

***Politics in Contemporary Vietnam: Party, State and Authority Relations.* Edited by Jonathan D. London. Hampshire, England, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Hardback: 229pp.**

The tremendous public response to the Chinese deep-water oil rig stationed illegally inside Vietnamese waters from May to July 2014 showed how much Vietnam's domestic politics has changed in recent years. Through social media, online petitions and mass demonstrations (before a few of them descended into violent riots), broad segments of Vietnamese society showed that they too have an important voice in the nation's politics.

And so when Jonathan London argues that "Vietnam has entered a new if indeterminate phase of its political development" (p. 185), he has a point. Boldly, London asserts that Vietnamese politics is "today characterized by a sense of uncertainty and possibility that has no precedent in the country's postwar history" (p. 1). His new edited volume on *Politics in Contemporary Vietnam* is an exciting collection of essays that brings together some of the most important contributors to the study of Vietnam's domestic politics over the past two decades and offers a kaleidoscope of complementary yet contrasting views on the party-state. For the purpose of this review, I will discuss them according to three main groups, focusing on the Vietnamese communist party (Tuong Vu), state administration (Thaveeporn Vasavakul, Thomas Jandl and Edmund Malesky), and state relations with the wider society (Benedict Kerkvliet, Carlyle Thayer and Andrew Wells-Dang).

As with many discussions of Vietnamese politics, this book begins but does not end with the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). Tuong Vu provides a rich historical account of the institutionalization of the CPV through successive periods of expansion and institutionalization (1945–60), ossification and decay (1970–86) and reforms at the top but continued decay below (1986 until present). While Tuong Vu emphasizes violence and the CPV's "near-total grip on society" (p. 22) as the most critical factors in its institutionalization, his narrative of decay leaves much in doubt about the party's political future. As he presciently suggests, "Not development but involution seems to be the trend, as the party can grow only by sucking from the state sector and the military already under its control but not by expanding its roots into a rapidly changing society" (p. 30).

The next three chapters deal with different aspects of state administration. However, what is striking is how they all show how recent initiatives to democratize or make public institutions more accountable have ended up, in one way or another, reconsolidating authoritarian rule. After sixteen years of the Public Administration Reform programme (1996–2012), Thaveeporn Vasavakul — who has been studying it for nearly as long — argues that rather than democratizing public institutions, these reforms have helped reconfigure Vietnamese authoritarianism according to specific institutional and organizational needs arising with its “bold and not-unproblematic process of administrative decentralization” (p. 43). The main reason is that these reforms built accountability networks primarily within state institutional sectors, but offered little recourse for non-state actors.

Similarly, Edmund Malesky, who revisits his illuminating experiment to track delegate participation in the National Assembly on the Internet, and provides new analysis on the Assembly’s recently instituted “Confidence Vote”, suggests that both tools have been most effective as semi-transparent mechanisms for the authoritarian political system to gather information on public attitudes and potential disturbers. As Malesky argues, these findings emphasize the enduring constraints of the National Assembly as a “representative” organization and warn against the perverse effects that can arise when pursuing transparency initiatives within an authoritarian setting.

Thomas Jandl follows-up on the theme of decentralization by addressing this puzzle: if local-level economic performance since the 1990s has depended more on international trade than domestic factors, what challenges has this created for Hanoi’s top-heavy command over provincial leaders? In response, Jandl shows how Vietnam’s most successful risers have not been those that defended Hanoi’s line, but rather the ones that challenged it and succeeded — of which the late Prime Minister and architect of the *đổi mới* (renovation) market reforms, Võ Văn Kiệt, was a paragon example. However, rather than suggest that authoritarianism might hinder or obstruct such economic prowess, Jandl suggests that, “in the end, Vietnam appears to be governed *very pragmatically by success*” (p. 83, emphasis in original).

The last three contributions focus on state relations — and struggles — with the wider society. However, just where we might expect to find the harshest assessments of the party-state, we seem to find the most optimistic or, at least, ambiguous ones. The chapters

by Benedict Kerkvliet and Carlyle Thayer, two of the most influential scholars in the study of Vietnamese politics, focus on the eternal battle between dissidence and repression. By tracking the political activities and personal histories of sixty-two regime dissidents, Kerkvliet shows a considerable “lack of uniformity” in patterns of arrest and repression, especially where they concern similar acts of dissent. He offers this as evidence for a considerable “degree of toleration” (p. 182). Looking at the problem from the other end — namely, by focusing on the state’s main organizations of repression — Thayer finds similar degrees of irregularity in state repression, but, in contrast, explains them by the fragmented nature of the party-state and manipulation of its repressive organizations by party elites amid factional in-fighting. Both examinations provide highly informative and richly researched accounts of regime dissidents and state repression, yet they arrive at divergent explanations on its more puzzling nuances and arcane politics.

While acknowledging some of the gloomier aspects of Vietnamese politics, Andrew Wells-Dang suggests “this negative picture belies the vibrant reality of civil society in Vietnam” (p. 163). Through cases of public advocacy on bauxite mining in 2009 and 2010, a derogatory article in the CPV’s daily *Nhân Dân* 2012, and constitutional revisions in 2013, Wells-Dang argues that many and the most successful forms of policy advocacy in Vietnam operate in non-confrontational ways through informal structures, personal connections, and by creating niches between the public and private domains. However, by definition, this excludes challenges to state authority itself. Also, Wells-Dang is less clear whether this “vibrant reality” is more because of, or despite, Vietnam’s political system.

Overall, *Politics in Contemporary Vietnam* is a very useful compilation of original contributions and it will serve as an excellent handbook to those looking to be introduced to or updated on key debates in the study of Vietnam’s domestic politics. London’s own contributions at either end of the volume additionally provide an overview of Vietnam’s key political institutions and a brief discussion of emerging trends in political contestation and “secondary associations”. In the Introduction, London also proposes to frame these studies within comparative perspectives on authoritarianism, especially as they address questions of endurance, global integration and counter-intuitive investments in such things as public accountability. However, while several chapters in the volume draw effectively from comparative theory, especially in relation to China, it is done unevenly throughout the volume and could have benefitted

from a stronger overall conclusion on how the study of Vietnam contributes to this wider literature.

If there is a tinge of disappointment, it is perhaps that the book could have done more to address the new trends driving the new political moment upon which London seems so intent. This might have included sections on Internet politics and broad changes in political culture and consciousness, which are only dealt with cursorily, as well as the renewed relevance of Vietnamese intellectuals, land and environmental issues and, not least of all, the South China Sea conflict as an increasingly important rallying discourse for regime opposition. Perhaps these issues only await a sister volume.

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