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Introduction

On 10 June 2018, thousands of protesters flooded the streets of Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, and other major cities during a week-long series of demonstrations that saw both widespread offline and online dissident activities. The demonstrations came two days before the final vote on the Special Economic Zone Act was scheduled to take place.[1] The Special Economic Zone Act is a law that would enable the government to lease land in three designated economic zones to foreign entities for up to ninety-nine years.[2] Protesters were met by large cordons of police officers who attempted to contain the demonstration. The demonstrations were, for the most part, peaceful; however, footage has surfaced on the internet showing police officers and individuals who appeared to be plainclothes officers dragging protesters into police cars and unmarked vans.

The protests received extensive media coverage overseas while state-controlled media inside Vietnam kept their coverage of the incident to a minimum. Domestic media outlets reported that people in many localities took to the streets, causing social disorder and that the police detained some protesters.[3] Ultimately, perhaps partly due

to the pressure arising from the protests, the National Assembly of Vietnam gave in and voted to postpone the implementation of the bill indefinitely.

This was not the first time Vietnamese took to the street to express their dissatisfaction. Large scale protests erupted across Vietnam in May 2014 in response to the deployment of a Chinese oil rig in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, which was perceived as an illegal and aggressive move by the Vietnamese. The demonstrations quickly escalated into riots with as many as 20,000 protesters torching and looting foreign-owned factories. Subsequent clashes between the police and rioters resulted in at least twenty-one people killed and almost one hundred wounded.[4] In 2016, a series of demonstrations were held from May until as late as December to protest the dumping of toxic waste into the coastal waters of Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri and Thua Thien–Hue provinces in Central Vietnam by a Taiwanese steel plant. Prolonged exposure to toxic substances discharged from Formosa's steel plant through drainage pipes resulted in a massive number of dead fishes found washed up on shore, endangering the life of the locals whose livelihoods depend heavily on fishing.[5] Unapologetic and combative remarks from the management of the steel plant further angered the victims, and demonstrations spread nationwide.[6]

Despite those protests and demonstrations, the CPV's authority has remained unshaken. The Party, founded in 1930 and ascended to power during the final months of the Second World War, has been the sole ruling party of a unified Vietnam since 1976. The CPV emerged victorious after multiple wars and even survived the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had caused the downfall of many other communist regimes. In 1986, the Party implemented a series of economic reforms known collectively as *Doi Moi*, which transformed Vietnam's ruined economy into one of the fastest growing in the world. The CPV's ability to survive and maintain its political domination over Vietnam's politics is particularly remarkable considering Vietnam had been constantly at war and faced economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation until the 1990s.

The resilience of communist regimes has been extensively studied following the collapse of the Soviet Union when regime changes took place in dozens of countries. Regimes with adequate preparedness and adaptiveness, possessing effective state apparatus and sufficient legitimacy, and facing little pressure from the West would often find themselves resilient to the shocks and upheaval of crises. Regimes lacking these conditions would be weakened or overthrown. The elements upon which the survivability of a regime depends could be divided into external and internal factors.

External factors include the global and regional political environment, Western linkage and leverage, which favours democratization, and black knight support, such as that provided China and Russia, which generally helps to prolong the existence of the regime. If an authoritarian country is located in a democratic neighbourhood, the likelihood of democratization is higher.[7, 8] Huntington argued that the democratization of a country in a non-democratic neighbourhood would have a profound impact on its neighbouring countries by revealing the possibility and incentives for democratization and by encouraging political opposition in those countries, as well as providing an example of what kind of strategies could be used to challenge a dictatorial ruling regime.[9] Bunce and Wolchik[10] pointed out several cases in which a sufficiently strong political opposition movement could push for electoral changes, not only in their own country but also in neighbouring non-democratic regimes. Nevertheless, as shown by Way, despite successful electoral revolutions in Armenia in 2003 and 2008 and Azerbaijan in 2003 and 2005, regime change through elections failed in other countries in the same region.[11] This reveals that as much as political challengers can learn from the lessons of their neighbours, ruling regimes can also learn from the failures of other authoritarian regimes elsewhere to strengthen their grip on power.[12]

According to the Economist's Democracy Index in 2023, six of the ten Southeast Asian countries (excluding Brunei) are considered flawed democracies, while four are authoritarian regimes.[13, 14] During the Vietnam War, certain Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand

and the Philippines openly opposed the communist North Vietnam, even sending troops to fight alongside the US Army and the Army of South Vietnam. However, since Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 and become a full member of ASEAN, the overall regional environment has become much more favourable to the long-term survival of the CPV. ASEAN's fundamental principles do not mention democracy, instead they emphasize values such as mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, national identity and non-interference in internal affairs. ASEAN members do not concern themselves much with the political system of their neighbours, as long as the regime in question does not threaten regional stability. Therefore, diplomatic and economic pressure on Vietnam to democratize primarily originates from Western countries, such as the United States and the European Union, rather than from its neighbours. In contrast, diplomatic and economic ties with Russia and China support the continuity of the current regime. The CPV has been successful so far in balancing its foreign relations, which in turn contributes to the regime's survivability.

Internal factors can be divided into "hard" and "soft" aspects. The "hard" aspect includes the organizational power of the ruling regime and its performance, which can be evaluated through statistics such as the number of members of the ruling party, the number of police officers, GDP per capita and the like. On the other hand, the "soft" aspect, meaning the regime's legitimacy, is harder to evaluate and tends to be overlooked.

Among the "hard" and "soft" internal factors, Bellin,[15] Way,[16] and Levitsky and Way[17] argue that a regime's resilience primarily depends on its organizational power which includes institutional establishment, the organization of the ruling party, and the loyalty of the military and law enforcement apparatus. Additionally, Tuong asserts that effective economic policies for a state's industrial development is as important as the regime's cohesive structure.[18] In the case of Vietnam, Shiraishi also mentions that the flexibility of the state's structure established by the CPV's leadership and its socioeconomic policies were the main reasons for its resilience.[19]

Stable and well-connected organizational structure reduces the risk of regime change from within and the security apparatus serves as a deterrent against disobedience and can be deployed to control and suppress mass protests and riots if necessary. The primary function of this security apparatus is to maintain order for the ruling regime using intimidation and even violence. "Low-intensity" activities may include denying political opposition access to basic social services, imposing special taxes or attacking dissidents using plainclothes collaborators.[20] The threat of harassment, detainment and prosecution can discourage opposition from openly opposing the ruling regime.

The CPV has also successfully used "low-intensity" activities through its law-enforcement apparatus to intimidate and restrict opposition and dissidents, which keeps the formation of domestic political opposition in check. Thayer emphasizes the repressive role of four key state organs in bolstering Vietnam's one-party state: the Ministry of Public Security, the People's Armed Security Force, the General Directorate II (military intelligence) and the Ministry of Culture and Information,[21] which play a vital role in the survival of the regime.[22]

Abuza notes that the Politburo, which serves as the command centre of the CPV, is a select elite group that fiercely monopolizes political power and prevents the growth of civil society.[23] However, Thayer argues that the CPV, despite projecting a united front to the public, is deeply divided internally, and its organs of oppression are controlled by Politburo leaders who engage in factional infighting.[24]

Nevertheless, although factional infighting has always been a common occurrence within the Party, its highest-level members have always been in consensus regarding the CPV's political domination. This consensus has been one of the main driving forces behind the Party's ability to survive. Despite infighting and internal purges throughout the history of the CPV, such as the Nhan Van–Giai Pham affair between 1955 and 1958 or the prosecution of anti-communist revisionists between 1963 and 1967,[25] the CPV has been able to maintain a relatively stable institutional establishment, a cohesive organizational structure, and a

loyal military and law enforcement apparatus. The CPV's tenacity is a testament to its organizational power.

According to Thayer, this organizational power can be compromised on three counts. Firstly, the robust centralized authority of the CPV faces potential erosion from state organs at the subnational level, which historically have demonstrated a degree of autonomy or resistance to central directives. Secondly, the Party leadership is internally divided regarding the speed and breadth of economic, political and social reforms. Thirdly, since the mid-1980s, Vietnam has implemented economic reforms aimed at establishing a market economy with socialist characteristics, leading to significant societal changes, particularly in communication technology, including the proliferation of mobile phones, satellite television and the internet. In combination with a growing number of Vietnamese students pursue education abroad annually, this has resulted in increased contestation in state-society relations.[26]

Dimitrov suggests that the lifespan of a communist regime depends on four types of adaptations that help it expand its support base beyond the electorate. These adaptations include the introduction of economic reforms, policies to promote inclusiveness of both reform winners and reform losers, institutionalization of horizontal and vertical accountability, for example, parliamentary query sessions or offices that directly receive and respond to citizens' complaints, and the modification and reinvigoration of communist ideology based on nationalism to make it more appealing to both ordinary citizens and intellectuals.[27]

There are other measures that authoritarian regimes can take to strengthen their rule, such as compromising and power-sharing with different social groups to discourage them from rebelling against the regime's rule,[28] improving elite cohesion that aims to reduce the risk of betrayal and defection within the ranks of the leadership and organizing popular movements to manage and weather political crises.[29]

Nathan,[30] Brownlee[31] and Magaloni[32] argue that creating a meritocratic system that rewards cadres for exhibiting favourable attitudes and actions while punishing disobedience can be used to

encourage party members to remain loyal. However, meritocratic systems may become problematic during political or economic crises, as the Party may be forced to reduce the rewards for its members and be unable to maintain their loyalty. Bratton and van de Walle,[33] Geddes,[34] Nathan[35] and Hale[36] suggest that an authoritarian party can consolidate internal power by arranging a system of power-sharing among its most powerful members. By establishing norms and procedures for succession, the Party's leadership ensures that disagreements among its top members are kept to a minimum and that the Party's hierarchy remains undisturbed. Furthermore, the leadership would remain resistant to challenges from the public or their political opposition.

In Vietnam, the most visible example of a system of power-sharing at the top level is the Politburo, which usually includes more than a dozen of the most powerful politicians. Although from time to time, certain powerful decision-makers can dominate this collective leadership, such as the cases of Le Duan in the 1970s and 1980s and Nguyen Phu Trong from the 2010s until his death in 2024, no politician in Vietnam has been able to reach the level of power comparable to Stalin or the paramount leaders of the Chinese Communist Party.

Empirical studies conducted by Geddes,[37] Brownlee[38] and Magaloni[39] have shown that highly institutionalized authoritarian ruling parties with more effective, functional organizations tend to be more durable compared to parties lacking those qualities. In such cases, the ruling party often establishes patronage in which only those loyal to the Party can enjoy access to financial support, political positions and other privileges. In many cases, the Party goes further by officially adopting a political ideology that helps to bind its members together. This is especially true for parties that have risen to power through armed struggle and violent revolution.[40]

In Vietnam, institutional establishment takes many forms, from the pro-communist grassroots movements under the Vietnamese Fatherland Front to the myriads of state-owned enterprises. The CPV and the institutions under its umbrella are further bound by its political ideology, Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Thought. This cohesion is bolstered by a decades-long history of armed struggles. Hai argues that the

institutional establishment helped the CPV to successfully restore and maintain public trust, kept its opposition in check at home and smartly reduced external pressures. The institutional establishment under the control of the CPV has proven relatively effective in countering the formation of new social forces.[41] Although civil societies are formed, so far, they have been unable to demand significant changes from the ruling regime, nor could they meaningfully threaten its institutional establishment.

An unwritten system of cadre nomination for leadership positions exists, where young and promising government employees, referred to as *cán bộ nguồn* (potential cadres), are earmarked for leadership roles. Prospective candidates are groomed early and are usually selected to work as a political commissar. Up-and-coming cadres are expected to maintain a patron-client relationship with a higher-ranking official, which, in turn, forms a faction. Multiple factions exist within a body of government, competing for power and influence. Upon the uneventful retirement of the head of such faction, the leadership position is usually passed to the next in line. In rarer cases, the downfall of the leading senior politician may lead to the collapse of the whole faction.

In addition to a regime's organizational power and internal security apparatus, many scholars argue that its performance, which can be observed through economic growth and the distribution of wealth, is one of the most important elements that contributes to the resilience of that regime. Huntington points out that to maintain long-term popular support and enhance its political resilience during crises, an authoritarian regime would also need remarkable economic performance and firm control over natural resources. Regardless of how they rose to power, non-democratic regimes often cling to their power through violent revolutions and maintain political legitimacy not via free and fair elections, but by the values attributed to them by their subjects.[42] As a result, to remain in power, these non-democratic regimes must compensate for their lack of democratic constitutionality with economic growth and the improvement of the living standards of their citizens.

According to Przeworski and Limongi[43] and Geddes,[44] dictatorial regimes that achieve high enough GDP per capita and mitigate the

negative impact of economic crises to avoid slowdowns will have a higher chance of remaining in power. Shiraishi[45] attributed the survivability of the CPV to the successful adaptation of the market economy under a socialist one-party political regime. According to Hiep, socioeconomic performance as the result of the adoption of *Doi Moi* served as the single most important source of legitimacy for the CPV in the twenty-first century.[46]

However, economic development and the betterment of living standards have not always been enough to justify the rule of authoritarian regimes in contemporary politics. As early as the late 1950s, modernization theorists like Lipset,[47] Rostow,[48] and Huntington[49] suggested that economic development could destabilize society by introducing new social forces that cannot be controlled through established institutions, especially in the case of authoritarian regimes. This issue, however, proved to be less acute with regimes that are extremely rich in natural resources, most notably in some Arab countries where despite living standards and GDP per capita being comparable to those of developed Western countries, social forces that would push for political changes have failed to form. Van de Walle[50] and Way[51] explained this phenomenon by positing that by distributing a portion of their massive wealth, which originated from their vast natural resources (e.g., oil reserves) among the population, those ruling regimes had created a dependent middle class that must rely on it for their material well-being. For less-fortunate authoritarian regimes that are not blessed with immense natural wealth, economic development could help strengthen the legitimacy of their rules, while economic downturns and recessions could negatively impact this legitimacy.

However, economic performance alone would be insufficient to make up for erosion of other sources of legitimacy. While the living standards of the Vietnamese have been increasing since the initiation of *Doi Moi*, the same could be said about social inequality and corruption. Vietnamese citizens can also compare their living standards to those of people in Western democratic countries thanks to the influx of information through the internet and cross-border movement of

people, and this is a source of dissatisfaction. Furthermore, prosperity achieved through the introduction of the market economy contradicts the communist creed, which requires the CPV to redefine their version of communism.

Thayer argues that since the mid-1980s, Vietnam has undergone profound political, economic and social changes, leading to increased accessibility to information for ordinary citizens.[52] Market reforms have enabled the formalization of a private sector and spurred grassroots civil society initiatives. This surge in information dissemination and civil society activism has prompted a re-evaluation of state-society dynamics, including the applicability of the Leninist model.[53] Consequently, scepticism has arisen regarding the correlation between Vietnam's economic achievements and the socialist ideology espoused by the ruling CPV.

Economic crises, such as the 2008 financial crisis or the COVID-19 recession, not only slow down growth, which is detrimental to the CPV's performance legitimacy, but also make social inequality and corruption more evident to the public, which damages socialism as the Party's official state-building ideology. Nhu and Tuong argue that while Vietnam's economy is now integrated into the global economy, the lack of effective leadership has led to its low position in global value chains and heavy reliance on China. This has resulted in mounting challenges facing the CPV in various sectors of the society, including workers, media, universities and state-owned enterprises, decades after the initiation of *Doi Moi*.[54]

Malesky examines the political landscape of Vietnam in 2013, focusing on the constitutional drafting process and the unprecedented confidence vote in the National Assembly. These events unfolded against the backdrop of the nation's persistent economic challenges, elite political competition, growing international engagement and an increasingly informed populace, influenced by a dynamic blogosphere. He asserts that forthcoming Vietnamese leaders must prioritize performance over relying solely on patriotic sentiment for legitimacy in the contemporary context.[55]

While agreeing that performance legitimacy is important to maintain the obedient-worthiness of the CPV, Thayer maintains that traditionally, the legitimacy of the CPV has arisen from other sources such as military victories against foreign forces and the charismatic legitimacy that the Party's leadership inherited from Ho Chi Minh.[56] Thayer also argues that Vietnam has attempted to base its legitimacy on rational-legal norms through the adoption of the 1992 Constitution and legislation. The CPV has endeavoured to reinforce its rational-legal authority in territories under its control by holding elections and passing laws soon after seizing power from the occupying Japanese in August 1945. The ratification of the 1992 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is just one example of the CPV's continuous efforts to uphold the rule of law.[57] Thayer argues that the traditional sources of legitimacy for the CPV have been exhausted, and that attempts to adopt alternative legitimization models have been ineffective. However, he and Hiep also note that nationalism has been revived as an additional source of legitimacy due to the emergence of conflict in the South China Sea.[58]

The CPV understands clearly the vital importance of political legitimacy to its survival and has been adaptive to changes by adopting strategies suitable to its situational needs. During wartime, this had helped the Party to gain a massive popular base to support its war efforts, while during peacetime it had allowed the CPV to openly take responsibility for its failed economic policies and launch reforms.[59]

Prior to *Doi Moi*, the legitimacy of the CPV had been founded on tradition-based achievements and values, Ho Chi Minh's charismatic leadership and socialism as a state-building ideology. However, with the evident failure of communism worldwide, economic development started to become an increasingly important source of the Party's legitimacy. With rapid economic development and the betterment of people's living standards, Vietnam had experienced a great deal of political stability. Nevertheless, even though Vietnam continued to enjoy an annual GDP growth rate of more than 6 per cent even amid the 2017–18 global financial crisis, the early 2010s saw increasing social unrest. Policies and actions of the CPV were being challenged

from inside the country, a phenomenon uncommon for more than two decades. This suggests that the political legitimacy that the CPV had been enjoying has become less effective in preventing people from questioning, and to some extent, challenging its rule. To reinforce its legitimacy, the CPV has resorted to a combination of tactics, from persecuting dissidents to starting anti-corruption campaigns and using propaganda to emphasize its democratic legitimacy through elections.

Scholars studying post-Soviet Vietnam often overlook the soft aspect of the CPV's rule for two reasons. Firstly, the "hard" aspects of CPV resilience, such as its well-established organization, loyal military and law enforcement apparatus, and rapid economic growth are often prioritized. Secondly, even when the significance of legitimacy is acknowledged, evaluating its impact on the resilience of an authoritarian regime poses a daunting challenge. While the "hard aspects" of regime resilience can be measured using statistics like GDP, GDP per capita and the size of the police force or military, there is no universally accepted metric to statistically evaluate legitimacy. A comprehensive understanding of the CPV's resilience against all odds requires a thorough examination of its legitimacy, as mere numbers alone cannot explain the defeat of the United States in the Vietnam War or the CPV's ability to survive after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. This book aims to demystify this elusive aspect of CPV rule, with a specific focus on its claim on democratic legitimacy through legislative elections and the National Assembly.

This book consists of seven chapters. Chapter One is the introductory chapter. Chapter Two explores the pillars of the CPV's legitimacy, excluding its democratic claim. Chapter Three investigates the factors prompting the CPV to increasingly emphasize its democratic legitimacy. Chapter Four analyses documents and leadership statements from the CPV's inception to the present, arguing for the consistent assertion of democratic legitimacy in those. Chapter Five provides a comprehensive examination of Vietnam's National Assembly elections and the Assembly's structure, exploring its functions within contemporary Vietnamese politics. Chapter Six presents findings from two surveys

conducted shortly after the 2016 and 2021 National Assembly elections, assessing Vietnamese perceptions of democracy and elections. These surveys illuminate the effectiveness of CPV propaganda efforts, revealing a generally positive view of democracy among Vietnamese voters. However, while many Vietnamese citizens are aware that the CPV has been using a rigged system called "*quân xanh*, *quân đỏ*" (blue pawn: a token candidate; red pawn: a candidate who is more or less guaranteed election) to select delegates for the National Assembly, with the elections serving as a façade to legitimize it, they generally exhibit indifference and tolerance towards CPV rule. The last chapter provides the conclusion of the book.

Notes

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