes, which were taken in the NA in June 2013. Malesky discusses his findings in "The Adverse Effects of Sunshine," in which he and associates investigated the determinants and effects of publicly broadcast query sessions. Both the confidence votes and the query sessions illustrate the difficult assembly members and regime elite face in acquiring information on citizen preferences while maintaining order and stability in an authoritarian parliament.

What, we might ask, does the recent development of the NA mean with respect to politics in Vietnam more generally and the significance of Vietnam with respect to efforts to understand and explain single-party authoritarian politics more generally? Malesky's piece challenges Vietnam observers to move beyond facile statements about the presumptive "assertiveness" of the NA to substantive analysis of what is actually occurring and whether and how it affects the accountability of the government. His asseveration that we have seen improvements in the quality (i.e., education and training and functional expertise) of assembly members is important as it invites us to consider the somewhat important if potentially discomfoting possibility that Vietnamese authoritarianism can be more responsive to national challenges that it has ever been. His observation that confidence votes in Vietnam's NA are unprecedented among authoritarian and single-party regimes, which is a reminder that Vietnam's politics are unusual. On the other hand, Malesky reminds us that not a single official in the June 2013 voting received a share over 50 percent and that government ministers received systematically lower confidence votes than did members of the assembly itself. He concludes that the confidence vote appears to be a mechanism for information gathering in a semitransparent setting, rather than a bold strike for accountability.

Perhaps the most striking change in Vietnam's politics at present has been changes in the politics of dissent. And, in particular, in the rapid development of what might be best characterized as an incipient and largely unmediated public discourse about politics and society, which has unfolded on the net and indeed in communities and workplaces across the country. In his characteristically careful analysis of patterns of dissent and repression in Vietnam up until 2010, Ben Kerkvliet has probed a critical question: Why and under what circumstances do state authorities in Vietnam variously repress or tolerate dissident behavior?

Adopting the departure point that all states use repression to control dissent, Kerkvliet's analysis juxtaposes the experiences of some 62 regime dissidents. He finds that whereas some regime critics are subjected to harsh treatment, others are not. He probes a variety of explanations, finding no single one adequate.

His broader conclusion, that Vietnam's state tolerates many forms of dissent, compels us to examine our assumptions both about the meaning of repression and the character of repression in Vietnam. This question has become if anything more important amid the recent development of Vietnam's political discourse, in which the sheer volume of dissenting speech has grown exponentially. Certainly, the questions Kerkvliet raises deserve continued attention. At a broader and perhaps more controversial level, Kerkvliet's analysis invites us to consider the value and limits of relativistic (versus absolutist) perspective that starts with the assumption that all states (from North Korea to Norway) use repression against their citizens. Kerkvliet's point, of course, is that we are best off adopting an empirical approach and considering carefully observable patterns of dissent, repression and, yes, "toleration." Indeed, developments in Vietnam since 2010 defy simple characterization. On the one hand, a number of regime dissidents have been sentenced to very lengthy prison terms, such as Trần Huỳnh Duy Thức (16 years) or Cù Huy Hà Vũ (seven years plus three of house arrest), while, on the other hand, scores more – including increasing numbers of young, internet-based activists – have been imprisoned or subject to regular harassment and abuse. During the first half of 2013, 46 pro-democracy activists and bloggers were arrested (Thayer 2013b).

But that is not the whole story. For Vietnam in a relatively short space of time has developed a more open political culture; one that has far-outpaced the evolution of the country's formal political institutions. No doubt, this has owed in large part to the development of a Vietnamese cyberspace. But it is more than that. Viewed sociologically, the developmental dynamics of Vietnam's incipient public political discourse can only be understood as the product of mutually constitutive interactions between the state and its social environment, an environment in which increasing numbers of Vietnamese, within and without the state apparatus, are taking an interest in politics and expressing their views. At the very least, Kerkvliet reminds us that, in any society, the state plays a vital role in structuring the space within which dissent occurs. This is not to assume the state is interested in promoting dissent by any means. Rather, it is to acknowledge that the state has significant agency in creating, and more or less effectively regulating, the social

space in which dissent occurs. Undoubtedly, these issues are discussed at the very pinnacle of the CPV, in such agencies as the Party Committee on Education (Ban Tuyên Giáo). Today, in Vietnam, broadcasts of state-filtered news, whether through the precinct speaker system (loa phường) or 700 state-run newspapers, occurs within the social environment where Vietnamese are more able to access alternative views, albeit in a limited way.

Given the considerable interest in the politics of state repression in Vietnam, there has been strikingly little analysis of the apparatus of repression itself. Carlyle Thayer's contribution to this volume cuts through such claims with a crisp analysis of the quartet of Vietnamese agencies responsible for repressive functions. These include the Ministry of Public Security, the People's Armed Security Force, the General Directorate II (military intelligence), and the Ministry of Culture and Information. If Kerkvliet's chapter forces us to consider degrees of toleration in Vietnam's polity, Thayer's reminds us that Vietnam's repressive apparatuses are indeed extensive and constitute a major dimension of state governance. In his analysis, Thayer is struck by the extensiveness of repressive agencies, given the relatively "small number" of dissidents and activists. Thayer's suggestion that different factions within the Vietnamese state use repression to undermine each other is fascinating in its own right, particularly in the context of elite divisions. One wonders then, what will become of Vietnam's repressive agencies and their competitive behavior should the number of dissidents and activists in Vietnam grow, which appears to be occurring today.

How can we make sense of repressive aspects of Vietnamese authoritarianism in theoretical and comparative terms? There is a large literature on repressive institutions in China. One question to be explored is whether repressive agencies are any less decentralized than other parts of the state. There are interesting empirical questions to be asked about the extensiveness of repressive institutions. Thayer's widely cited analysis that one in six working-age Vietnamese is linked to the security apparatus – either as police or part of the sprawling military or as neighborhood security functionaries – is striking. Regular citizens across Vietnam are indeed widely carrying out public security functions (such as neighborhood defense brigades). Yet there has to date been no careful research on their activities (for a study of China, see Perry 2007). One might also juxtapose the Vietnamese experience with recent research by Lee and Zhang (2013), which has shed light on the manner in which the Chinese state employs non-security personnel, including networks of elderly persons, to bring pressure to bear on nonconformists.

Finally, we come to one of the most intriguing questions concerning politics in contemporary Vietnam: whether and to what extent the country is experiencing the rise of forms of autonomous forms of associational life; what some people refer to as “civil society.” The relaxation of totalitarian controls that has unfolded in recent decades has permitted Vietnamese greater degrees of personal freedom, particularly in the areas of consumption and leisure activities. As Wells-Dang amply demonstrates, however, there are multiple forms of associational life springing up in Vietnam including many quasi-autonomous and practically autonomous social organizations that look, feel, and behave like civil society organizations in democratic polities. More important for our purposes, we have begun to observe the vigorous development of secondary associations of a distinctly political character, ranging from networks of independent journalists and bloggers to the “No-U Football Club (NUFC),” which brings together young persons opposed to China’s legally baseless claims in the western Pacific.

The flowering of political associations in Vietnam occurs on thin ice. A clear example of these tensions was evident on Sunday, May 5, 2013, when a group of rights activists publicly called for human rights “picnics” at public parks in Hanoi, Nha Trang, and Ho Chi Minh City. Those participating were greeted by scores of police, who deployed multiple means to disperse the meetings. Several persons who were detained were subject to physical abuse and injury. In August 2013, young bloggers in Hanoi were the subject of a systematic campaign of threats, illegal detentions, and physical beatings. It seems that at the moment various activities represent what Bayat Asef has called “social ‘non-movements’” (Bayat 2009).² Be that as it may, social “non-movements” whether in Vietnam or elsewhere can be socially significant and worthy of study. So too can further analysis of political discourse, including discussions of whether and under what conditions it is accompanied by political action.

Looking forward

How, then, should we characterize politics in contemporary Vietnam? This volume of chapters has not pretended to provide a comprehensive accounting of the state of politics in contemporary Vietnam. Nonetheless, the chapters in this volume permit degrees of confidence with respect to specific trends. Now into its eighth decade of existence, the CPV remains the leading force in Vietnam’s politics, and is today faced with a qualitatively new set of challenges. While Vietnam’s market economy has continued to grow, the Party has struggled to sustain economic

growth and social order owing mostly to divisions and interests within the Party that dilute the force and coherence of its rule. The country's economic development remains geographically uneven, making the country's leadership and large swaths of the country's population dependent on a relatively small number of growth engines. Vietnam's formal representative institutions, though continuing to operate within the narrow confines of a single-party polity, maintain a unique position in Vietnam's polity. Within the past decade, the NA has gained stature as a forum for publicly addressing (if not always resolving) the stresses and strains of Vietnamese politics.

Perhaps the most salient development in Vietnam's politics has been in the realm of associational life. Dissent may be observed in any polity. Yet dissent within authoritarian contexts occurs within a hostile context. There seems little doubt that Vietnam in recent years has seen major changes in its political culture. While Vietnam has yet to develop any significant social movements, the country now exhibits (thanks mainly to increasing access to internet technologies) a vibrant political cyberspace in which dissenting views are presented and disseminated in an open manner. Nor are these discussions limited to cyberspace. On the other hand, the chapters in this volume demonstrate that open dissent in Vietnam carries many risks. The state sometimes tolerates dissent and sometimes crushes it by brutal means. While "civil society" remains a conceptually fraught term, empirical analysis suggests an increasing quasi-autonomous and practically autonomous associations now play a vital role in the social life of Vietnam and are transforming the character of the country's politics.

These and attendant changes introduce challenges to the study of politics in Vietnam. In contrast to the past, the study of politics in contemporary Vietnam is occurring in an age of big data, microblogs, and a 24-hour news cycle. To what extent does this enhance or hinder our ability to understand and explain political processes? The vastly increased flow of information in Vietnam gives one the sense that the velocity of politics has increased; but how can we know that we are indeed observing significant changes in the rules and compliance procedures governing power and authority relations in Vietnam? Is it the case that our understandings of politics in Vietnam are becoming more nuanced, or is it merely the case that we are experiencing changes in the manner in which we encounter politics in Vietnam? For scholars of politics in Vietnam, these are indeed interesting times.

As this book went to press, Vietnam's National Assembly had passed a revised constitution, with over 98 per cent approval, generating

decidedly different reactions from across the political spectrum. Hailed by its champions, the constitutional vote was greeted with disdain by critics, including thousands of petitioners who had called for fundamental reforms. Just weeks later, Vietnamese observed International Human Rights Day with a series of events, including the inauguration of the Vietnam Bloggers Network. While in his 2014 New Year's Address, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung raised eyebrows with a speech festooned with talk of the democracy and institutional reforms. These three examples, which transpired just within weeks of each other, remind us of how in the analysis of contemporary Vietnam's politics we confront questions both old and new. In this volume as in the past we have observed debates about the status of the CPV, featuring some accounts that emphasize decay and some that emphasize resilience and strength. As with the analysis of China, analysts of Vietnam often want to have it both ways. Indeed, they can. On the one hand, the CPV exhibits considerable fractiousness and incoherence and displays a leadership crisis at its peak. On the other hand, the Party and its constituent agencies remain a deeply institutionalized and dominant force in all spheres of social life, backed by a repressive apparatus that is formidable to say the least. Be that as it may, the events of the recent past suggest degrees of indeterminacy that are in my own view truly novel. Perhaps the greatest weakness of scholarship on authoritarian politics owes to the tendency for people within such regimes to conceal their preferences. For the present author, it is newly conceivable that very significant changes in Vietnam's political institutions could occur within five years' time.

Overall, this volume has depicted a country whose political institutions are evolving at a more rapid clip than in the past. The country's politics feels and is indeed less scripted than at any time in the postwar period. Vietnam's politics are fluid in a way that was hard to imagine just a few years ago. And they are more interesting than in the past, in part because the political scene is more open and uncertain than in the past. Certainly, many important themes have not been discussed in this volume. These include, but are not limited to, the rise of political activism, the shifting character of Vietnam's political links to the world system, the politics of class, gender, and ethnicity, and the politics of welfare, inequality, and citizenship. Be that as it may, the chapters in this volume have addressed key dimensions of politics in Vietnam at a momentous period in the country's political development. We hope and trust this volume contributes positively to existing understandings of

contemporary Vietnamese politics and to situating Vietnam within the broader theoretical literature on comparative politics in Asia.

Notes

1. This sentiment was expressed at the conference to which these essays were initially submitted (Authoritarianism in East Asia, June 29–July 1, City University of Hong Kong).
2. I wish to thank Joerg Wischermann for calling this work to my attention.