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The Dragon's Underbelly

Dynamics and Dilemmas in Vietnam's Economy and Politics

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Edited by Nhu Truong and Tuong Vu

The Dragon's Underbelly

**Dynamics and Dilemmas in
Vietnam's Economy and Politics**

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

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Introduction

The Peg of Vietnam's Economic and Political Development

Nhu Truong and Tuong Vu

During an eight-day spectacle of its 13th National Congress in 2021, the Vietnamese Communist Party opened the curtain on a political theatre that reaffirmed the party's ruling leadership. This 13th National Congress also marked thirty-five years since the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) ushered in Renovation in order to divert the economy towards a path of market reforms. Having survived the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, today, the high economic growth generated under these reforms has provided the party with a claim to performance-based legitimacy. Between 2016 and 2020, Vietnam continued to attract significant foreign investments that sustained an annual growth rate of 6 per cent. During the global coronavirus pandemic, the country's GDP growth dropped to 2.91 per cent, its lowest growth rate in decades. Yet Vietnam was still recognized as one of the three Asian economies, along with China and Taiwan, to have maintained a positive growth rate despite the severe impact of the pandemic (Lee 2021). This gave the newly elected leadership at the 13th National Congress the confidence to exude continued optimism in the nation's future (Duc Binh et al. 2021).

Now, at this important juncture, it is a timely opportunity to take stock of Vietnam's economic and political developments, and to closely dissect the contradictions behind the VCP's success story. As this volume shows, the previous five years from 2016 to 2020 offered causes for both hopes and concerns. Despite the resilience

of the Vietnamese economy, many problems persist, some of which are structural, including the low productivity of the labour force, an inefficient state-owned sector, rising national debt, and the country's low position on the global value chain of production (P.V. 2020).¹ Back in 2010, VCP leaders formally declared 2020 to be the year when Vietnam was to become a modern, industrialized economy (Ng Tong 2010). Ten years later, the goalposts for the party's performance have been expediently shifted. The party now aspires to transform the economy and to achieve national industrialization by 2035 (Song An 2021), but that goal remains elusive to date.

In politics, the VCP has tightened its grip over political elites during the previous five years. Calls for political reforms garnered wide public attention and permeated spheres of political debates during the 2013 constitutional revision, including calls for a multi-party system and a constitutional court. But the VCP has unequivocally rejected demands for deeper political reforms and has moved to centralize party leadership and control. At the 13th National Congress, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong broke institutional norms to hold the reins for a third consecutive term, while the majority of membership in the new Politburo are career officials in the party bureaucracies and state security (Le 2021). Under Trong, the party has also launched a vigorous anti-graft campaign that netted more than a hundred officials, including a Politburo member and numerous other top officials in the military, the police, national and provincial governments, and state-owned enterprises. While the VCP propagated this unprecedented campaign as a "deep clean" of the political machinery to safeguard public goods from the maw of corruption and to maintain the people's faith in the party (Phuong Linh 2018), the campaign has principally been motivated by political wrangling and factional infighting.²

In this economic and political climate, hundreds of activists and advocates for democracy, land rights, religious freedom and other civil liberties have been arrested and given lengthy sentences in prison (Human Rights Watch 2021). Political openings that facilitated the emergence of the so-called "self-nomination movement" in the 2016 legislative election have also been tightened (Truong 2020). Massive protests against two government draft laws erupted nationwide in 2017, exposing the latent power of anti-government undercurrents in society (Human Rights Watch 2018).³ Tensions with China in the East Sea/South China Sea remain high despite the VCP's efforts to appease China, making Vietnam's engagement with China a dangerous issue that arouses both strong nationalist sentiments and widespread social

discontent (Grossman 2021, pp. 19–23). While Vietnam has revised the Labour Code in 2019 to allow workers to form independent trade unions (Hutt 2019; Chan 2020), how this change will be implemented in practice still remains in question.⁴ The government's recent failure to cope with the resurgence of Covid-19 in the summer and autumn of 2021 further exposed deep problems in its economic model as well as in its social and political management styles (Flower 2021; Tatarski 2021).

This edited volume examines these developments and trends in Vietnam's economy and politics over the last five years, while noting that many trends discussed in the volume have occurred since Nguyen Phu Trong's first term, if not earlier. The volume addresses two crucial sets of questions. First, what is the nature of Vietnam's economic growth since market reforms? More specifically, what role has the state played in Vietnam's developmental trajectory? What then are the coming opportunities and challenges for Vietnam's economy? Second, how has economic growth affected Vietnamese politics? To what extent has rapid economic transformation strengthened or weakened the communist party's grip on the political system?

In this introductory chapter, we will first attempt to answer these two sets of questions with economic theories of development. Through this lens, our analysis stresses the resource-based nature of Vietnam's economic growth and the problematics of the current trajectory.⁵ It is underpinned by a sharper differentiation of the more limited role of the state in Vietnam's development compared to the region's "East Asian tigers". Systemic vulnerabilities in the current economy now place Vietnam at a particular crossroads in which the regime is confronted not with the mere task of propelling GDP growth but with the greater challenge of generating sustainable growth over the long term. Ironically, while economic growth has emboldened the party's claim to performance-based legitimacy, it has also heightened tensions in contemporary state-society relations that directly challenge and erode the power of the party over society.

In the second part of this chapter, we will introduce the contributing essays in this book, which focus on different aspects of the above sets of questions. Through the latest research represented by a collection of perspectives from Asia, including Vietnam, Japan and South Korea, as well as scholars working within and outside of North America across fields and practices, this volume will provide readers with a better understanding of salient issues facing contemporary Vietnam after more than three decades of market reforms.

Nature of Economic Growth

At the risk of oversimplification, neoclassical economic theory views the development of a national economy as contingent on the efficient use and allocation of scarce resources—namely, labour and capital—throughout the economy.⁶ Other things being equal, more workers, more machines and more efficient employment of both are bound to raise national income. Besides the amounts of productive resources employed, the quality of workers and the level of technology also determine productivity and expand growth possibilities. Institutional economics adds to neoclassical economics by stressing market and governmental institutions that reduce transaction costs, ultimately raising efficiency. Development economists further emphasize the importance of trade gains for developing economies because of the limited size of the domestic market and the enormous needs for imported technologies.

The above elementary insights from economic theories are particularly useful, given Vietnam's peculiar conditions when the government embraced market reforms in the late 1980s. At the time, Vietnam was among the poorest countries in the world; in 1988 three million of its population were near starvation and another five million were malnourished (Heng 1993). This dire economic crisis could not be attributed to the country's lack of labour and capital, but rather to the communist government's inept policy that effectively repressed the capacity of the Vietnamese economy. The VCP's initial push for a centrally planned and primarily collective economy severely restricted market activities, leading to a situation in which both physical and human resources were deeply undervalued and underemployed.

According to standard economic theories, the engine of Vietnam's economic growth, at least for the first two decades of reform, came from the unleashing of this "repressed capacity" under the command economy, aided by gains from trade, external aid, investment and remittance (Riedel and Turley 1999; Hill 2010). The willingness of the VCP to retract previous dogmatic policies in favor of alternative pathways to economic growth was instrumental. As government restrictions were lifted, increasing amounts of domestic resources were brought into productive activities for market circulation rather than for meeting government quotas. With private enterprises legalized, individuals seeking better lives for themselves and their families contributed to rising productivity. As the economy opened up to foreign investment and trade, foreign aid and capital expanded the available stock of resources and technologies. Billions of annual remittances

from the diaspora, especially in the early years, played a profound role in stimulating domestic consumption, providing hard currencies for the import of machinery, and balancing the current account and the government budget (Dang 2016, pp. 356–57; Vu 2015).

From this analytical viewpoint, the secrets of economic growth in Vietnam appear to be no secrets at all. The often touted “miracle” of Vietnam transitioning from being a starving nation to one of the world’s top rice exporters in only a few years speaks not to any miraculous developmental government policy but simply to the government’s liberalization of the country’s repressed capacity.⁷ As Hal Hill (2000, p. 284) argues about Vietnam’s unexpected success in export, “the most suitable analytical tool for understanding the success of the reforms is the concept of ‘unshackling’ exporters, and business in general”.

Today, the limits of Vietnam’s current growth model are supported by three observations. First, Vietnam’s economy has not risen above its expected rank in the region. Assuming Vietnam had not experienced three devastating wars and the failed socialist experiment, one would expect its economy to be at a comparable level of GDP per capita as those of the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand—neighbouring countries with more or less similar endowments. In fact, between 1990 and 2019, Vietnam’s national per capita income remained much lower than that of Thailand as well as those of Indonesia and the Philippines.⁸ Second, if we compare Vietnam’s national income per capita in the 1980s and today with those of its neighbours, it can be seen that there has been no change in the ranking over those four decades. In the 1980s, Vietnam was the fourth-poorest country in Southeast Asia, ranked above only Burma, Laos and Cambodia and below the rest, including the Philippines. As of 2019, Vietnam’s economy maintained the same low ranking, even though its gaps with the Philippines have been sharply reduced.⁹ Third, national incomes per capita of Cambodia and Laos, countries that had shared a history of war and socialism with Vietnam before opening up in the 1990s, have also tracked closely that of Vietnam in the last four decades.

The regional comparison above suggests, on the one hand, that Vietnam still has some repressed capacity. Both neoclassical and institutional economics would suggest that the Vietnamese government should further liberalize the economy and craft more effective market institutions to realize the full potentials of the country’s resources. On the other hand, the comparison also suggests that sheer reliance on Vietnam’s resources or repressed capacity might not be sufficient.

Continuing rapid growth to help Vietnam keep up with its neighbours must count on other development strategies and institutional factors, such as higher productivity and technological upgrading, and deeper rationalization of existing financial institutions.

The Role of the State

Although standard economic theories assign only a limited role to the state in economic development, they are suspect in the context of East Asia, where scholars have pointed out the decisive role of the state in the rapid industrialization of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore (Johnson 1982; Amsden 1989; Haggard 1990; Kohli 2004; Suehiro 2008). Industrialization in these nations was achieved less by following neoclassical economic prescriptions and more by direct state interventions through effective industrial policies that successfully promoted strategic sectors and through social policies such as land reform and state investment in education and healthcare that enhanced growth-inducing equality.

On the surface, the experiences of the “East Asian tigers” seem relevant for Vietnam (Turner et al. 2019; Beeson and Pham 2012). After all, Vietnam does have a powerful state that already directly controls major economic sectors. A closer look reveals, however, that the Vietnamese state has much less capacity than the East Asian tigers (Pincus 2015), and much less autonomy or cohesion to pursue the same strategy (Gainsborough 2017; Fforde and Homutova 2017). Furthermore, the state is hamstrung by the party’s tenacious clinging to its socialist ideology, which still gives priority to state-owned enterprises (SOEs), regardless of their efficiency, at the expense of private capital (Vu-Thanh 2017). The large state-owned sector, whose interests are intertwined with those of the ruling elites, is quite powerful and has resisted reform (Ishizuka 2020).¹⁰

If Vietnam were to pursue state-led industrialization, the political system dictates that it would rely on SOEs, which is exactly what has happened. The Vietnamese state under prime ministers Vo Van Kiet and Nguyen Tan Dung championed the consolidation of SOEs to create conglomerates—dubbed “steely fists”—that could lead Vietnam’s industrialization (Vu 2009). Yet none turned into a Korean chaebol, and quite a few went bankrupt, losing billions of dollars. The state-owned sector in fact has been “a net drag on the Vietnamese economy” (Malesky and London 2014, pp. 412–13). Periods that have witnessed the most rapid growth and poverty reduction have been when the state sector was weakest.

With such a dismal performance of its industrial strategy, the contributions of the Vietnamese state to the country's economic transformation have been limited to lifting the market restrictions of the socialist era, providing political stability and special treatment for foreign investors (even while domestic private firms are discriminated against), negotiating trade agreements to widen access for Vietnamese exports, and other similar policies. In land management, for instance, between 1986 and 1993, the Vietnamese government had granted individuals a bundle of land-use rights to facilitate land-market transactions. Effective as of the 1993 Land Law, these included the rights to transfer, exchange, inherit, lease and mortgage land-use rights. Subsequent legislative amendments and revisions further broadened and extended these rights to both domestic and foreign investors, enterprises and businesses, including the rights to sublease, donate, provide guarantees and contribute land use as capital.¹¹ Most notably, the 2003 Land Law swung open the gate for indiscriminate government land seizures, often occurring in collusion with investors, without commensurate compensation for dispossessed villagers for “economic development purposes”. Unlike Vietnam, the Chinese Communist Party has more proactively and intently maintained control of the land supply, particularly through government control of rural-to-urban land conversion, as a “tool of macroeconomic management” for boosting and contracting the national economy (Rithmire 2017).¹² Whereas China might be described as a case of “land-centered development” (Lin 2009) or “state-led development” (Ong 2014; Chan 1994), this is less the case for Vietnam. So the role of the state in Vietnam's industrialization is to promote growth within the gradually loosening parameters of ideological and political constraints, rather than to take the bull by the horns in leading the country's economic development.

On social policies to support growth-inducing equality, the role of the state in Vietnam has been similarly passive despite rhetoric to the contrary. While social inequality in Vietnam has been less severe than for many of its neighbours—such as China and the Philippines (Kuhonta and Truong 2020; Kuhonta 2011; Malesky, Abrami and Zheng 2011)—the number of “the super-rich” in Vietnam has increased rapidly in the last decade at a rate estimated to be the world's third-highest during 2019–24 (Wells-Dang and Vu 2019; McCarthy 2020). If arbitrary land seizures have helped political elites amass wealth, state investment in education and healthcare, especially for workers and the urban poor, has been meagre.¹³ Moreover, although Vietnam is less corrupt than Cambodia and

the Philippines, its public service is still mired in corruption that further limits access for ordinary citizens and labour productivity (Transparency International 2021; Benedickter and Nguyen 2018, p. 29). In catching up with neighbouring countries then, it will be important for the Vietnamese state to invest more in social services while reducing corruption.

Economic Growth and Political Change

How then has economic growth affected Vietnamese politics? To what extent has growth weakened or strengthened the VCP's power? There is a rich body of scholarship in political science about the relationship between economic growth and political change.¹⁴ Although they do not fully apply to Vietnam, some evidence of each theory can be found, and all point to the weakening grip of the ruling communist party on the political system.

Based on the historical experience of European development, modernization theorists focus on the emergence of the bourgeoisie and other urban middle classes as interconnected modernizing processes, such as urbanization, industrialization, secularization and social differentiation, that spread throughout society. It is expected that the rise of new urban classes will lead to increasing demands for political participation (Lipset 1959). As Huntington (1968) argues, the crises observed in many newly independent countries in Asia and Africa in the 1960s came from the failure of their political systems to develop effective political institutions that incorporate or channel those demands.

Without assuming the inevitability of authoritarian collapse or political democratization that modernization theory largely takes for granted,¹⁵ the potential of the middle class as agents of opposition and democratic pushbacks has borne out in part among Vietnam's neighbouring countries. Throughout the post-war history of these countries, while the business elites often cooperated with governments, urban groups from students to teachers to professionals were engaged in numerous protest movements, even though not always for democracy.¹⁶ In South Korea, they toppled the Rhee Syngman regime in 1960 and battled military rule in Kwangju in 1980, eventually contributing to the democratization of the country in 1988 (Lee 2007). In the Philippines, "people power" brought down the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 (Thompson 1995). In Thailand and Indonesia, the Thai government of Kittikachorn and the Indonesian government of

Suharto, respectively, fell in the face of massive urban protests in 1973 and 1998 (Bertrand 2013, chs. 2 and 5).

On the other side of the ideological spectrum are Karl Marx and scholars in his school who draw different lessons from European experiences. The central figures in these accounts are not the bourgeoisie but subordinate classes such as farmers, workers and the urban poor (Marx and Engels 1848; Thompson 1971; Scott 1976). Greater exploitation under capitalism coupled with the destruction of traditional mechanisms for welfare provision by market forces are predicted to lead to riots, protests and revolts by those classes that can pose challenges to the ruling elites. Workers' strikes were indeed a major cause of unrest in South Korea under military rule (Koo 2001). Rural armed struggles led by communist parties threatened government in the Philippines (1950s and 1980s) and Thailand (1960s–70s).

Displaying vestiges of similar dynamics, large public protests have been on the rise in Vietnam during the last decade. Workers' strikes have been common, as have been farmers' protests, some of which involved violence (Kerkvliet 2019). Representing this bleak trend was the recent case of Dong Tam village, where villagers armed themselves and openly challenged the authority for over a year, ultimately resulting in the death of their leader in a night-time raid by security forces (Kerkvliet 2020). While these protests have often been invoked by specific grievances, protests concerned with environmental causes or otherwise fuelled by anti-China sentiments have seen more cross-linkages across societal cleavages. Urban intellectuals, veterans and students led small but persistent demonstrations in 2007, 2011 and 2014 to demand the Vietnamese government take action against China for its perceived violations of Vietnamese sovereign rights in the South China Sea (Vu 2014). Massive protests involving thousands from wider social sectors and classes simultaneously took place in many large cities against the Special Zone and Cybersecurity laws in 2017 (Human Rights Watch 2018). Likewise, the Tree Movement in 2015 rallied public outcry against the Hanoi government's decision to cut down 6,708 trees lining the city streets (Vu 2017). Large demonstrations by farmers and fishermen with wider public support later took place in the aftermath of an environmental disaster caused by a Taiwanese steel complex in Ha Tinh in 2016, demanding accountability and compensation.

Deep and widespread resentment has also been fuelled by restricted outlets for "managed participation" and a constricting space for political dissent. There is little redress in the system against wrongdoers

who are powerful officials. Many established intellectuals and young bloggers have risked long prison sentences to write critically about the communist party and the government in their online posts. Several have sought to found autonomous professional associations, such as the Free Journalists' Club (*Cau lac bo Nha bao Tu do*), Independent Writers' League (*Van doan Doc lap Viet nam*), and Independent Journalists' Association (*Hoi Nha bao Doc lap*). Others have formed (illegal) political parties and democracy advocacy groups, such as the Democratic Party (*Dang Dan chu*), Bloc 8406 (*Khoi 8406*) and Brotherhood for Democracy (*Hoi Anh em Dan chu*).

Society-centred accounts, however, do not capture the decisive impacts of economic growth on post-communist Vietnam's political elites and the regime. First, the ability of the market economy to improve living standards has over time deepened the gap between the regime's socialist ideology and the reality of life. With few exceptions, the ruling elites today no longer believe in that ideology even though they still publicly pledge their allegiance to it (Saxonberg 2012). Second, under the market economy, money has increasingly penetrated the communist party and government bureaucracies. Corruption has reached an alarmingly high level; it involves large sums of money that feed insatiable greed and has become endemic in public service.¹⁷ The government monopoly of resources and abuses of power have continually generated widespread grievances that run deep. This also attests to the problem of a development strategy that relies heavily on foreign investment and which subjects the lower classes to exploitation and dispossession. Third, the communist party can no longer retain much of its secrets as rival elite factions resort to the internet to air the dirty laundry of their enemies in public (Bui 2016). This exposure has further diminished the legitimacy of the VCP.

Another source of threats for the regime comes from its relations with the outside world. As Vietnam's economy becomes more integrated into the global economy, it is now vulnerable to external economic shifts over which it has no control. One of the recent shifts involves the trade war and security tensions between the United States and China, the two largest trade partners of Vietnam. Regardless of what will transpire, Vietnam is in a precarious position and is likely to be negatively affected.

In response to dangers from eroding legitimacy and weakened cohesion as a result of corruption and rising popular nationalism, VCP leaders have sought to retool the system in minor ways in order to stem political decay and increase its resilience. Ideologically, they

have continued to downplay socialism and relied more on economic performance as a discourse of legitimation (Le 2012). They have loosened control over domestic criticisms of China to reduce pressure and appease popular nationalist sentiments. Institutionally, since 2016 the party has launched a more aggressive anti-corruption campaign than in the past. Other means to increase vertical and horizontal accountability have been instituted (Abrami et al. 2013; Schuler 2021).

The VCP has sought to tighten its control over the military while expanding police power to monitor the internet, crack down on dissent and suppress opposition. Epitomizing the trend in changing state-society relations is the increasing use of violence by protesters and by the government, such as in the case of Dong Tam village above. This trend testifies powerfully to the effects of economic transformation on politics in Vietnam.

Furthermore, it speaks to the need for the party to take greater steps to address societal grievances and demands, as well as to develop political institutions that better respond to and incorporate public interests. As Huntington forewarned, “the primary problem of politics is the lag in the development of political institutions behind social and economic change” (Huntington 1968, p. 5).

Officials of international agencies in Hanoi who were frustrated when their advice for further reform was ignored by the government reportedly joked that Vietnam was neither a developed nor developing country; it belonged to a unique category of “countries that don’t want to develop”.¹⁸ While the Vietnamese government appears irrational in the joke, it is not. Rather, the regime is walking a tightrope and must navigate a delicate balance between imperatives for rapid development and increased existential threats, particularly in scenarios where the party has failed to be responsive to societal needs and unrest.

Structure of the Book

The chapters in this edited volume are organized thematically in three parts. Part I underscores how the Vietnamese economy is vulnerable across many dimensions despite its impressive growth rates. The first chapter by Tuong Vu and Thuy Nguyen places Vietnam’s market reform in a historical perspective by reviewing developments since the 1980s as the country evolved from its socialist system of the war and revolutionary period. Their chapter frames the market reforms of the late 1980s against the backdrop of the Vietnamese communist revolution and the draconian march to socialism in the first post-war decade, which led to a profound social, political and economic crisis.

The authors recount how Vietnamese reformers have embarked on market reform but refused political reform. This principle has fundamentally shaped the reform process and its outcome, including the integration of the economy into the global economy, the rise of “red crony capitalism”, the decay of the political system, and the ongoing legitimacy crisis.

In Chapter 2, Vu Quang Viet offers an overview of Vietnam’s developmental path since 1985 with a historical discussion about the country’s transition from a planned economy to market-oriented economic reforms.¹⁹ Making use of statistical data, the chapter outlines how Vietnam’s economy has fallen short of reaching the VCP’s alleged goal of achieving industrialization. In doing so, the author calls for a re-evaluation of Vietnam’s development strategy and advocates for deeper reforms.

Although Vietnam’s rapid economic development has been largely explained by its participation in the global value chain (GVC) and a focus on low-value-added activities and foreign direct investments, Upalat Korwatanasakul argues in Chapter 3 that industries such as food products, textiles and clothing, and electrical and electronic equipment have also contributed significantly to the rapid development of Vietnam’s economy. Yet, by depending on foreign inputs and technologies in order to increase the country’s total production outputs and exports without further upgrades, Vietnam faces risks of structural stagnation, erosion of national competitiveness, and economic slowdown. Therefore, to steer the economy from falling into a middle-income trap, the VCP should consider integrating a GVC-upgrading development model into its new policy agenda. Policies that facilitate strong institutional reforms, promote strategic GVC engagement and strengthen domestic capabilities, especially of small and medium-sized enterprises, should be the priority.

The next two chapters, Chapter 4 by Truong Quang Hoan and Chapter 5 by Yoon Ah Oh, similarly highlight the negative trends in Vietnam’s economy. Specifically, Truong alerts Vietnam to the danger of falling into a middle-income trap as a result of the country’s declining labour productivity. Employing data from the Trade-in-Value-Added database, this chapter explores the dynamic pattern of Vietnam’s position in the global value chain, focusing on the electronics industry and the textile and apparel industry as well as the extent to which different groups in this industry actually benefit from the global value chain. Analysis in Chapter 5 focuses instead on Vietnam’s economic dependence on trade relations with China. In particular, Oh employs

a typology of trade shocks based on the intentionality of events that trigger the shocks, and the transmission channels of bilateral trade between Vietnam and China. This typology provides a framework to identify and better understand the nature of Vietnam's vulnerability, as well as the distinctive risks associated with each particular type of trade shock.

Next, Part II focuses on important political developments and changes in state-society relations under the effects of economic growth in contemporary Vietnam, particularly evolving state-business relationships in Vietnam's state-owned enterprises, the mechanisms of VCP leadership in public universities, the role of media in popular protests, and the freedom of workers to organize in Vietnam. In the chapters by Mai Fujita and by Quang Chau and Mai Van Tinh, they suggest that although the VCP maintains certain strongholds of state-owned enterprises and public universities, party control has also eroded. Concerning regime responses to social unrest, the analysis by Nguyen Thuc Cuong and Hoang Cam Thanh suggests that citizen protests channelled through media-infiltrated politics led the government to respond with policy change in 2018. At the same time, as Tinh Van Vu's chapter points out, whether policy change results in meaningful outcomes is another question.

Focusing on the equitization and divestment of state capital from large state-owned enterprises and the rise of large private family-owned enterprises building close relationships with the party-state, Chapter 6 by Mai Fujita asks who are the individuals leading large state and private enterprises and from where have they emerged? And how have state-business relationships changed? In order to address these questions, her chapter examines the structure of the enterprise sector, features of Vietnam's largest enterprises, and profiles and origins of the top management of the largest state-owned and private enterprises, which draws on an original database of the top managers of listed enterprises. Based on in-depth case studies of the career histories of the managers of selected large private and state-owned enterprises, Fujita concludes that the state-business relationship remains close despite the recent emergence of several large private enterprises.

Using archive documents and extensive interviews, Chapter 7 by Quang Chau and Mai Van Tinh sheds light on a subject insufficiently covered in Vietnam studies—that is, how the VCP controls higher education. Through the analytical framework of elite dualism, the authors argue that party control of public universities is relatively tight at the top level but rather loose at the grass-roots level. First, university

presidents, who are de facto the party secretary, normally have both good academic credentials and solid political capital. Second, at the sub-institutional levels, political capital is often outweighed by academic credentials in appointment decisions. Third, the Communist Youth Union appears to be losing ground to international NGOs that provide students with English skills and opportunities to volunteer abroad. Furthermore, the recent enforcement of the US-style governing board structure as part of the public administration system's restructuring, whilst not likely to threaten the party leadership, has the potential to create opportunities for universities to thrive. In contrast to calls for power convergence (*nhat the hoa*) throughout the political system, the party tends to tolerate some power divergence in the realm of higher education. In conclusion, the authors suggest that universities can potentially hold leverage for democratization.

To what extent does space actually exist for citizen participation, societal resistance and the development of civil society in contemporary Vietnam? In addressing this crucial question, Nguyen Thuc Cuong and Hoang Cam Thanh in Chapter 8 capture an increasingly salient dimension of contemporary Vietnamese civil society called mediatized infrapolitics—an unobtrusive realm of everyday state-society struggle on mass media platforms. These two authors conducted a discourse analysis of local newspapers and foreign media outlets on the controversial proposal for land leases of ninety-nine-years' duration for foreign investors in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and the resultant policy change in 2018. Taking the results, the authors argue that mediatized infrapolitics has increasingly influenced the accountability of the VCP via a three-stage communicative process. In short, unlike noisy, headline-grabbing protests and demonstrations, mediatized infrapolitics, albeit seemingly innocuous, quietly and effectively sets the scene for the former to spread in moments of external crisis.

While the previous chapter suggests that the Vietnamese communist regime could be responsive to social demands, Chapter 9 by Think Van Vu highlights some of the inherent limitations in these responses. In December 2019, the National Assembly of Vietnam passed a new labour code, which came into effect in January 2021. It allows workers to form independent unions at the workplace. Examining factors that hinder the freedom of trade unions in Vietnam and workers' participation in such unions, the chapter finds that provisions in the law remain vague and do not specify how to set up and manage new workers representative organizations at the workplace. Moreover, union subservience to the VCP and managerially dependent unions

still hinder trade union reform. In effect, many workers do not trust a union's protection or its role of representation.

Chapter 10 by Trinh Khanh Ly discusses another dark side of Vietnam's development—namely, rising inequality in society and the low wages for workers that has resulted in large numbers of them seeking employment opportunities abroad, whether legally or illegally. Rather than providing vocational training or finding other means to raise workers' incomes, the Vietnamese government has aggressively promoted the export of labour. While this policy has brought higher incomes for workers and large amounts of annual remittances to the Vietnamese economy, there have been problems, including steep fees collected by state-designated labour-export agencies and the prevalence of workers overstaying their visas. Despite such labour export programmes, low wages for domestic workers and limited employment opportunities continue to send thousands of young Vietnamese to Europe every year to work illegally. Trinh shows how these workers encounter great risks in their journeys and are exploited in their host countries.

Finally, Part III places Vietnam in comparative perspective, specifically with China, by focusing on political accountability, political factions and government responses to protests. Challenging the assumption that Vietnam and China are identical regimes, Nguyen Khac Giang in Chapter 11 argues that Vietnam exhibits relatively higher accountability than China. Employing nested game analysis, the chapter shows how the two regimes have been involved in different games during certain historical periods, consisting of the game between the ruler and the selectorate (internal accountability game), the regime and the population (external accountability game), and the regime and foreign powers (foreign pressure game). Different payoff expectations in each game affect the characteristics of accountability within the respective regimes. In the long run, regimes with low accountability like China face a higher risk of internal factionalization, whereas regimes with higher accountability like Vietnam are exposed to a higher risk of elite-mass tensions.

Chapter 12 further contributes to a comparative study of Vietnam and China by drawing attention to how factional politics animates the anti-corruption campaigns led by the communist party in each country. Using a new dataset of disciplinary investigations in the Chinese and Vietnamese communist parties, Duy Trinh argues that regimes can resolve this dilemma by selectively protecting officials who are perceived as allied with the dictator. Factional clarity, the extent to

which perceived and actual factional affiliation overlap, determines how selective protection manifests. In China, where factional clarity is strong, the regime engages in *ex post* protection by delaying sanctions and meting out lenient punishments to investigated officials in provinces whose leaders share ties with the incumbent general secretary. In contrast, under Vietnam's weak factional clarity, such officials are protected *ex ante* by being excluded from investigations. Altogether, these findings shed light on how authoritarian regimes with similar formal institutions produce divergent corruption and anti-corruption outcomes.

Where Vietnam will be headed in the next five years remains to be seen. As a case of a rapidly growing post-communist country, Vietnam has attracted great attention from outside observers. Regardless of how readers view the Vietnamese model of development, we hope they will find this volume useful for understanding its particular strengths and weaknesses, and its accomplishments and failures.

Notes

1. See also the chapters by Vu Quang Viet, Upalat Korwatanasakul and Truong Quang Hoan in this volume.
2. See Chapter 12 by Duy Trinh in this volume.
3. See also Chapter 8 by Nguyen Thuc Cuong and Hoang Cam Thanh in this volume.
4. See also Chapter 9 by Thinh Van Vu in this volume.
5. By "growth", we refer to the increase in gross domestic product (GDP) or GDP per capita, while recognizing that this is an imperfect measure of a country's overall development.
6. For an advanced discussion of the neoclassical and other theories of economic growth, see Acemoglu (2009).
7. A similar conclusion is reached by many studies on China and Vietnam reviewed by Malesky and London (2014, p. 401). The discussion here does not deal with the politics of reform *per se*. See Chapter 1 by Tuong Vu and Thuy Nguyen in this volume for an overview of political issues related to reform. For studies on the drawn-out policy debates and changes at the central level in accepting local policies that accommodated private incentives, see Fforde and de Vylder (1996) and Dang (2016); on agriculture specifically, see Kerkvliet (2005). For a more positive assessment of Vietnam's transformation than is provided here, see Fforde (2009, pp. 486–87).
8. Data from the World Bank based on constant 2017 international dollar. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.KD?locations=VN-PH-ID-TH>.
9. The Vietnamese government changed its method of GDP calculation in late 2019 resulting in its GDP increasing by 25 per cent and overtaking that of

- the Philippines in 2020. See Lien Hiep Quoc Viet Nam (2019). This artificial increase has not been accepted by many economists (email communication with Vu Quang Viet).
10. See also Chapter 6 by Mai Fujita in this volume. Among the East Asian tigers, only Taiwan has had a relatively large state-owned sector, but Taiwanese political elites have been more forthrightly pro-capitalism and pro-United States than Vietnamese communist leaders.
 11. See the 1998 and 2001 amendments and the 2003 Land Law.
 12. This is not to suggest that Vietnam should follow the so-called “China model”, given the many repercussions that resulted from China’s path to economic growth. See, for example, Sargeson (2013).
 13. The latest available data shows that government spending on healthcare and education as a percentage of GDP in Vietnam is lower than the world average, while spending for defence is higher. See https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Vietnam/Health_spending_as_percent_of_GDP/; https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Vietnam/Education_spending_percent_of_government_spending/; and https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Vietnam/mil_spend_gdp/. Another source confirms that the Vietnamese state is far more concerned about security than development. In 2014, Vietnam’s domestic security forces (including the military) consumed 21 per cent of the annual national budget (compared to 11 per cent in the United States), while its spending on education accounted for 16 per cent. Vu Quang Viet, “Tai sao boi chi ngan sach qua lon va keo dai trong nhieu nam o Viet Nam”, *Thoi Dai Moi* no. 16 (September 2017): pp. 219, 232, 242. http://www.tapchithoidai.org/ThoiDai36/201736_VuQuangViet.pdf.
 14. See Bertrand (2013) for a broad review of the literature as applied to Southeast Asia.
 15. Not long ago, some individuals claimed that “China is moving closer to vindicating classical modernization theory”, and even predicted that “China will embark on democratization around 2020” (Liu and Chen 2012). Yet, that neither China’s nor Vietnam’s communist regimes have democratized—and indeed have become more deeply entrenched—has turned the modernization thesis on its head. Both countries are exemplary cases of *growth without democratization*, at least to date.
 16. For a discussion of recent anti-democratic protests in Thailand involving “illiberal democrats” against “undemocratic liberals”, see Norton (2012). Others—including Berman (1997), Bellin (2000), Wright (2010), and Sinpeng and Arugay (2014)—have also called into question the notion that the middle class is an inherent liberal or progressive force that always provides a bulwark for democracy.
 17. According to surveys conducted in 2019 by the United Nations Development Programme, between 20 and 45 per cent of respondents perceived corruption as prevalent in the public sector (UNDP 2020). For corruption involving high-ranking officials and state-owned enterprises, see Vuving (2019, pp. 375–86).
 18. Hai Chau (2015) quotes Pham Chi Lan, the former head of the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and an advisor to former Vietnamese prime ministers.
 19. In this volume, the order of Vietnamese names is left to the author’s preference.

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