POLITICAL CHANGE IN VIETNAM

In Search of the Middle-Class Challenge to the State

Martin Gainsborough

The relationship between popular and academic theorizing is always an interesting one. How does the esoteric world of academic theory become mainstream? How quickly does this happen and what determines which bits of academic theory get through and which do not? Such issues—the reader may be relieved to hear—are beyond the scope of this article. However, they provide an appropriate backdrop to theories of democratization. In the popular, or at least professionally popular, imagination, the link between economic development and democratization is well established. After a certain period of time, so it is argued, economic growth leads to the creation of a middle class, whose interests and aspirations differ from those of the authoritarian state, leading in due course to pressures for democratization.[1] These ideas certainly find expression in academic theory on the subject, but, expressed in this way, many of the more nuanced aspects of theory have been lost. The body of theory I am referring to has its origins in Barrington Moore's now classic text, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.[2] This has since been built upon by a number of other scholars,

Martin Gainsborough is British Academy Post-doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Warwick, Coventry, U.K. The author would like to thank John Sidel and participants at a seminar at the Asian Studies Centre, St. Antony's College, Oxford, on May 8, 2001, for comments on an earlier version of this paper. Remaining errors of fact or judgement are of course my own.

Asian Survey, 42:5, pp. 694–707. ISSN: 0004–4687
© 2002 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved.
Send Requests for Permission to Reprint to: Rights and Permissions, University of California Press, Journals Division, 2000 Center St., Ste. 303, Berkeley, CA 94704–1223.

1. The term "middle class" is often used interchangeably with "civil society."
2. Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

including most notably Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens.[3] These writers, who emphasize the importance of changing class relations, state power, and transnational forces in explaining moves toward greater democracy or their absence, are to be contrasted with those who focus on such things as political leadership, culture, and political parties to explain why democratization has or has not occurred.[4]

This article, which looks at political change in Vietnam over the past 15–20 years, will do so primarily with reference to the first body of literature.[5] This has the advantage of helping us move away from a heavy reliance on the middle classes as the standardbearer of democratization, which in recent years has tended to become the *sine qua non* of whether a country democratizes or not. While not ignoring the potential role of the middle class, the writings of Moore and Rueschemeyer et al. situate it within a broader context. Drawing on historical cases from the 17th to the 20th century, these writers between them single out five classes as being important as to whether a country democratizes.[6] These are large landowners, the peasantry and rural workers, the urban working class, the bourgeoisie (or capital-owning class), and the salaried and professional middle class. The writers argue that it is not only the changing stance of individual classes brought about by economic development that has a bearing on whether a country democratizes but also the relationship among classes and their relationship with the state.

In terms of the focus of this article, some of the writers' most interesting findings concern the position of the middle class or bourgeoisie. Drawing on the historical record, they note that while the middle class has been a force for democratization, it has often as not sided with authoritarianism. According to Moore, what is important is not simply the existence of a large middle class but its relationship with the state. That is, if it is to support democratization, it needs to be "vigorous and independent" from the state. In this article, we will explore what this means in relation to the Vietnamese case, particularly focusing on business interests that have emerged since reform. Also important, according to Rueschemeyer et al., in terms of whether the middle class will be a force for democratization, is its relationship with the working class. In countries where there is a large and politically active working class, the middle class has tended to feel threatened, favoring instead the

3. Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Stephens, and John Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 1992).

4. For a summary of the theoretical literature on democratization, see David Potter, "Democratization in Asia," in *Prospects for Democracy: North, South, East and West*, ed. David Held (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 355–79.

5. The article draws on three years of field work in Vietnam (1996–99), when the author was based in Ho Chi Minh City.

6. Moore had very little to say about the working class.

authoritarian status quo. This issue will also be considered in relation to Vietnam. In addition, the article will consider the nature of state power in Vietnam and the impact of transnational forces on the Vietnamese political scene, because these issues are also emphasized by these writers as having a bearing on whether a country democratizes.

The danger with the approach being proposed in this paper is that it can all too easily be taken to assume that all countries are traveling on the same historical road, ending with the establishment of liberal democracy. When looking at political change in authoritarian states, we, in the West, find it genuinely very difficult to conceive of any other end point. And yet, the experience in Asia to date would seem to suggest that Western-style liberal democracy is one of the least likely conclusions. Even Thailand and the Philippines, often seen as Asia's most democratic states, display many features that suggest their democracies are more formal than substantive.[7] Moreover, Singapore, with its long-standing capitalist development and substantial middle class and yet the absence of a democratic transition, although perhaps explained by Moore's emphasis on the importance of middle-class independence from the state, nevertheless seems to point to the possibility of another kind of evolution. One only has to read an interview with Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew to be aware of the very different philosophical and cultural tradition on which he draws.[8] We can, of course, dismiss the language of Lee and others as simply a cover for authoritarianism. However, in terms of trying to gain a sense of how politics in Vietnam, or elsewhere in Asia, is *likely* to evolve, it seems worth taking this different-ness seriously.[9] These issues will be considered further toward the end of the article. In the meantime, it is important for the reader to bear in mind that the issues discussed below have been chosen because they appear to have been significant in the evolution away from authoritarianism in other historical contexts. However, they are

7. See Benedict Anderson, "Cacique Democracy in the Philippines: Origins and Dreams," *New Left Review* 169:1 (May/June 1988), pp. 3–31; Paul D. Hutchcroft, "Oligarchs and Cronies in the Philippine State: The Politics of Patrimonial Plunder," *World Politics* 43:3 (April 1991), pp. 414–50; and John T. Sidel, "Siam and Its Twin: Democratization and Bossism in Contemporary Thailand and the Philippines," *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin* 27:2 (April 1996), pp. 56–63.

8. For examples, see Garry Rodan, "Singapore's Leadership Transition: Erosion or Refinement of Authoritarian Rule?" *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 24:1 (January–March 1992), pp. 3–17; and Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, "State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality and Race in Singapore," in *Nationalisms and Sexualities,* eds. Andrew Parker et al. (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 343–64.

9. This is not a relativist position (i.e., it makes no claim that all political systems can be equally justified on ethical grounds simply because of differences in philosophical and cultural traditions). Rather, this approach is adopted in order to give us the best chance in predicting the course of political change in Vietnam. If we are too quick to dismiss alternative ideas about how to organize society, we may miss something in terms of how events are likely to evolve.

not deterministic nor do they provide much insight into the nature of political systems that will emerge in place of authoritarianism.

Changing Class Interests under Reform

The onset of reform in Vietnam is variously dated from 1979, when the first tinkering with the central plan was carried out; from 1986, when the Vietnamese Communist Party held its Sixth Congress; and from 1989, when rather more substantive structural economic changes were introduced.[10] Whatever one prefers, Vietnam for 15 to 20 years has been undergoing a shift from a system of central planning to one that places greater emphasis on the market to allocate goods and services. During this period, the ruling party has eschewed political reform along multiparty lines, focusing instead on making one-party democracy work better (to use the party's language).[11] Nevertheless, driven by growing integration into the world economy, the past decade or so has seen rapid economic growth in Vietnam and rising per capita incomes.[12] This has had repercussions nationwide and in all sectors of society.[13] So what has been the impact of 15 to 20 years of reform on class formation and the relationship among different classes? The article will now consider this with reference to the five classes cited above.

Large Landowners

The first class mentioned in the theoretical literature is large landowners. Historically, they have been against democratization. In Vietnam's case, it

10. For a discussion of such issues, see Melanie Beresford, "Interpretation of the Vietnamese Economic Reforms 1979–85," in *Researching the Vietnamese Economic Reforms: 1979–86*, Australia-Vietnam Research Project, Monograph Series no. 1, School of Economic and Financial Studies, Macquarie University, Sydney (January 1995), pp. 1–16. The author's own research on Ho Chi Minh City would tend to lay stress on the late 1980s, when changes in terms of greater involvement by politicians in business started to become evident. See Martin Gainsborough, *Changing Political Economy of Vietnam: The Case of Ho Chi Minh City* (London: Routledge, 2002, forthcoming).

11. For an overview of what this has involved, see Carlyle A. Thayer, "Political Reform in Vietnam: Doi Moi and the Emergence of Civil Society," in *The Developments of Civil Society in Communist Systems*, ed. Robert F. Miller (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992), pp. 110–29.

12. During 1990–2000, real GDP growth averaged 7.3%. Per capita income was estimated at US$370 in 2000, compared with $150 in 1991. See Ho Chi Minh City Statistical Office, *Nien Giam Thong Ke Tan Pho Chi Minh 1998* [Ho Chi Minh City statistical yearbook 1998], p. 246; *The Economist*, Economist Intelligence Unit, Country Forecast December 2000 (London), p. 10; and United Nations Development Program, *Vietnam: Socio-Statistical Bulletin 1989–99* (Hanoi), March 1999.

13. Obviously, there are debates about equity, with some areas growing faster than others. See World Bank, *Vietnam: Poverty Assessment and Strategy,* Report No. 13442–VN, January 23, 1995; and World Bank, *Vietnam Development Report 2000: Attacking Poverty*, Joint Report of the Government–Donor–NGO Working Group, Draft for Discussion, November 15, 1999.

would appear to be axiomatic to argue that such a class does not exist. Large landowners were purged in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam during the 1950s, with the process continuing in liberated areas of the south during the 1960s and after the communist victory in 1975.[14] According to the theoretical literature, the fact of their absence would seem to work in favor of a democratic transition.

However, is it right to see Vietnam as a country devoid of a large landowning class? Despite continued formal restrictions on the maximum permitted landholdings in the countryside, the reform years have been accompanied by the growing incidence of landlessness with its obvious corollary, namely, the re-emergence of large landowners.[15] There is also a confluence of interest between the government's stated desire for foreign investment in agro-processing and the need for large landholdings. Foreign investment in agro-processing has been limited to date, but there is some evidence that foreign agro-processors have been able to secure large tracts of land when desired.[16]

One might also argue that while the large landowners of the *ancien* regime have been toppled, in their place there has emerged a new landlord class, namely Communist Party cadres and government officials. After all, it is very often they, or their family members, who dominate the rural economy.[17] If this analysis is correct, the prospects for a widening of the political space look less good.

The Peasantry and Rural Workers

The second class is that of peasantry and rural workers. According to the theoretical literature, the peasantry have historically had an interest in democratization but have not been much of a force for it, largely because they have been poorly organized. The fact that Vietnam continues to be a predomi-

14. For a summary of the experience of land reform in the north during the 1950s, see Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 57–58. For a discussion of land reform in the south prior to 1975, see Douglas C. Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War and Economic Development: South Vietnam 1955–75* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). See also Melanie Beresford, *National Unification and Economic Development in Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

15. See Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet and Doug J. Porter, eds., *Vietnam's Rural Transformation* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995); Berhard Dahm and Vincent J. H. Houben, eds., *Vietnamese Villages in Transition: Background and Consequences of Reform Policies in Rural Vietnam*, Passau University (Germany), Department of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999; and Alix de Mauny and Vu Thu Hong, *Landlessness in the Mekong Delta: The Situation in Duyen Hai District, Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam*, report prepared for Oxfam Great Britain, June–July 1998.

16. Business Monitor International, *Vietnam 2000* (London), pp. 52–53. Figures for cumulative approved foreign investment to early 1999 show that just 1.6% was targeted at agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. See Business Monitor International, *Vietnam 1999.*

17. See *The Economist*, Economist Intelligence Unit, Country Forecast, September 2000, (London), p. 24.

nantly rural society two decades after reform would seem to imply a relatively weak impulse for democratization.[18]

Since the 1990s, rural unrest appears to have become more common. The causes of the unrest are under-researched, but they would appear very often to be linked to land disputes involving local elites, often with allegations of elite corruption.[19] Although there is no evidence of direct foreign sponsorship of rural unrest, dissident non-government groups based overseas and foreign human-rights organizations have been quick to champion the cause of aggrieved rural communities, while foreign governments, including the United States, have criticized the government's handling of such incidents.[20]

Beyond individual cases of unrest, it would, however, be misleading to speak of a rural opposition in Vietnam understood in terms of an organization with a common institutional base and a coherent critique of party rule. Some scholars have alluded to the growth of autonomous farmers' groups, but there is really very little evidence for this.[21]

The Urban Working Class

The third class mentioned is that of the urban working class. It is regarded as having been an important force for democratization. In Vietnam, the urban working class is still quite small, given the predominantly rural nature of the country. However, the reform era has been accompanied by rapid urban growth, and hence a growing urban population. This has been driven in large part by spontaneous rural-to-urban migration, as strict controls on the movement of population have broken down and as farmers have flocked to the cities in search of employment on construction sites and in factories that have sprung up with reform.[22] By 2010, the government expects one-third of the population to be urban-based.[23]

In terms of organized labor, the urban working class has yet to flex its muscles in any significant way. Labor relations have certainly become more complex since reform, with the growth of private, including foreign, capital.

---

18. A little under 25% of GDP is derived from agriculture, with some 66% of the labor force is employed in the countryside. See World Bank, "Transforming the Rural Economy," in *Vietnam 2010: Entering the 21st Century*, Joint Report of World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Consultative Group Meeting for Vietnam, December 14–15, 2000.

19. See Kerkvliet, *Vietnam's Rural Transformation.* On the outbreak of rural unrest in the Central Highlands in February 2001, see *Far Eastern Economic Review* (*FEER*), March 1, 2001.

20. See Reuters News Agency, March 6 and 9, 2001.

21. See Adam Fforde, *Vietnam: Economic Commentary and Analysis*, no. 8. (Canberra: Aduki, 1996), pp. 78–80.

22. See Jonathan Haughton, "Room to Move," *Vietnam Business Journal 6:5* (October 1998), pp. 36–37.

23. See World Bank, "Transforming the Rural Economy," p. 1.

Since the early 1990s, strikes have become more common. However, there are no independent unions, and the state Vietnam General Confederation of Labor still appears to share the party's agenda of encouraging economic development and maintaining political stability rather than seriously representing workers.[24]

The Bourgeoisie

The fourth class is the bourgeoisie, understood here as the capital-owning or business class. In the popular view, entrepreneurs are often viewed as being part of middle classes, and hence seen as a force for democratization.[25] However, in the writings of Moore, Rueschemeyer, and others, bourgeoisies are typically viewed as taking an ambivalent stance toward democratization. Richard Robison, for instance, refers to an effective "pact of domination" between capital-owning classes and the authoritarian state in Suharto's Indonesia, based around perceived shared interests.[26]

In Vietnam, the last decade and a half of reform has certainly seen the emergence of a new business elite. However, while this elite is new in terms of its business interests, it is in fact rather old in terms of its political ties. That is, many of the new entrepreneurs have emerged from within the existing system, are currently serving or former officials, or are the children of the political elite. In Ho Chi Minh City, for example, the top 100 companies in 1995 were nearly all state enterprises, many of which had diversified into a range of different business sectors over the course of the late 1980s and 1990s, notably real estate, retail and foreign trade, and banking. Among the top 100 were just five private limited-liability companies, and a number of these had state companies as shareholders. To succeed in business, companies are still very reliant on the state for licenses, contracts, access to capital and land, and very often, protection.[27] Thus, on this basis, Vietnam still lacks the "independent or vigorous bourgeoisie" cited by Moore as a necessary element in democratization.

---

24. See Stephanie Fahey, "Changing Labour Relations," in *Dilemmas of Development*, Vietnam Update 1994, Political and Social Change Monograph 22, Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 1995, pp. 45–67; and Ying Zhu and Stephanie Fahey, "The Challenges and Opportunities for the Trade Union Movement in the Transition Era: Two Socialist Market Economies—China and Vietnam," *Asia-Pacific Business Review* 6:3 (Spring/Summer 2000), pp. 282–99.

25. See Thayer, "Political Reform in Vietnam." Under a heading of "Political Democratization," Thayer has a section on "Private Entrepreneurs," where he argues that entrepreneurs have been able to "carve out a space for themselves unfettered by party control."

26. Richard Robison, "Authoritarian States, Capital-Owning Classes, and the Politics of Newly Industrialising Countries: The Case of Indonesia," *World Politics* 41:1 (October 1988), pp. 52–74.

27. See Gainsborough, *Changing Political Economy*, Chapter 2.

The theoretical literature also emphasizes the importance of the bourgeoisie's relationship with the urban working class in terms of whether it supports democratization or not. If the middle class feels threatened by the working class, it is likely to be more conservative. If not, it is likely to be bolder. Given the small size of Vietnam's working class and its relative lack of militancy, the outlook would appear more positive in terms of the possible stance of the bourgeoisie. However, there is little evidence yet of strong pressure for rapid political change from any of the business community. In calls for such things as a level playing field for all companies, greater access to information, less red tape, and so on, which in part can be seen coming from domestic companies, one can possibly see the early stages of a division between the bourgeoisie and the state. However, these calls are relatively muted in comparison with the vigor with which such firms, out of necessity, go after state largesse.

The Salaried and Middle Classes

The fifth social group considered in the theoretical literature is the salaried and middle classes. In Vietnam, this would include professional state employees holding positions of responsibility in the bureaucracy and state enterprises, although there is likely to be some overlap with the capital-owning classes or bourgeoisie. A rather newer group in this category would be professional Vietnamese employed by foreign companies. A few years ago some scholars were emphasising an emerging gulf between groups such as this and the state, arguing that people were increasingly organizing their lives without reference to the party.[28] While the fact of someone's employment by a foreign company may be significant, this author would tend to emphasize the continued close relations between this group and the state, in terms of their relatively privileged background (i.e., securing the necessary education to make them employable by a foreign firm), as well as the focus of their primary loyalty, their willingness to join the party, and so on. Thus, as with the bourgeoisie, professional Vietnamese employed by foreign companies are still "very much of the system."[29]

In terms of possible change in this area, there is a sense in which as middle-class Vietnamese increasingly travel abroad, they are being exposed to different ways of doing things, which can make them less tolerant of certain

28. See David Marr, "Vietnamese Perestroika Slowly Realises Change," *FEER*, November 3, 1988, cited in Thayer, "Political Reform in Vietnam," p. 128.

29. The orientation of professional Chinese employed by foreign companies is addressed in Margaret M. Pearson, *China's New Business Elite: The Political Consequences of Economic Reform* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). This book has been criticized for assuming that this group will necessarily be at the forefront of political reform. See review by Doug Guthrie in *China Quarterly* 158 (June 1999), pp. 503–04.

practices in Vietnam. This phenomenon can range from observations about the high cost of consumer durables in Vietnam compared with elsewhere in Southeast Asia—a feature of protectionism, high import costs, etc.—to the red tape involved in sending or receiving parcels to or from overseas. The author has also detected a growing exasperation on the part of some professional Vietnamese with official corruption.[30]

State Power

As well as analyzing the position of different classes and the relationships among them, the theoretical literature under consideration in this paper also argues that the nature of state power has been crucial as to whether a country democratizes. In countries where it is difficult to clearly identify a distinct realm of authority separate from society (some African states, for example), the prospects for democratization are reportedly poor. However, a very powerful state—one which is almost entirely autonomous in relation to society—is also seen as not conducive to a shift away from authoritarianism. Thus, it is in the middle ground between not too little, and not too much, state power that a democratic breakthrough has the greatest chance of success.

Over the years, the nature of state power in Vietnam has attracted quite contrasting characterizations. Joel Migdal, for example, has described Vietnam as a "strong state," putting it, rather surprisingly, in a category with Israel and Japan but also alongside other state socialist countries.[31] For Migdal, these states are strong because they are, in his view, able to deploy state institutions to perform certain public policy functions despite the existence of other power centers. In terms of the Vietnamese state's alleged strength, Migdal is joined by a number of Vietnam scholars.[32] Others have disputed the characterization of the Vietnamese state as strong, arguing that its actual capabilities are far less than is often assumed.[33] In an attempt to resolve this debate, this author would argue that the state in Vietnam is ultimately strong but it depends on the context, hence the conflicting interpretations. If one looks at the day-to-day working of state institutions and the bureaucracy, one is struck by how particularistic seats of power in individual institutions are the norm, and how the ability of formally senior institutions in

30. The observations in this paragraph are based on informal conversations with Vietnamese informants.

31. Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 269.

32. For a summary of scholars who have characterized the Vietnamese state as strong, see Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, "Village-State Relations in Vietnam: The Effect of Everyday Politics on Decollectivization," *Journal of Asian Studies* 54:2 (May 1995), pp. 396–418.

33. See idem., "Village-State Relations," also for a summary of scholars who have characterized the Vietnamese state as weak.

the hierarchy to galvanize junior institutions to act is limited. Power is thus scattered. The state is weak.[34] However, if one looks at the role of the police in people's day-to-day lives—their official ability to harass, extract rents, and generally prevent dissent—the state appears strong. Moreover, in periodic clampdowns on certain types of speculative business activity, and in the prosecution of big corruption cases, the state (or particular echelons of it) shows that when it feels so moved, it can be very strong.[35] In a context in which one would normally emphasize the relative free-for-all of the business environment, the ferocity of such clampdowns observed by the author in Ho Chi Minh City during 1995–99 was very striking.[36]

In sum, therefore, the relative autonomy of the state some 15 to 20 years into reform would seem to be rather unconducive to a democratic transition. The theoretical literature particularly emphasizes how a heavy military and police presence in a state bodes poorly for a transition away from authoritarianism. In Vietnam, the military and police have always been well-represented in key leadership positions.[37]

Transnational Forces

The literature also emphasizes the importance of transnational forces in the success or failure of moves away from authoritarianism. Factors mentioned as being of potential importance include a country's size, its geographical location, and the nature of its relationship with the global economy. Looking at Vietnam, one is conscious of how there are pressures working in both

34. See Gainsborough, *Changing Political Economy*, Chapter 4.

35. See Martin Gainsborough, "Corruption and the Politics of Decentralisation in Vietnam," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, forthcoming 2003.

36. This juxtaposition between a state with both weak and strong attributes is captured in writing on China. Yia-Ling Liu writes of a "sporadic totalitarian state" with strong despotic power but weak infrastructural power. Lieberthal and Oksenberg talk of a "fragmented authoritarian regime." See Yia-Ling Liu, "Reform from Below: The Private Economy and Local Politics in Rural Industrialisation," *China Quarterly*, vol. 130 (June 1992), pp. 293–316; and Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

37. For background on the composition of the Politburo since 1976, see two articles by Carlyle A. Thayer: "The Regularization of Politics: Continuity and Change in the Party's Central Committee, 1951–86," in *Postwar Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development*, eds. David G. Marr and Christine P. White (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asian Program, Cornell University, 1988), pp. 177–193, and "The Regularization of Politics Revisited: Continuity and Change in the Party's Central Committee, 1976–96," paper presented to a panel on "Vietnamese Politics in Transition: New Conceptions and Inter–Disciplinary Approaches, Part 2," the 49th Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Chicago, March 13–16, 1997. The military and security representation of the Politburo fell substantially at the Ninth Congress in April 2001, compared with the Eighth Congress in 1996. See <http:/www.nhandan.org.vn/Vietnamese/today/bai–tscn6.html>, accessed May 8, 2001.

directions at the same time. The end of the Cold War might be regarded as resulting in a climate in which Southeast Asian countries, no longer seen as potential dominoes in an anticommunist struggle, have come under increased pressure from North American and European Union (EU) states on issues of human rights and governance. The extent to which such pressure results in substantive change in the target country is, of course, debatable. However, what is indisputable is that the ideological terms of the engagement between the West and Southeast Asia have changed substantially from the days of the Cold War.[38] On the other hand, Vietnam seems less vulnerable to external ideological and cultural inflows than, say, neighbouring Laos.[39] This would appear in part to reflect Laos's small size and its very heavy economic and cultural links with more-democratic Thailand. However, this relative lack of vulnerability may also be a feature and consequence of Vietnam's heavily nationalistic independence struggle, which has given it a degree of self-belief that Laos, historically more dependent on Vietnamese support, does not possess to the same extent. Moreover, in terms of limiting external ideological and cultural inflows, this author would emphasize the state's still-substantial ability to do this, even in an era of globalization. This again is something that which Laos, with its close integration with Thailand, has appeared less able to do.[40]

Vietnam's location in Southeast Asia and its membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) since 1995 offer a certain level of insulation from North American and EU pressure for political change. After all, while there is considerable variation in the political systems of ASEAN states, this is a grouping whose members still display relative degrees of authoritarianism, and an organization which has by and large maintained its principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its members.[41] Meanwhile, Vietnam's all-important relationship with China—much improved in

38. See Benedict Anderson, "From Miracle to Crash," *London Review of Books* 20:8, April 16, 1988.

39. For background literature on Laos, see Grant Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1988); and *The Economist*, Economist Intelligence Unit, Country Report, Laos Quarterly, 1993–present.

40. Martin Gainsborough, "Globalisation and Vietnam: The State in Ho Chi Minh City Fifteen Years into Reform," paper presented to the Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation, University of Warwick, U.K., May 21, 2001. The author would emphasize the continued ability of the Vietnamese state to get its message across through the domestic media (press, radio, and television) and public billboard advertising, despite increased public access in recent years to the Internet, satellite television, and the foreign press. Although censorship plays a part, this is mainly because the external influences play a very small part in most people's lives.

41. For background on Vietnam's relationship with ASEAN, see Jorn Dosch, "In Search of Sustainable Security: Vietnam's Interest and Role in ASEAN," paper presented at the 3rd Euroseas Conference, London, September 6–8, 2001.

recent years but still characterized by mistrust—has also arguably served to bolster authoritarian rule in Vietnam. Whatever differences Vietnam and China may have, they have in common a shared mistrust of U.S. global power and the fact that they are some of the last remaining communist states seeking to reform their economies along market lines without losing political control. Thus, as the frequent party and government exchanges between the two countries illustrate, there is much they can learn from each other.[42]

In addition, the popular tendency is to emphasize how in an era of globalization, increased integration in the world economy tends to work to the detriment of authoritarianism, not least with the growth of the middle class on the back of economic development. However, what is also evident in relation to Vietnam is the way in which foreign aid and private capital inflows work to bolster state power, because it is state institutions and state companies that are the principal beneficiaries.[43]

From One-Party Rule to What?

From the outset, this article has emphasized the importance of trying to break free from a mind-set that sees Vietnam as necessarily being embarked on a historical road that ends in Western-style liberal democracy.[44] Indeed, the article has argued that this is probably the least likely outcome, based on the experience of other countries in Southeast Asia. Taking this as our starting point, the key is not so much to be alert for some kind of liberal democratic breakthrough but rather to ask how else might a broadening of political space occur in a country like Vietnam?

At least part of the answer would appear to lie in a re-examination of concepts such as state and society. Instead of looking for the emergence of a robust civil society standing as a bulwark against state power, as much of the literature does, one should rather look at what is occurring *within the state*. A number of scholars have argued similarly. In the book *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia*, Daniel Bell and Kanishka Jayasuriya write:

42. See Carlyle A. Thayer, "Comrade Plus Brother: The New Sino-Vietnamese Relations," *Pacific Review* 5:4 (November 1992; Ramses Amer, "Sino–Vietnamese Relations: Past, Present and Future," in Carlyle A. Thayer and Ramses Amer, eds., *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition* (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 1999); and Stein Tonnesson, "Sino-Vietnamese Relations and the South China Sea Irritant," paper presented at the 3rd Euroseas Conference, London, September 6–8, 2001.

43. See Adam Fforde and Steve Seneque, "The Economy and the Countryside: The Relevance of Rural Development Policies," in Kerkvliet, *Rural Transformation,* pp. 97–138; Gainsborough, "Globalisation and Vietnam," pp. 12–14.

44. These issues are discussed in relation to Indonesia in Mark T. Berger, "Old State and New Empire in Indonesia: Debating the Rise and the Decline of Suharto's New Order," *Third World Quarterly* 18:2, pp. 321–61.

> The impetus for political reform arises not from the autonomous assertion of independent interests by social classes but from conflict within the state; political reform is about the management of intra-elite conflict rather than about the fundamental restructuring of state-society relationships. Therefore, political liberalisation [in Pacific Asia] is manifested in the changing architecture of the state with civil society remaining both limited and circumscribed.[45]

This fact, this author would argue, is testament to the very different philosophical and cultural heritage on which Asian states draw. Illustrating this with reference to Indonesia, Mark Berger notes how Suharto's New Order regime "reinstated and reconfigured organicist (and/or integralist) ideas which view state and society as a single organic entity and the embodiment of a harmonious village or family."[46] While Berger notes that this ideology is in part a reconfiguration—although only in part—and is used to deny oppositional activity, it does highlight the different philosophical and cultural roots on which many Asian leaders draw. Moreover, to the extent that such thinking is influential in terms of what actually happens, it offers a clue to likely political evolution. To illustrate the same point, one suspects that when Lee Kuan Yew speaks of the need to establish safeguards to limit the "way in which people use their votes to bargain, to coerce, to push and jostle" the government, or refers to the need for the government to show that it "cannot be blackmailed," such rhetoric does not simply represent sheer cheek on his part, but is actually indicative of a fundamentally different way of understanding the relationship between state and society.[47] Similarly, when Vietnamese leaders go on record to say that Vietnam will *never* have need for opposition parties, justifying such a position on the grounds that the ruling Communist Party knows the will of the people and only exists to serve it, this is not just a crude defense of authoritarianism but represents heartfelt opinion based on a very different view of state and opposition than that of the West.[48]

The idea that one should look for a broadening of political space *within* the state rings very true for Vietnam. For all the emphasis in foreign journalistic and academic writing on civil society, the emerging middle class, Buddhist and Catholic religious dissent, dissident intellectuals, youth disillusionment, and rural unrest—all of which are real phenomena up to a point[49]—one gains the strong impression in Vietnam that the main arena of struggle is within the

45. Daniel A. Bell et al., eds., *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 14.

46. Berger, "Old State and New Empire," p. 341.

47. Rodan, "Singapore's Leadership Transition," p. 5.

48. See text of interview of Vietnam's party general-secretary, Nong Duc Manh, by *Time* magazine, Vietnam News Agency, January 29, 2002.

49. For a good example of this genre of literature, see Zachary Abuza, *Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam* (Boulder, Colo.: Rienner, 2001).

state. Thus, if one points to some of the major political debates of the reform era, which have to do with the relationship between the party and the government, the role of the National Assembly, issues of centralization and decentralization, or the best way to manage state enterprises, it is clear that the extent of change or the widening of political space must be seen in relation to state institutions. For example, the party may still be the ultimate authority, but it now has to contend with more robust government institutions and a stronger National Assembly that, notwithstanding their common party representation, both represent alternative seats of power. Whether this was the intended outcome of the critique of the party emerging at the Sixth Congress in 1986 is unclear, but, as an illustration of how change is occurring within the state, it is revealing.[50] Equally, the concerns of the business sector, rather than finding expression through an organization external to the state, are channeled through the state-sanctioned Chamber(s) of Commerce and Industry or the Bankers Association.[51] Even if one were to speculate that such organizations might one day spawn breakaway groups or evolve into something external to the state, one suspects that they might also retain something of the different philosophical and cultural underpinnings in terms of how they conceive of the relationship between state and society.

Conclusion

With reference to writings by Moore and Rueschemeyer et al., the article has sought to offer a more rigorous account of the nature of political change in Vietnam over the past 15 to 20 years. In terms of why the middle class has not emerged to challenge the state, the fact of its still-close relations with the state—dependent on it, not independent from it—seems highly significant. Moreover, for all the popular emphasis on issues such as civil society and globalization, the Vietnamese state still seems relatively autonomous in relation to society, and relatively impervious in relation to external ideas and influences, although one would not want to emphasize the latter too much. Furthermore, when political change occurs in Vietnam, as it inevitably will, one lesson from much of the rest of Asia is that a broadening of the political space is likely to come from changes within state institutions, rather than from the rise of an assertive civil society as imagined in the West. Whether this will result in a sweeping away of authoritarianism is questionable. More likely, one suspects, is that we will see a gradual softening of its sharper edges.

---

50. For background, see Thayer, "Political Reform in Vietnam."

51. On the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, see Jonathan R. Stromseth, "Reform and Response in Vietnam: State-Society Relations and the Changing Political Economy," Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1998.