

***Political Dynamics of Grassroots Democracy in Vietnam.* By Hai Hong Nguyen. Houndsmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Hardcover: 259pp.**

Observers of Vietnam frequently consider the country as a case study of successful economic reforms without corresponding political reforms. Since the structure of the single-party state has remained virtually intact since reunification in 1976 under the rule of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), it is tempting to conclude that no significant political change has occurred.

Hai Hong Nguyen's book on "implementation of democracy at commune and ward levels" (*thực hiện dân chủ ở cấp xã, phường, thị trấn*), commonly referred to in English as "grassroots democracy" (GRD), is a welcome corrective to a static view of Vietnamese politics. Hai's research, based on a wealth of Vietnamese documentation as well as extensive interview data, shows that the emergence of GRD after rural unrest in 1997 was "a political reform rather than a 'PR' project" or mere propaganda (p. 38). Grassroots democracy, Hai argues, has been a "mutually empowering" process (p. 39) that has addressed the needs of citizens for greater political participation as well as the CPV's requirement for repairing and strengthening its legitimacy.

The implementation of GRD, however, has neither been smooth nor consistent across the country. Hai's focus, therefore, is on actual results of GRD policies in terms of inequality, corruption, good governance, human rights, rule of law and social capital. He embarks on in-depth case studies of three provinces (Thai Binh, where the protests that prompted the first GRD decree occurred; Hung Yen, where a serious land conflict culminated in 2012 with the seizure of farmland; and Danang, a booming city on the central coast), concluding that grassroots democracy policies have been effectively implemented in the third, partly so in the first, and not at all in the second. The reasons for divergent outcomes are found not in geographical location, but rather in specific contextual features summarized under the categories of economic development, strong individual leadership and vibrant social organizations.

As such, *Political Dynamics* is a welcome addition to the growing literature on Vietnamese politics written by "insider-outsiders": either international scholars who have spent long periods living and working in Vietnam, or (as in Hai's case) Vietnamese natives who have studied overseas but returned to conduct field research in

their homeland. Hai's critical engagement with Vietnamese political realities and international comparative theories produces a provoking mixture of approaches and some novel, perhaps overly optimistic, conclusions.

At the same time, the book's comparative value is constrained by both conceptual and methodological limits. The most notable involves the use of the term "democracy" where Hai attempts to situate Vietnamese "grassroots democracy" within a discourse of global democratization, with unconvincing results. He adopts Valerie Bunce's broad definition of democracy as "freedom, uncertain political results, and certain procedures" (p. 6). Yet GRD clearly fails on all three counts: it is "a top-down policy strictly controlled by the CPV" (p. 55), applies only to local level government, and is implemented differently across provinces and cities. It thus combines certain political results with uncertain procedures. Just because *dân chủ* is translated as "democracy", one should not assume that the two terms refer to the same phenomenon.

Rather than an indigenous Vietnamese variant of democracy, GRD appears to signify a modified form of autocracy: responsive, resilient and perhaps even benevolent, but authoritarian in inspiration. Hai concedes as much in his identification of "leadership" as one of the key variables for the success of GRD. His Danang informants credit the city's former Party secretary, Nguyen Ba Thanh, with an individual vision that mobilized public consensus. "Unfortunately", Hai concludes, "there are few local leaders like Thanh" (p. 185), begging the question of why not — a question underscored by Thanh's untimely demise in 2015 (after this book had gone to press). An uncritical admirer of Thanh, Hai remarks without apparent irony that Danang "was able to implement GRD successfully because it had an authoritarian, but determined and competent leader" (p. 174). While such leadership has resulted in local political reforms, comparing it to "democracy" is a mismatch.

Methodologically, Hai poses two key research questions: why have some provinces implemented GRD more effectively than others? And what impact has GRD had on state–society relations? The findings from the three purposely selected case study provinces offer evidence on a range of indicators, but these changes may not actually be attributable to GRD. And there is no attempt made by the author to generalize: are more Vietnamese provinces like Hung Yen, or like Danang? In fact, a rich set of survey data exists to answer these questions: the Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI), which Hai cites

selectively in his case studies. The most recent PAPI data shows that scores on “participation at local levels” have declined sharply since 2011. Only 28 per cent of respondents nationwide are aware that the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance exists. And, as research by Oxfam has shown, inequality throughout Vietnam has increased significantly since GRD was enacted. Provincial data would have greater validity if juxtaposed with national trends.

In its presentation, *Political Dynamics* would have benefited from a more thorough pre-publication edit, shortening some dense analytical and literature review sections, removing irrelevant tables (such as provincial economic statistics) and correcting a number of errors and typos. For instance, Vietnam has sixty-three provinces including five centrally-administered cities, not sixty-four and four (p. 199), and Thai Binh is a northeastern province, not a southeastern one (p. 10).

A final area of inconsistency concerns the ordering of Vietnamese names throughout the book. In Vietnamese, the author’s name is written as Nguyen Hong Hai, with family name first; he is properly addressed as Dr Hai. Why he has chosen to westernize his name as a scholar is a mystery. In the index, Vietnamese names are presented in the correct order. The extensive bibliography, however, alphabetizes Vietnamese by given name (“Hai, Nguyen Hong”), even in cases of pen names of journalists and writers (“Lai, Tuong”). Others, including overseas Vietnamese, are alphabetized by family name (“Duong, Minh Nhat”), producing confusing results. By following different rules for Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese sources, the bibliography mirrors the conceptual disconnect that *Political Dynamics* brings to democracy itself.

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