

***United Front: Projecting Solidarity through Deliberation in Vietnam's Single Party Legislature.* By Paul Schuler. Redwood City, California: Stanford University Press, 2021. Hardcover: 247pp.**

Although the past two decades have seen a growing body of literature on the role of parliaments in authoritarian regimes, Vietnam's National Assembly (NA), a key political institution responsible for law-making in the party-state, remained excluded as a case study. Paul Schuler's *United Front: Projecting Solidarity through Deliberation in Vietnam's Single Party Legislature*, the first monograph in the English language on the NA, therefore deserves to be widely acknowledged as it lays the foundation for future studies on this increasingly important Vietnamese institution.

In addition to the Introduction and Conclusion, the book consists of seven main chapters. Chapter One revisits the extant literature on authoritarian legislatures and flesh out its central theoretical argument: the purpose of legislatures in single-party regimes is first and foremost to signal authoritarian dominance and legitimacy. Chapters Two to Seven test this theoretical argument by using the NA as a case study. The book concludes by summarizing the findings and offering perspectives on the politically transformative role of the NA and authoritarian legislatures more generally. Possessing a deep knowledge of Vietnamese politics, and fluent in Vietnamese, Schuler was able to access Vietnamese archives and conduct interviews directly with locals, especially NA officials, during the research for this book, allowing him to draw strong and insightful conclusions.

According to Schuler, the Vietnamese NA has progressively evolved in terms of internal organization, the selection and election of its leaders, as well as the technical reforms to improve its legislative functions since the adoption of *Doi Moi* (Renovation) in 1986. More interestingly, scholars undertaking comparative studies of Vietnamese and Chinese politics would realize, through Schuler's discussion of recent developments in the NA's performance, that the way in which it operates is, in certain respects, more democratic than its Chinese counterpart. For instance, holding votes of no-confidence against high-level officeholders and televised question and answer sessions are elements of the Vietnamese NA that are not present in China's National People's Congress. However, as Schuler points out in Chapter Six, these elements are hard to come by without the pre-approval of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). The

author was therefore right when arguing that the party empowered the NA to undertake reforms (p. 169). This argument reinforces the conventional wisdom that legislatures in single-party regimes are rubber stamps, despite the Vietnamese NA's seemingly active role in pushing for reforms.

Schuler further contends that the Vietnamese NA's more active role came about in response to the increased concentration of power within the executive and the office of prime minister in the *Doi Moi* era, which is facilitated by the prime minister's essential role in promoting socio-economic development. He cites the example of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's premiership, during which power was highly concentrated in the executive branch and Dung himself at the expense of the other power centres, especially General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. This concentration of power was made possible by the tripartite relationship between the NA, the CPV and the executive as a result of the unclear separation of powers between the three and the overlapping authorities held by top leaders. In democracies, there are normally systems of checks and balances in place to prevent the executive from abusing power. In Vietnam, however, given the CPV's monopoly of power, there are no meaningful checks and balances, and government officials often hold concurrent leadership positions in the party and the government. The concentration of power under Prime Minister Dung led to rampant corruption that was considered a serious threat to the CPV's regime security. Schuler contends that facing such a threat, senior conservative leaders of the CPV supported the strengthening of the NA's role so that it could better scrutinize the government and restrain the prime minister's power.

Even as the NA has become more empowered, the party has no intention of losing its control over the legislative body. The electoral process for members of the NA is strictly controlled, with the authority to select candidates for elections remaining exclusively with the CPV. This explains why many Vietnamese are uninterested in NA elections, as they often ask family members to cast votes on their behalf (p. 135). Even though its elections are not free and fair by Western standards, the Vietnamese NA still lends some legitimacy to laws passed by the CPV. On the legitimating role of the NA, Schuler argues that the legislative body serves a "soft propaganda signalling effect ... whereby exposure convinces the audience of the message the regime intends to send" (p. 188).

Unfortunately, Schuler's book was published before Vietnam elected its new NA and new government following the 13th

CPV Congress held in early 2021. Since then, the NA under the chairmanship of Vuong Dinh Hue, who is widely seen as the frontrunner to replace CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, has undertaken some unprecedented reforms in the legislative process and in the operation of the NA, such as holding the first-ever national conference on strengthening the monitoring and supervisory function of the NA. More importantly, since Hue took over the NA chairmanship, the tone of the NA in its interactions with the government has been more assertive, with more authoritative words like “request” (yêu cầu) rather than “suggest” (đề nghị) being used to affirm the authority of the legislature as at least on an equal footing with the executive.

The book would have benefitted from a discussion about the role of pre-and post-session meetings of the legislators with their local constituents, particularly those conducted by the “four pillars”, namely the CPV general secretary, the state president, the prime minister and the NA chairperson. Rather than conveying the concerns of their constituents to the legislature, the “four pillars” tend to utilize these meetings to present their policy directions to the public. Some minor issues, such as the confusion between the names of the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Pham Binh Minh) and the head of the CPV Department for External Affairs (Hoang Binh Quan) (p. 156), remain. Such minor errors, however, should not deter the reader from this excellent monograph, which is overall a refreshing read and an important contribution to the literature on the role of parliaments in authoritarian regimes in general and the role of the NA in Vietnam’s political system in particular.

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