

***Speaking Out in Vietnam: Public Political Criticism in a Communist Party-Ruled Nation.* By Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. Hardcover: 224pp.**

Although Vietnamese citizens are able to speak their minds, the manner in which they do so varies according to the political situation they find themselves under. For instance, during the period of state socialism (1951–89), collectivized farmers displayed their disapproval of state planners' compensation and agricultural price policies by neglecting cooperative agricultural lands in favour of their own private plots. Managers and workers at state-owned enterprises misreported capacity information and exaggerated input demand in response to central planners' ambitious targets and meager inputs. Such acts of disapproval were public, systemic and political, forcing authorities to pilot reforms that propelled Vietnam's transition away from central planning to a market economy. As the Soviet communist bloc disintegrated, intellectuals, writers and even some senior leaders of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) publicly cast doubt on the regime's viability. In looking at recent socio-political developments in Vietnam, Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet's *Speaking Out in Vietnam: Public Political Criticism in a Communist Party-Ruled Nation* confirms that the practice of speaking out publicly remains a prominent and persistent political feature of Vietnam's one-party system in the reform era.

Speaking Out in Vietnam investigates four clusters of public political criticism occurring between 1995 and 2015: factory workers protesting their working and living conditions; farmers demonstrating against land appropriation and corruption; citizens opposing China's encroachment into Vietnam and questioning the patriotism of party-state authorities; and democracy and human rights activists advocating regime change. Kerkvliet observes that party-state authorities dealt with public criticism with a mix of responsiveness, toleration and repression. Here, Kerkvliet borrows from Harold Crouch's study of Malaysian politics in describing Vietnam as a "responsive-repressive" state, in which it exercises authoritarian powers to maintain political stability while simultaneously being sensitive to countervailing popular pressures and opposition. Although he describes state-society relations in Vietnam as "dialogical", Kerkvliet cautions that this does not imply that the country is on the brink of introducing multiparty elections, freedom of speech and press, or other elements of procedural democracy.

Speaking Out in Vietnam presents a dynamic account of citizens speaking their minds, drawing information from the liberalized Vietnamese press, Internet-based resources and direct interviews. The study of labour strikes is based on over 900 Vietnamese news reports, while the analysis on land demonstrations consults wide-ranging sources including villagers' letters, land complaints filed by lawyers, villagers' interviews given to journalists, journalists' own accounts and authorities' commentaries. The account of anti-China activism relies on more than 600 sources including Vietnamese blog sites and news outlets, while the discussion of democracy and human rights advocacy makes use of critics' own writings on the Internet. *Speaking Out in Vietnam* also offers insights gained from interviews with certain groups of critics over the years.

The book documents how the four different groups of public critics have spoken out on issues of justice, fairness, human dignity, sovereignty and due process. The factory workers, mostly in foreign-owned enterprises, organized strikes in reaction to their employers' negligence of labour law or the government's wage and welfare policies. Farmers affected by unfair land appropriations demonstrated in public to express their anger over the lack of transparency in local development planning, below-market-price compensation schemes and perceived corruption. Other than sending collective statements to party-state authorities, anti-China activists held public assemblies to commemorate the soldiers killed in conflict with China in order to express their anger over Beijing's claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands, China's attacks on Vietnamese fishermen, and Vietnam's increasing dependence on Chinese investment and imports. Lastly, through their networks, organizations, Internet sites and publications, democracy and human rights activists advanced CPV-led confrontation, engagement and civil society approaches to regime change.

Speaking Out in Vietnam highlights the preference of party-state authorities for toleration and accommodation of citizens' demands, rather than relying on repression. Local authorities and officials from the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour has encouraged companies to accede to worker requests, while the land sector raised their compensation prices in response to valid claims. Both the government and the National Assembly have sought to integrate the concerns of workers and farmers into national legal frameworks. Responding to anti-China critics, party-state authorities have adopted a multi-pronged strategy of avoiding military conflict, asserting Vietnam's territorial integrity, and cultivating good political and economic relations. Authorities have also mostly tolerated open

democratization campaigns. However, the state has chosen repression when it pertains to certain issues and activities. One such instance was when workers attempted to form independent unions, or when demonstrations became lengthy and threatened to spread nationwide. Authorities typically used intimidation, threats and periodic detention against hardline democratization and human rights activists, but have varied the terms of imprisonment according to the critics' age, connections and method of confrontation.

Speaking Out in Vietnam is a welcome contribution and an eye-opening read for anyone familiar with Vietnam as well as those less so. It not only conveys the voices of citizens protesting state policies but also invites reflection on the pairing of consent and repression as instruments of rule. One topic that could benefit from further investigation is the extent to which party-state authorities have relied on alternative society-society or state-society dialogue mechanisms to establish consent. For example, society-society mechanisms in industrial-labour relations refer to the consultative discussions between social and professional organizations such as the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour and the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industries, which represent labour and business respectively. In land management, state-society dialogical channels are platforms enabling local authorities, businesses and citizens to deliberate and negotiate over land development planning and land appropriations. The use of these dialogical mechanisms and their effectiveness are pertinent to any analysis of accommodation and toleration.

More could also be discussed about the structural conditions favouring or inhibiting the use of repression. *Speaking Out in Vietnam* makes interesting observations that central authorities were less reliant on repression than local government units when addressing land disputes, and that authorities were less repressive towards critics with party-state connections. Examining the role of leadership decision-making, central-local decentralization, and the cohesion of the ideological and security state apparatus could shed light on the likelihood and persistence of repression as an instrument of rule. For a nation under communist rule, the choice of accommodation or repression is crucial for the prospect of democratization.

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