

***Vietnam: A Pathway from State Socialism.* By Thaveeporn Vasavakul.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Softcover: 79pp.**

Thaveeporn Vasavakul's book is part of the Cambridge Elements series on Politics and Society in Southeast Asia that in concise form seeks to elucidate different aspects of regional politics and societies. Vasavakul's book focuses on the period after 1986 when the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) pursued a policy of *đổi mới* (renovation) that resulted in spectacular economic growth. This followed the period which Vasavakul calls "state socialism", from 1954 to 1985, first in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV or North Vietnam) and then in its successor, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), that emerged after the unification of the DRV and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in 1975. The book consists of an introduction and four chapters: "From State Socialism to Transition"; "State Building"; "Accountability of the *Đổi mới* State"; and "Regime Change and Legitimacy from a Comparative Perspective". Vasavakul relies on a significant array of recent Vietnamese sources including monographs as well as print and online media. She has also extensively consulted Western sources on the subject.

Vasavakul characterizes "state socialism" as an adaptation of core Marxist-Leninist principles for state building. While other scholars of Vietnam have called this "bureaucratic socialism", the "DRV model" or a "centralized planning and bureaucratic subsidy mechanism", Vasavakul uses the term "state socialism" to highlight the role of the state, led by the VCP, to control the means of production through economic planning to create an egalitarian society with a social security system using incentives to elicit desired individual responses (p. 4).

Vasavakul's main argument is that "despite the label 'one-party rule,' the party-state apparatus that channels that rule has become fragmented thirty years after the launch of *đổi mới*. This fragmentation is a legacy of thriving commercialized interests at the provincial level during Vietnam's transition from plan to market" (p. 3). The author therefore concludes that the transition to state socialism has undermined the power of the central state as provinces mobilized to accumulate their own resources and bypass central authority. The disintegration of central planning has amounted to the disintegration of the political power of the central state (p. 63).

The book presents much information on the *đổi mới* process, including land management, accountability and relations between the

state and the provinces. In explaining the origins of the renovation process, while Vasavakul says that it resulted from a combination of domestic and international factors working simultaneously (p. 8), she sees the unification of the country, which she calls “the historical crisis of reunification” (p. 63), as the leading factor. She defines this crisis as follows: “[i]n the newly liberated South, the VCP’s collectivization of agriculture and its nationalization of industry and commerce met with vehement resistance. ... The South’s total dependence on aid from the United States prior to the Saigon regime’s collapse created a vacuum that necessitated the SRV’s self-sufficient economy to produce North-South transfer of resources that precipitated an economic crisis” (p. 8). The author does not explain why she considers the South Vietnamese economy as totally dependent on the United States while that of the SRV’s is seen as self-sufficient, which certainly was not the case as the DRV and the SRV both heavily relied on the Soviet Union and its satellites. Vasavakul even mentions “reduced aid from the Soviet Bloc” among the external factors for launching the renovation (p. 8).

There is very little information on foreign investments after 1986. Although there is a special part focused on this issue, it occupies less than two pages and discusses the experiences of only a couple of provinces in attracting investments. The reader is not provided with the bigger picture or even the identity of the main investors (pp. 40–41).

The book is titled “A Pathway from State Socialism”, but it does not reveal to its readers the destination of this “pathway”. The absence of a sense of direction begins with the book’s opening sentence: “*Đổi mới* is Vietnam’s revolution from state socialism” (p. 1). In fact, it remains unclear whether or not, in the author’s opinion, Vietnam is still in the renovation period or has moved out of it and is on the way to a new destination. Only in the last two pages does Vasavakul suggest that the destination is unknown: “In the years to come, it seems that the Leninist regime in Vietnam will be faced with two main political options: to creatively adapt socialism to new conditions, or to follow models found in other developing countries” (p. 65). She continues: “If successful, Vietnam, a late developer, will contribute to the history of Leninism in an innovative way” (p. 66).

While this reviewer wishes that these two possibilities had been discussed earlier in the book so that the reader might envision Vietnam’s possible destination(s), another potential problem is apparent. Apart from referring to “the core Marxist-Leninist principles

for state building” at the beginning of the book, Vasavakul does not define what Marxist-Leninism is. If the reader is to surmise that the Marxist-Leninist principles that the author mentions at the beginning are the same as what she means at the end—“leadership by the Communist Party, democratic centralism, public ownership of the means of production, and central planning” (p. 4)—we need to understand how *đổi mới* fits into this unchanging ideological context and how the decentralization described in the book contributes to the history of Marxist-Leninism.

Furthermore, the author introduces a very important document—the 1991 Vietnamese Communist Party Platform on National Construction during the Transition to Socialism. It asserted that “Vietnam was in the process of a transition to socialism and would adopt the strategy that promoted a commodity-based multi-sector economy with socialist orientation as a stepping-stone to a more advanced economy driven by industry, services, and agriculture” (p. 15). This document implies that Vietnam had not achieved socialism in 1991, which is an important idea and could lead to a very engaging discussion about how the Vietnamese government defines socialism and how this differs from Vasavakul’s definition which sees the pre-1986 period as “state socialism”.

However, all the above-mentioned questions are meant to serve as a basis for discussion rather than to detract from the overall value of the book. Readers will certainly find in the book a lot of interesting information on Vietnam’s reforms over the past thirty years. The author is to be congratulated for her contribution to the literature.

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