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## Politics in Contemporary Vietnam

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London, Jonathan D. 2014. "Politics in Contemporary Vietnam." In: *Politics in Contemporary Vietnam: Party, State, and Authority Relations*, Jonathan D. London Ed. Houndmills UK. and New York. Palgrave/MacMillan.

Vietnam's political development has entered an extraordinary, if indeterminate, phase. Politics in Vietnam, long a predictable affair, are today characterized by a sense of uncertainty and possibility that has no precedent in the country's postwar history. Changes are apparent on a variety of levels. At the pinnacle of state power, competition among elite members of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has produced no clear victor, lending to a sense of acute political gridlock. The degree of dissensus was laid bare in October of 2012, when the entire Politburo was subjected to unprecedented criticism by the Party Central Committee. It was evident again in early 2013, when Vietnam saw a bitter and uncharacteristically public proxy struggle for control over the party Politburo. Nor have evolutionary processes been limited to the sphere of elite politics. Recent changes in Vietnam's political culture are a case in point. Unfiltered political speech and contentious politics, only recently a rarity in Vietnam, have swiftly become commonplace. While the art of political commentary, dormant for decades, has seen a spirited revival. Underlying all of these political developments is a set of tensions and contradictions within Vietnam's political economy itself. While the country's economy retains considerable potential, two decades of rapid economic growth has given way to a flagging economic performance. Today in Vietnam there is a sense that economic mismanagement, corruption, skills and infrastructure bottlenecks, and sheer incompetence are conspiring to dim the country's prospects. Intensifying social inequalities and inequities have contributed to political restlessness. Nor, however, should political discontinuities be exaggerated. In late 2013 Vietnam's National Assembly endorsed a revised constitution that ignored calls for reform that have emerged both within and outside the Party. While Vietnamese are taking a greater interest in politics, organized dissent is severely repressed.

This volume places Vietnam's recent political evolution in perspective through a rigorous analysis of politics in contemporary Vietnam.

Comprising contributions from leading Vietnam scholars, this volume drills deeply into core aspects of Vietnam's politics. Thematic focuses include the development and decay of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the politics of (in)accountability within the state administrative apparatus, the recent evolution of relations between central and local authorities, the functions of representative institutions, the activities of political dissidents, the growth of incipient forms of secondary association and "civil society," and state repression. Unlike much of the scholarship on Vietnam, the contributions in this volume take special care to consider Vietnam in light of broader debates concerning politics in Asia. China is of particular interest, even as much of the literature on China is itself insular and noncomparative. Yet Vietnam is not China and indeed recent experience in Vietnam speaks to broader debates in comparative politics concerning such matters as regime survival and decay, elections and representation, civil society, and dissident politics. Finally, there are differing characterizations and explanations of the state of Vietnamese politics today. Indeed, the chapters in this volume find agreement in some areas and discord in others, facilitating a lively discussion and contributing to a better if imperfect understanding of the dynamics of power relations in one of Asia's most important but least understood countries.

This introductory chapter has three aims. The first is to establish a common foundation by way of a concise and up-to-date overview of Vietnam's political institutions that also introduces contributions to this volume. The second is to highlight a crosscutting theme around which the chapters in this volume coalesce; namely, the nature of authoritarian politics in Vietnam and the significance of the Vietnamese case in relation to broader debates in comparative politics, political sociology, and related fields. The final aim of this introduction is to identify salient tensions and disagreements that emerge across the various contributions to this volume, some of which are raised by the authors themselves. I will return to these tensions in the volume's concluding chapter, in which I take stock of this volume's contributions and consider Vietnam's political outlook and future research on the subject.

## **Politics in Vietnam**

Contemporary Vietnam exhibits a one-party regime in which secondary association is highly circumscribed and dissident behavior is subject to severe punishment. This and other institutional attributes suggest that

Vietnam's political regime remains solidly authoritarian. Yet beyond this simple characterization, Vietnam's politics are not widely understood. Vietnam's politics are complex and they are changing. And yet, too often, prevailing understandings of politics in Vietnam tend to be simplistic or outdated, or both. Another common mistake is to assume that Vietnam's politics may be simply "read-off" from the Chinese case. While the volume of scholarly literature on politics in Vietnam has increased, Vietnam is often overlooked in literature on comparative politics. Next to China, Vietnam seems small and inconsequential. There is a tendency to forget or be ignorant of the fact that Vietnam today is the world's 13th most populous country and that after two decades of sustained economic growth, Vietnam has entered the ranks of the world's lower-middle income countries. Vietnam is significant in its own right and its politics are distinctive from that of China. Indeed, the differences between Vietnam and China are ripe for comparative and theoretically informed analysis.

That politics in Vietnam remains enigmatic also owes to its limited accessibility. In the past and up to the present, the country's leadership has remained suspicious of and resistant to external scrutiny. Still, Vietnam in the last two decades has become much more accessible and there is by now a significant scholarly literature on the country's political economy, though heavily concentrated on analysis of social and economic conditions in the country. Indeed, from a situation of too little data, analyses of social conditions in Vietnam today seem frequently overwhelmed by data. Worse, it is very often the case that studies of social and economic conditions and processes in Vietnam ignore politics altogether, forgetting that all social and economic processes are intrinsically political. A likely reason for this is that a good deal of social research in Vietnam is policy-driven research and donor-driven policy research in particular. In these studies, politics are off limits.

Perhaps the most important explanation for the relative thinness of the literature on politics in Vietnam is the practical challenges it poses. Though Vietnam has become more accessible, independent research on politics remains difficult. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) remains a secretive organization and the country's political institutions and processes remain opaque. Indeed, a great deal of politics in Vietnam is indecipherable. Yet it is equally clear that the usefulness of a "black box" approach to Vietnam's politics has its limits.

### **Party, state, and formal representative institutions**

Authoritarian regimes are organizational complexes built by parties around a set of interests, are maintained by vast administrative apparatuses, and

are legitimated through more or less elaborate ideational, procedural, and coercive means. Older and more recent debates on authoritarian regimes have centered on their relative durability, the character of their internal and external relations, and the processes by which such regimes seek to buttress, legitimate, and consolidate their domination. In Vietnam the state comprises the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), the state administrative apparatus along with its executive and functional agencies, formal representative institutions, state-controlled mass organizations, as well as the armed forces, police, and a multitude of security agencies organized on a variety of jurisdictional levels. Analysis of these elements and their interrelation generates important insights into contemporary Vietnam's politics and raises important questions for theoretical literature on authoritarianism.

### *The party*

Recent literature on authoritarian regimes has recast attention on one-party states and the conditions under which they rise and fall (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010). Among others, one-party states are said to persist due to their ability to co-opt and to serve as a mechanism for elite bargaining between elites and the masses. Svobik (2012) has likened recruitment into party structures to the illusion of a tournament-like structure, in that those who initially seized power enjoy great gains and retain status whereas later entrants join on the promise of opportunities that relatively few can realize. Single-party regimes retain members by using institutions like mandatory retirement to clear space at the top, thereby allowing lower-level members to believe they have something to gain through continued support.

Politics in Vietnam is not reducible to the CPV but cannot be understood in isolation from the operations of the party and its metamorphosis over time. Put simply, the CPV has been and remains dominant in Vietnam's politics. Founded between 1925 and 1930 and with roots in the Communist International, the CPV developed in the context of a protracted anticolonial struggle. Founded by a small number of youths, the Party gradually expanded its activities and numbers and managed to withstand French efforts to eliminate it. In the so-called August Revolution of 1945, the Indochina Communist Party (as it was then known) seized power in the vacuum created by Japanese surrender. It swiftly assumed a position of leadership and dominance, a position which it maintains to this day.

Arguably, three aspects of CPV rule have been most consequential: its ability to secure national independence and unification in the face of immense and highly destructive external pressure; its ability to maintain its position of dominance in politics in the context of war and post war adversity and the subsequent disintegration of the state-socialism;

and, more recently, its role in promoting unprecedented economic expansions and associated gains in living standards.

Founded on the principles of national independence and socialist revolution, the CPV today governs a rapidly transforming market economy that is increasingly enmeshed in the processes and institutions of global capitalism. The Party's survival is remarkable in its own right. Though the fate of authoritarian regimes is notoriously difficult to predict, the CPV has proven to be a durable force.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, scholarship on the CPV is among the most developed segments of the relatively small literature on politics in Vietnam. (Though there are probably more books on Ho Chi Minh than the party.) On the whole, the literature on the CPV has tended to fall into one of four categories: historical analysis of party origins and development, broad overview of the Party's recent past, polemical indictments by political opponents, and detailed analyses of twists and turns in party politics, sometimes (derisively) referred to as "Kremlinology." The best single study of the Party's early development remains Huỳnh Kim Khánh's *Vietnamese Communism, 1925–1945* (Khánh 1982), followed by the publication of numerous studies of the Party during the long war years (e.g. Turner 1975). There have been several analyses of the Party during the reform era (i.e. post-1986 era) (e.g. Stern 1993; Porter 1993; Abuza 2001). Though sophisticated in respects, these analyses tended to be broad overviews based on close readings of largely translated secondary sources, and they exhibited an uneven grasp of the character and significance of Vietnam's social and cultural institutions.

A number of Vietnamese language analyses have shed considerable light on the party's workings, with the most famous among these being the memoirs of the exiled former Party member and *Nhân Dân* editor Bui Tin (1995). More recent scholarship has sought to assess in broad strokes the development of the party and its behavior in the context of Vietnam's market transition (e.g. London 2009).

The most prolific analyst of Vietnam's politics and by extension of the Party has undoubtedly been Carl Thayer, who has written extensively on developments in the Party since the 1970s (see, for example, Thayer 1979, 1987, 1988, 1995, 2007, 2010). The most prominent emerging scholar of the CPV is Tuong Vu, who in this volume develops a detailed and up-to-date analysis of processes of institutionalization and deinstitutionalization of party rule in Vietnam. This brings us to the fundamental if familiar question about the CPV.

Now, as in the past, a central question concerning the party is its vitality. The Party's significance stems from its formal and real

position of supremacy in politics. The CPV's Politburo and its standing committee remain the preeminent decisional bodies. The party's branches and cells are interpenetrated with all parts of the state and are present in all segments of society. But the vitality of the Party is in question. How, in essence, have de-totalitarianization and marketization affected the CPV?

Huntington's seminal notion of "institutionalization" (Huntington 1968) has been favored in the analysis of party systems democratic and otherwise, but has not been obviously helpful in understanding the maintenance or decay of authoritarian regimes. Thus, varieties of authoritarianism in East Asia invite us to reconsider received wisdom.

In a cogently argued chapter that situates Vietnam in theoretical literature on comparative politics, Vu explores the roles of elite politics, violence, war, and rents in the evolution of the CPV and its implications for the party's future. One of the issues raised in Vu's analysis is why or under what conditions people join communist parties. His detailed case studies offer an important challenge to the predictions of the Svolik tournament model.

### *The state administrative apparatus*

Beyond the party lies the rest of the state apparatus. We can begin with the sprawling administrative state, frequently referred to as "the state" (nhà nước) in Vietnamese, and which comprises a full complement of executive and functional agencies designed to govern the affairs of the country. It is helpful to have an understanding not only of the operations of the state but also its organization and its relation to the Party. This can provide a better understanding of the scholarship on the state.

The state (like the Party) extends its organization vertically across four separate levels of authority, from the level of the central government, to that of provinces and major cities, down to (rural) districts and (urban) wards, and finally (rural) communes and (urban) precincts. At still lower levels (e.g. villages and hamlets) lie a variety of party and state officials who contribute in various ways to the governance of social activity. The functional agencies of the state are organized vertically. At local levels, these functional agencies are doubly accountable, to local executive bodies (i.e. People's Committees) on the one hand and to higher-level functional agencies on the other.

The executive agencies of the national state are referred to as the government, led by the prime minister, his deputies, and government ministers. At lower levels of authority (e.g. provinces, districts, and communes), People's Committees serve as the executive agency of local

authorities. People's Committees are appointed by formally representative bodies, called People's Councils (see later). Functional agencies of the state (e.g. internal affairs, education, and agriculture) are organized horizontally at different levels of authority and governed vertically, from the central level, through the provinces, districts, and communes.

An important feature of this political administrative system is that local state agencies are doubly accountable (or subordinate) – to their local people's committee on the one hand and to their higher-level functional organization on the other. Once again, all state agencies are penetrated by the Party apparatus, which represents a third dimension of accountability. Typically, and arguably increasingly, local executive authorities – particularly at the provincial level – exert greater power than functional agencies and even local party bodies.

The relationship between the Party and state is interesting in this regard. The state administrative apparatus may be reasonably construed as an instrument of the Party, as is encapsulated in the CPV slogan, "The Party Leads, the state implements, and the people inspect." Nonetheless, it is also the case (again, perhaps increasingly) that state executives and administrative agencies – though they are penetrated by Party structures – are not the same as the Party and have relative autonomy from the Party. But nor should this be exaggerated; the state administrative apparatus is interpenetrated by the Party apparatus at all levels of governance.

The historical development of the state administrative apparatus under the CPV has been the subject of several books, with Phong and Beresford's (1998) analysis of authority and economic decision making and Kim B. Ninh's analysis of education and cultural administration being among the best (Ninh 2002). Hardy's recent analysis of migration policies has drawn praise for its ability to elucidate the lived experience of state administrators and those whose migration they sought to govern (Hardy 2005).

Studies on the state and its administrative apparatus in contemporary Vietnam have provided some of the most outstanding scholarship on the country's politics. Thaveeporn Vasavakul's work on state formation (Vasavakul 1997, 1999) is exemplary in this regard, as it traces three "waves" of state building, in the 1950s, the postwar 1970s, and in the wake of the transition to a market economy. Literature on Vietnam's legal institutions arguably represents a substrata of literature on the state. Analyses by Mark Sidel (Sidel 2008) and John Gillespie (2007) have highlighted the development and transformation of legal institutions and "legality" in the context of Vietnam's market transition (one

of the first considerations of the role of law may be found in Thayer and Marr 1993).

Vietnam's economic transformation has affected all aspects of social life, and the political aspects of this transformation have been the subject of numerous studies. The scope of the changes is impressive. During the 1970s and 1980s Vietnam was among the poorest countries in the world. Today Vietnam is listed among the world's lower middle-income countries. Economic organization has changed fundamentally. Living standards have improved significantly, if unevenly, and from a very low base. Even in the context of a likely global recession, Vietnam's economy is likely to experience continued growth over the decades ahead.

The political analysis of economic change in Vietnam is essential and the relation between the state and the economy is itself a major focus of literature on the state in Vietnam. Melanie Beresford (2008) provides an excellent and recent overview. Numerous analyses have examined the interplay between state agencies and foreign investors (e.g. Malesky 2004, 2008). Writing in this volume, Thomas Jandl sheds new light on the increasing autonomy of provincial leaders in wealthy Vietnamese provinces, and on the convergence of interest among central and domestic elites. Jandl's analysis highlights differences in this regard between Vietnam and China, by demonstrating that while provincial officials in Vietnam do indeed gain independence from the center through economic success, such economic success often depends on a breach of central doctrine. Nonetheless, success in economic terms allows elites to advance their stature and influence within networks of national and international elite; economic success trumps coercive power. His analysis raises questions for existing research on the economic aspects of elite factions in other settings, notably China (e.g. Shih 2008).

The study of local politics and administration in Vietnam has also gained momentum. Kerkvliet and Marr's edited volume on local government in Vietnam, *Beyond Hanoi* (Kerkvliet and Marr 2004), includes several excellent analyses of the workings of the state at the local level, including fascinating accounts of local government in the Red River Delta (Pham 2004; Truong 2004), northern mountainous region (Sikor 2004), Mekong Delta (Hicks 2004), as well as Hanoi (Koh 2004) and Ho Chi Minh City (Gainsborough 2004).

The recent growth of literature on administrative aspects of politics in Vietnam has been stimulated by a large program of Public Administration Reform that international organizations such as the World Bank and United Nations have undertaken in partnership with the Vietnamese government (e.g. Painter 2003). The Vietnamese state's



adoption of decentralization policies has been the subject of a number of analyses (Fritzen 2006), as have changes in the principles and institutions governing the provision and payment for essential social services, such as education and health (London 2003, 2009, 2011).

What the best of these analyses do is advance beyond a preoccupation with formal institutions to the informal aspects of state administration that animate state administration and the difficulties experienced in attempts to regulate it. In Chapter 3, Thaveeporn Vasavakul presents a nuanced analysis of efforts to introduce accountability mechanisms in the operations of the state and highlights the role of intra-state institutional competition and conflict as driving factors in the evolution of Vietnam's regime. It bears emphasis that while local administration is an analytically distinct category, it is empirically interpenetrated with the CPV. As Jandl's chapter in this volume aptly demonstrates, the Party controls its agents through promotion and demotion, and Party politics ultimately condition the politics of the state.

#### *Representative institutions and mass organizations*

As described earlier, one of the more lively debates in comparative politics concerns the significance of formal representative institutions and processes, such as legislatures and elections. Vietnam is according to its constitution a democracy in which representative institutions determine government appointments. In practice, Vietnam fails to meet accepted understandings of democracy (see, for example, Schmitter and Karl 1991). Nonetheless, representative institutions (regardless of whether they are representative in a democratic sense) form an important part of Vietnam's political institutions.

The National Assembly (NA) is the central-level body whose representatives are elected for five-year terms. At local levels of authority (i.e. province and below), People's Councils elect executive People's Committees, which handle affairs of state in their respective localities. Since the early 1990s, many Vietnam observers wistfully held out the possibility that the NA would represent an incipient force for democracy, but there has been little discernible movement in this direction. Though the NA has undoubtedly modernized and has achieved a higher profile, it is still at the end of the day a deliberative body that is subordinate to the Politburo.

There are several features of the NA that deserve mention. The NA comprises representatives of different localities, although some centrally nominated representatives do not reside in those localities. The NA has a tiny number of representatives who are not Party members, and the

number has actually declined in recent years. A vast majority of new NA representatives are also first-term representatives and are not professional representatives in that their duties are only part-time. Lastly, all candidates for NA and local people's councils must be vetted and approved by local election boards, which are managed by the Vietnam Fatherland Front, and which can effectively bar undesired candidates.

Scholarship on representative institutions in Vietnam has developed only within the last two decades (Thayer 1993). The clearest analysis of the organization and operation of representative institutions is MacElwee's 2006 study (UNDP 2006). Although the democratic credentials of the NA are questionable, the NA has played an increasingly high-profile role in national politics. One of the more interesting aspects of the NA concerns the processes by which it is elected.

This is a subject of special interest to Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler, who have written a number of pieces exploring the NA. They have studied electoral institutions, demonstrating how elections tend to be relatively free of ex-post manipulation, but also show that ex-ante manipulation is widespread with favored regime candidates benefitting from districts with lower candidate-to-seat ratios and weaker competition (Malesky and Schuler 2010, 2012). Despite this assistance, every election a large number of centrally nominated candidates still manage to lose. These losses are heavily concentrated in rich, southern provinces that tend to be net contributors to the Vietnamese budget, demonstrating a salient political cleavage that has been underexplored. Finally, the authors have studied what Vietnamese delegates do upon election, taking advantage of the biannual query sessions, where delegates are allowed to quiz ministers on important political issues of the data. The authors find that the most active and critical delegates tend to be full-time delegates who are locally nominated. These delegates manage the provincial delegations and often have the most interaction with local leaders and constituents. Most provocatively, Malesky and Schuler (2011) find that delegates who survived close elections are also likely to be more active in query, offering tentative evidence that their behavior is meant to win the support of local leaders or perhaps even local voters.

In his chapter in this volume, Malesky trains his analysis on the implications of election for NA representatives, seeking to penetrate the opaque political maneuvering that governs the selection of candidates and the trajectory of their political careers. Arguing against a widely hypothesized idea about elections in authoritarian regimes – that such elections are used to help identify young political talent for further grooming, Malesky finds that in Vietnam, leaders are largely

determined prior to elections, suggesting that elections for the NA are used for information acquisition and co-optation. Like Vu and Jandl's chapters, Malesky situates Vietnam in the broader literature on comparative politics.

Beyond the Party, State, and representative institutions, lies a number of other important state actors. These include mass organizations, the military, police, and public security forces, secondary associations, and regime dissidents. Mass organizations include the Vietnam Fatherland Front, the Vietnam women's union, the Communist Youth League, Peasants Union, and so on. These organizations play explicitly political roles as they are charged with promoting and ensuring faithfulness to the Party line in word and action across a variety of sectors. While none of the chapters in this volume subjects mass organizations to direct analysis, their significance is explained through various references found across the chapters.

### **State repression, regime dissents, and secondary associations**

A common theme of literature on comparative politics is the mutually constitutive relation between state and society, often problematically termed "state-society relations." Gainsborough (2010) suggests a good way to study the state is to not focus on the state itself, but rather what it does in its external relations. His analysis illustrates the role of the patronage networks that state and party leaders use to cultivate influence, promote upward mobility within the state, and use for protection (Gainsborough *ibid.*). Kerkvliet's historical analysis of agricultural policy is a good illustration of the complexities of this mutually constitutive relationship, as it demonstrates how tensions between the state and citizens can transform state action (Kerkvliet 2005). The last chapters of this volume contribute to this stream of literature through analyses of regime dissidents, state repression, and "civil society."

Carl Thayer has rightly chided scholars of Vietnam for ignoring the important role of the military, police, and public security forces, who are routinely left out of analyses of politics in Vietnam even as they play an indispensable role in the functioning and maintenance of the regime. As we noted earlier, Thayer's critique can be applied to work on authoritarian regimes more generally. As Thayer and various collaborators have shown, the military and police are important political and economic forces in their own right (see, for example, Thayer 2008 and 2011). In this volume, Thayer presents the first scholarly analysis of Vietnam's institutions of state repression. His chapter details the agencies and individuals involved and the tactics they deploy in their efforts to detect,

discourage, and punish dissent. Thayer's chapter examines the repressive role of key state organs in buttressing Vietnam's one-party state: the chapter analyzes how authoritarian rule is actually implemented by examining the methods and tactics used to repress pro-democracy activists, bloggers, journalists, and religious leaders. He concludes that Vietnam's one-party state is a divided entity and that its organs of repression are sometimes manipulated by Party leaders engaged in factional in-fighting.

Thayer's analysis is timely in two respects. First, there has been a great deal of interest among Vietnam scholars in the formation of autonomous secondary associations (i.e. civil society groups). Indeed, there have been several recent analyses of "civil society" and "political civil society" activities in Vietnam (Thayer and Marr 1993 were among the first to appear, see also for example: Kerkvliet et al. 2003; Thayer 2009a, 2009b; Wells-Dang 2010a, 2011). And while there is universal agreement that such organizations operate in a restrictive environment, there has until now been no serious attention to the organizations that monitor and suppress such activity.

The question of civil society is not interesting solely from the perspective of state repression. As Andrew Wells-Dang's contribution to this volume shows, Vietnam has in recent years seen the emergence of new forms of social organization akin to what some people might call "civil society." In a recent comparative analysis of Vietnam and China, Wells-Dang analyzes how the CPV selectively allows NGOs and other actors to shape policy (and even oppose Party decisions) as long as it is done within certain paths – essentially calling for different policies without challenging the supremacy of the Party itself, and by individuals, not organized political groupings. He analyzes opposition to the re-development of Hanoi's Lenin Park and also how the Party uses NGOs in trying out development policies or for environmental policymaking. Writing in this volume, Wells-Dang questions the tendency to view civil society in Vietnam as weak. Through case studies, Wells-Dang suggests that Vietnam possesses a civil society that exercises significant political influence, whether this is achieved through or in spite of the formal political system.

Let us first consider regime dissidents. While Vietnam's political culture appears to have changed, the CPV's treatment of political dissidents exhibits no clear pattern of evolution. If anything, the past several years has seen an uptick in the number of cases against dissidents and in the severity of penalties against them. No doubt, the recent intensification of repression is a reflection of heightened dissident activity,

which has been notably enabled by electronic media. What is less clear is who these dissidents are, and why the phenomenon of resistance persists. Within the past years, several scholars have analyzed dissident behavior and the fate of several high-profile dissidents (e.g. Abuza *ibid.*; Thayer 2006). In the present collection, Benedict Kerkvliet takes such analysis further, as he seeks to understand underlying patterns in dissident activity and the state's repressive responses.

Vietnam is frequently characterized as a highly repressive regime. In his chapter in this collection, Kerkvliet moves toward a more nuanced understanding of different types of dissident behavior and how the Communist Party regime deals with the increasing incidence of dissent in recent decades. Arguing against prevailing characterizations, Kerkvliet observes a degree of toleration of dissent by authorities and a lack of uniformity in their repression. He argues provocatively that the claim that authorities in Vietnam tolerate little or no dissent or opposition is off the mark.

The big questions in Vietnam concern the future of the one-party state in the context of a market economy. Some observers believe they detect signs of deep rot. Others readily accept the presence of tensions and contradictions in Vietnam's politics, but also note the authorities' effectiveness in co-opting, deterring, or crushing nodes of opposition. At present, the maintenance of one-party rule in Vietnam remains dependent on the intimidation and punishment of individuals. Recent transgressions by China in the Southeast Asia Sea show that Vietnamese are as politically engaged as ever. Whether sustained collective opposition to repressive rule can materialize is a question time will tell.

Overall, this collection of chapters marks a substantial contribution to existing literature. On the one hand, the chapters elucidate ideographic nuance. On the other hand, they situate Vietnam in relation to wider comparative historical research and their theoretical debates. In this respect, the chapters suggest the studies of Vietnamese politics might avoid a shortcoming of much of the literature on China, which has tended to treat China as a world unto itself. Vietnam is important in its own right. But its analysis has much to contribute to ongoing debates about broader historical experience and attendant social theory.

## **Authoritarianism and comparative politics**

The chapters in this collection, though they are not all explicitly comparative or theoretical, raise significant questions for the broader theoretical literature on comparative politics and authoritarianism. How

do one-party states sustain themselves? How and why do such states seek to improve internal accountability and does it matter? How does localities' interplay with a global market economy affect regime coherence? Why do authoritarian regimes invest great energies in electoral processes? And, how does repression and contestation operate? Vietnam offers insights for each of these debates and as such contributes to the development of the broader theoretical literature.

That theoretical literature on authoritarianism is undergoing a revival stems not only from the persistence of such regimes but also from the novel features of their institutional evolution and the debates to which these adaptations have given rise. Questions about regime institutionalization, legitimization, economic governance, repression, and contestation remain as relevant as ever. But the particular metamorphoses of today's authoritarian regimes have raised new questions about the character, determinants, and effects of the processes and institutions that sustain them, and not least the significance of these developments for existing social theory. Many of the leading questions in these debates have been over how, in a supposed "age of democracy," authoritarian regimes have modified their rule in ways that have enabled them not only to survive and be resilient but also to reproduce and even deepen conditions for domination. Given the rapid economic growth in China and other countries, there is also great interest in the relation between politics and economy under authoritarian regimes.

Many of the most important debates in current scholarship on authoritarianism have emerged through ideographic and comparative studies of authoritarian regimes in Asia, and indeed studies of authoritarianism have contributed to the development of Asian studies. The unforeseen and historically unparalleled course of developments in China, for example, has led to a reconsideration of basic questions concerning authoritarian regimes' character and durability. With its rapid and sustained economic growth China and Vietnam, too, have invited a new round of questioning about whether or under what conditions authoritarian regimes are more able to foster "development" and industrialization than their democratic counterparts. In light of the recent histories of Taiwan and the Republic of Korea, we also ponder political effects of economic change.

Analyses of the so-called "hybrid regimes" of Southeast Asia has been another center of debate. Larry Diamond (2002) has distinguished among different types of authoritarian regimes across world regions. William Case (2009), among others, has discussed features of such regimes in Southeast Asia, including electoral authoritarian regimes,

liberal authoritarian regimes, and so on. The analysis of hybrid forms has been concerned not merely with how regimes ought to be categorized; they also seek to explain processes and institutions of regime maintenance and transformation and why conditions for democratic transition do not obtain. This, in turn, has invited an engagement with theoretical debates in comparative politics about the mechanisms that underlie different varieties of authoritarian rule (Snyder 2006; Geddes 2005) and about the essential nature of authoritarian regimes. Indeed, the value of the authoritarian designation has been subject to question on both conceptual and theoretical grounds.

Conceptually, authoritarianism has been derided as a “residual” category ascribed to a wide spectrum of regimes that are neither democratic nor totalitarian (Brachet-Márquez 2010). Linz’s original definition of authoritarian political systems, for example, refers to

political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones. (Linz 1964: 255)

No doubt the unwieldiness of the above speaks to enormous variation in the political systems or regimes that fit this description (Linz 2000: 160). Indeed Linz later followed up with a painstaking conceptual unpacking of six distinctive types of authoritarian rule. Efforts to theorize more precisely the origins and development of different varieties of authoritarianism have produced rich analyses. O’Donnell’s notion of “bureaucratic authoritarianism” is perhaps the most classic example in this regard (O’Donnell 1973). Though conceived in the analysis of Latin American regimes, O’Donnell’s ideas have been invoked in studies of politics in other world regions. In the face of recent changes, do these studies retain relevance?

Yes and no. Though older literature on authoritarianism remains relevant, it is apparent that it suffers from three principal limitations. The first is its tendency to view regime characteristics through the prism of normative theories of democracy (Snyder *ibid.*). Second, in much of the older literature, ascription of the term authoritarian tends to lend to a static perspective that directs attention away from how regimes evolve over time (Brachet-Márquez *ibid.*). Third, earlier understandings of authoritarianism do not offer an adequate analysis of today’s

nondemocratic post-totalitarian regimes, including but not limited to China and Vietnam.

Indeed, the regimes in contemporary China and Vietnam expose the limits of earlier treatments of authoritarianism in these respects; neither regime exhibits even limited political pluralism, except of the intra-party sort. While interest groups and factions exist, none constitutes a political opposition, at least as it is conventionally understood. In both regimes the nature of authoritarianism has proven dynamic indeed; limited personal freedoms tied especially to consumption and (less) to accumulation have, along with a battery of new forms of surveillance, replaced overt political mobilizations. Nonetheless, groups and leaders within both countries exercise power within reasonably well-defined limits. Though ideology has waned and is at times incoherent (though perhaps especially to foreign critics), ideology plays a nontrivial role in regime maintenance. No doubt China and Vietnam are clear instances of post-totalitarian authoritarianisms, which is consistent with earlier claims (e.g. Brzezinski 1989). Yet at some point the use of such abstract labels as “post-totalitarian” draws us away from the empirical analysis that is necessary for the further development of theory (London 2012).

If older literature on authoritarianism has certain limits, more recent literature poses important new questions and directions for research. In general, the recent revival in the study of authoritarian regimes differs from its predecessors in important ways. Theoretically, the work has placed greater emphasis on the institutional features of authoritarian countries (legislatures, elections, local-central relations). Scholars have argued that such institutions are too costly to be mere democratic window dressing, and must therefore serve other authoritarian goals, such as promoting legitimacy, co-opting opposition, or signaling regime strength.

Empirically, the new literature has operated at a higher level of abstraction, predominantly testing theories using large-*n* analysis of authoritarian countries over time. This work has delivered several important findings, pointing to an increase in the prevalence and durability of authoritarian regimes (Puddington 2010), especially single-party systems, throughout the world (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010; Geddes 2005). Dovetailing with this finding, a separate sub-literature has emphasized that the successful authoritarian regimes are those that make use of nominally democratic institutions. Contributors to this literature have demonstrated a strong association between having a national legislature and regime longevity, political stability, and economic growth, particularly in single-party systems (Geddes 2005; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2009; Wright 2008).



While this literature has been fruitful, these contributions are only the first step. There is a need to build and expand on this work in three principal ways. First, most work that seeks to differentiate between authoritarian regime uses a typological approach, classifying states as single-party, personalist, military junta, or monarchy. These accounts are less useful, however, when it comes to intermediate cases or variation within subtypes. This is unfortunate, because as Malesky et al. (2011) show there is tremendous variation in institutional design and important economic outcomes (e.g. economic growth and inequality) within Vietnam and China, two countries which are always coded exactly the same way.

Second, the new authoritarian institutions literature has tended to overemphasize the transplantation of nominally democratic institutions into authoritarian countries, but has not paid nearly as much attention to the authoritarian institutions that do not have democratic analogues. For instance, the literature's focus on national assemblies and elections overlooks the fact that the official government legislature in single-party regimes is far less influential than the Party legislature, often called the Central Committee. While Shih (2012) has begun to make headway on these issues in China, we still have very little comparative analysis of: (1) election/selection to the Central Committee; (2) the relationship between the Central Committee and the Party Executive (the Political Bureau); (3) accountability mechanisms within the Central Committee; and (4) the responsiveness of Central Committee delegates to the underlying constituencies they titularly represent. Moreover, we still have limited understanding between institutional variation and outcomes we care about (economic growth, public goods provision, inequality, social stability).

Third, the theoretical thrust of the literature has strongly emphasized the role of authoritarian institutions co-opting potential opposition or enabling power-sharing among political elites. According to the co-optation argument, rulers, especially in countries with fewer natural resources, need cooperation from broader swaths of society and will thus use elections and assemblies to give these groups a formal say in the policy-making process (Wright 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Malesky and Schuler 2011). The elections may be used to incorporate elites, Party members, or societal interests groups (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009), but critically these groups must be outside of the ruling inner circle. Gandhi and Przeworski (2007: 1283) summarize the co-optation argument in this manner: "Authoritarian rulers may need cooperation and may fear a threat from various segments of society. Cooperation can be induced and the threat can be reduced by sharing spoils or by

making policy compromises.” They conclude that legislatures are well suited for this role.

A related alternative to the co-optation theory argues that the goal of institutions, such as strong parties and legislatures in authoritarian settings, is not about co-opting potential opposition but instead providing a mechanism for power sharing with regime supporters that allows collective action against a regime leader (Gehlbach and Keefer 2010). All authoritarian leaders rely to some extent on allies to provide security and perform the basic functions of the government. To win their cooperation, a regime leader shares power and the spoils of rule with these allies. Critically, however, the arrangement hinges on the ability of the supporters to credibly rebel or oust the leader if he violates his side of the bargain. Because of the secrecy of regimes, it is difficult to monitor the leaders’ actions; as a result, authoritarian leaders erect institutions that improve transparency, allowing supporters to better monitor the activities of their leaders (Gehlbach and Keefer 2010; Boix and Svulik 2013) and the regularized participation of all players.

Although the co-optation and power-sharing theories represent important advances in our understanding of why regime’s select particular institutional constellations, they underemphasize the coercive nature of authoritarian regimes, neglecting the equally important public security and legal institutions. Institutions, like judiciaries and legislatures, can be used to further authoritarian control (Slater 2008); elections can signal and project regime strength (Magaloni 2006); and regime party promotional mechanisms offer a delicate balance of punishment and power sharing, which furthers party strength (Svulik 2008). In this volume, the work of Thayer and Kerkvliet more deeply explores the coercive nature of authoritarian regimes, by illustrating how public security systems operate and how judicial institutions address political dissidents. Although these repressive institutions are prevalent in every authoritarian setting, obtaining detailed data on them has been difficult, and as a result, scholarship has been skewed toward the normatively positive features of authoritarian rule.

### **Situating Vietnam in asian politics**

The wide variance of authoritarian regimes in Asia has been an important source of theoretical inspiration and debate in the new scholarship. Authoritarian models range from the market-Leninist states of China and Vietnam (London 2012) to the totalitarian cultism of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; from the unstable “liberal authoritarianism” of Hong Kong to the electoral authoritarianism characteristic of the

regimes in Malaysia and Singapore. What unites these cases is a relatively simple set of authoritarian traits: concentrated power and durable limits on political expression and or and/or competition. Analysis of these traits has contributed to the development of theory.

Studies of authoritarianism in China have improved our understanding of “middle range” processes, such as authoritarian regimes’ internal operations and incentive systems (Shirk 1996; Jing Huang 2006; Yumin Sheng 2009), elite politics (Shih 2008; Cheng Li 2001), local politics and economic governance (Landry 2008), and the politics of accountability (Tsai 2007) and contestation. As the above citations indicate, the literature on China has been a growth area, and one that has generated a tremendous volume of literature. But the literature on China is insular. Though much of it is theoretically grounded and methodologically sophisticated, it is a literature that has not been particularly geared to comparison or, by extension, to the development of theory beyond China. Though there have been exceptions it is arguable that China studies has in particular become something of a stand-alone academic industry, in which international comparisons are by and large not sought out. The same can be said of the much smaller literatures on politics in Vietnam and the DPRK.

### **Debates, tensions, and controversies**

As this volume has taken shape, authors have been encouraged not only to situate Vietnam within broader debates in comparative politics, but also to directly discuss their arguments in light of those advanced by others. The result is a cohesive and lively discussion that coalesces around a set of common themes and a number of important controversies. All of the chapters in this volume examine the ways power and domination in Vietnam is constituted, structured, and maintained. Yet while the contributors find agreement on many basic questions, they diverge in other respects. At other moments, authors appear to diverge from conclusions they previously held dear.

Where Tuong Vu sees a Party-State undergoing decay and ossification, others suggest the Party and State retain certain dynamism. Malesky’s claim that patterns of elite recruitment in formally representative institutions facilitate co-optation appears raises questions about his other work, which has emphasized the independence of the National Assembly. Jandl’s claims that unlike China, where the principal (central Party) controls the agents through the power of promotion, in Vietnam the agents have captured the principal and are becoming the principals

as they get promoted as a result of success. This claim raises interesting questions for Vu's contribution as well as for comparative work on China and Vietnam, such as Malesky et al.'s comparison of China and Vietnam referenced earlier. Thayer's analysis of state-repressive institutions, which emphasizes their efficacy and harshness, is contradicted by Wells-Dang and Kerkvliet's assessment, that the Party-State is essentially or significantly "<sup>tolerant</sup>tolerable." Yet Wells-Dang and Kerkvliet's suggestion is itself contradicted by the constant stream of arrests and incidences of dissident persecution of the last two years. The tensions among the conclusions of the various authors makes for a lively volume and provides fertile ground for the concluding chapter, which takes stock of the arguments advanced in the various chapters and its implications for evolving understandings of politics in Vietnam. Having laid this groundwork, we can now turn to the individual chapters and dig deeper into power and politics in contemporary Vietnam. In the book's concluding chapter we will return to these questions and raise additional questions about Vietnam's politics moving forward.