



# Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs

Special Section “30 Years Doi Moi”

---

Wischermann, Jörg, Bui The Cuong, and Dang Thi Viet Phuong (2016),  
Vietnamese Civic Organisations: Supporters of or Obstacles to Further  
Democratisation? Results from an Empirical Survey, in: *Journal of Current  
Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35, 2, 57–88.

URN: <http://nbn-resolving.org/urn/resolver.pl?urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-9542>

ISSN: 1868-4882 (online), ISSN: 1868-1034 (print)

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<[www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org)>

---

Published by

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies and  
Hamburg University Press.

The *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* is an Open Access publication.  
It may be read, copied and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the  
Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

To subscribe to the print edition: <[ias@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:ias@giga-hamburg.de)>

For an e-mail alert please register at: <[www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org)>

The *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* is part of the GIGA Journal Family, which  
also includes *Africa Spectrum*, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* and *Journal of Politics  
in Latin America*: <[www.giga-journal-family.org](http://www.giga-journal-family.org)>.



## Vietnamese Civic Organisations: Supporters of or Obstacles to Further Democratisation? Results from an Empirical Survey

Jörg Wischermann, Bui The Cuong, and Dang Thi Viet Phuong

**Abstract:** In political science and in development cooperation, civic organisations (COs) under authoritarian rule are usually seen as supporters of processes that move towards democratisation. However, these organisations are sometimes criticised for their support of those in power. Within this context, critics refer to the fact that many COs have, for example, authoritarian intra-organisational structures. This characteristic clearly limits their potential to be supporters of democratisation processes. In this paper, we proceed from the assumption that Vietnamese COs can be both supporters of democracy *and* organisations that help to maintain authoritarian rule; they can sometimes even be both at the same time. COs are “polyvalent” (Kößler). More concretely, what COs are and which role(s) they play in the political system is mainly but not exclusively dependent on the impact the state has on them, and is at the same time dependent on the effects that those organisations have on the state.

The results from an empirical survey, supported by the German Research Council (2013–2016) and carried out as a co-operation between the Institute of Asian Studies/GIGA Hamburg and the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, suggest the following:

- Most Vietnamese COs are hierarchically structured, if not organised in an authoritarian way. They are not “schools of democracy”, in the sense of Tocqueville.
- Most Vietnamese COs that have engaged in the welfare provision sector, either willingly or unwillingly, have helped to foster the foundations of authoritarianism.
- In the field of economic policies, the COs invited by the state to participate in and contribute to the formulation of policies do help, overall, to secure existing power structures, even though these organisations also help change various economic policies and even though their activities produce some democracy-promoting effects.
- In the policy field of gender equality, women’s rights, and rights of sexual minorities, the mass organisation Vietnam Women’s Union supports the state’s respective discourse. Some NGOs active in this

policy field are doing both: They support *and* criticise the state's discourse on gender norms and the rights of sexual minorities.

In the conclusion, we answer the question of which Vietnamese COs can be seen as supporters of further democratisation and which can be classified as obstacles.

■ Manuscript received 31 May 2016; accepted 24 July 2016

**Keywords:** Vietnam, civic organisations, authoritarianism, democratisation

**Dr. Jörg Wischermann** is an associate research fellow at the GIGA Institute of Asian Studies and a consultant for national and international organisations of Development Cooperation. He was a senior research fellow at the GIGA Institute of Asian Studies from 2013–2015, scientific head of the project “Civil Society Organizations as Supporters of Authoritarian Rule? A Cross-Regional Comparison (Vietnam, Algeria, Mozambique)”, and a research fellow at the GIGA Institute of Asian Studies from 2008–2010. He worked as a consultant for national and international organisations of Development Cooperation from 2003–2008 and 2010–2013 and was a research fellow at the Otto Suhr Institute for Political Science, Freie Universität Berlin from 1982–1984, 1986–1987, 1991–1994 and 1996–2002. Personal website: <[www.giga-hamburg.de/en/team/wischermann](http://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/team/wischermann)>

E-mail: <[Joerg.Wischermann@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:Joerg.Wischermann@giga-hamburg.de)>

**Prof. Dr. BUI The Cuong** is a high senior researcher at the Southern Institute of Social Sciences (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences), visiting professor at Ho Chi Minh City National University and Binh Duong University (Vietnam). He was visiting professor at the Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, in 2013–2014. Currently, he is a visiting research scholar at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University.

E-mail: <[cuongbuithe@yahoo.com](mailto:cuongbuithe@yahoo.com)>

**Dr. DANG Thi Viet Phuong** is a researcher at the Institute of Sociology (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences). Her fields of interests are on Vietnamese associations, social welfare and rural development, where she focuses on evidence-based policy recommendations.

E-mail: <[dangvietphuong@ios.org.vn](mailto:dangvietphuong@ios.org.vn)>

## Introduction

What civic organisations (COs) are and what role they play in different political systems is the subject of a longstanding and controversial debate. Some views are based on those of the French political thinker and historian Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) and see such organisations as “schools of democracy” or even “bulwarks of democracy” (Hyden 2010: 253). However, there has also been a lot of criticism of such views, like the one Edwards and Foley (1996) or Roth (2004) articulated. Those authors warned of “dark sides” of COs, since many COs show features of authoritarianism as regards intra-organisational decision-making processes. Others have turned Tocqueville’s positions upside down and claimed that COs are supporters of autocracies. In Egypt, for example, members of social movements articulated such critiques vis-à-vis COs during the uprising there in 2011. Their critiques echoed comments about the worldwide “NGOization” of COs (Carroll and Sapinski 2015: 3f.). According to this view, many COs (especially NGOs) have developed into policy experts and/or service providers since the 1980s. In former days, such organisations had denounced conservative societies and authoritarian rule. Over time, however, due to their closeness to the state and to national and international donors, those organisations lost most or even all of their critical impetus (Bebbington, Hickey, and Mitlin 2008; Glasius and Ishkanian 2014).

Regarding the case of Vietnam, we find two main positions among scholars. On one hand, there are claims that COs, especially local NGOs working as service providers, are apolitical and closely related to, if not befriended with, the state (Thayer 2009; Wischermann et al. 2015: 28). In contrast, Bui Hai Thiem (2013) saw Vietnamese COs as contesting power and representing ideas and values in governance about democratic freedoms, transparency, accountability, and meaningful participation. In his view, COs “serve as fundamental platforms for the changing dynamics of governance in Vietnam” (Bui 2013: 93).

Cavatorta (2013) offered a way out of the controversy between those who see COs as fighters for democracy and those who view COs as organisations that help to preserve authoritarian rule. Cavatorta suggested shedding teleological thinking and giving up any normative presumptions. In this context, he recommended joining Berman (2006), who proposed that COs

should not be considered an undisputed good, but a politically neutral multiplier – neither inherently “good” nor “bad”, but ra-

ther as being dependent on the wider political environment and the values of those who control it. (Berman 2006: 266)

Finally, Cavatorta (2013) suggested conceptualising the relationship between (an authoritarian) state and society as an interdependency and proposed exploring COs and their activities in relational ways (Cavatorta 2014: 3). His idea takes account of the argument that whatever “political environment” might influence COs, these organisations are also part of this environment and influence it. Thus, when examining relationships of state-COs, relational thinking helps to avoid tautologies. Viewed in this way, relational thinking paves the way towards the development of a new research agenda.

Part of such a new research agenda is a larger, cross-regional project based at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA) and funded by the German Research Council (KO 3513/5-1).<sup>1</sup> This project was carried out in close co-operation with the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS), among others, and was completed in April 2016. The present paper analyses Vietnam-related data from this survey. The project investigated whether COs support and/or weaken authoritarian state power, using three post-socialist countries (Algeria, Mozambique and Vietnam) as examples.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. We first describe the theoretical framework of the survey, then address methodological issues, and then present the most important Vietnam-related empirical findings. In the penultimate section, we discuss in detail the conclusions that can be drawn from these findings regarding the question of which COs in Vietnam, if any, are supporters of and/or obstacles to further democratisation. The concluding section presents a short summary of the main findings and an answer to the above question.

## Theoretical Framework

This research project contains a basic assumption that recurs not only on functionalist theoretical approaches and concepts, but also on fundamentals of relational sociology. This assumption is that what COs are, what they are doing, what they are capable of delivering, and which role(s) they might play in the respective political system are all dependent on the impact conditioning factors have on them, but also dependent on

---

1 For further information on this project, see <[www.giga-hamburg.de/en/project/civil-society-organizations-as-supporters-of-authoritarian-rule-a-cross-regional-comparison](http://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/project/civil-society-organizations-as-supporters-of-authoritarian-rule-a-cross-regional-comparison)> (1 August 2016).

the effects that those organisations have on those conditioning factors. COs can be bulwarks of democracy, supporters of autocracies, and even both at the same time; in other words, COs are “polyvalent” (Köbler 1994).

In the empirical sections of this paper, we show what kind of impact the state (as the most important conditioning factor) has on Vietnamese COs and what impact COs have on the state. More precisely, we examine what impact two particular forms of state power have on COs and the kind of impact COs have on those two forms of state power. These forms of power are:

- Infrastructural power, which denotes the “logistics of political control” (Mann 1984: 192) in general, and two specific forms of such control, namely “control through welfare provision” and “control through limited participation”.
- Discursive power, which we understand as the “power employed by agents of the state through/on discourse” (Göbel 2011: 188, fn 7), and thus the exertion of power through controlling the societal discourse and shaping the understanding of societal or political issues, historical events, and so on.

In the research project, we analysed those interdependent and reciprocally influential relations between COs and four forms of state power in four areas.

The first area was intra-organisational decision-making. We chose this issue because, assuming that the state wants to exert control of the society in general and of COs in particular, it might try to influence those organisations’ decision-making processes. This could happen, for example, regarding activities and the selection of leading personnel. COs may or may not deny that the state impacts their intra-organisational decision-making processes.

Second, from a theoretical perspective, we assume that the state aims to exert control over the society by providing welfare services, and that in this respect the state utilises COs. COs can be very helpful in terms of reaching specific groups of vulnerable and disadvantaged people living in urban ‘problem areas’. However, the state also aims to maintain a very significant role in this policy field. Therefore, we examine the role of the state in this field, COs’ positions vis-à-vis this role, and whether associations do support and/or offer (which) criticism and alternatives to (which) state policies and practices in this policy field. In other words, we explore whether and to what extent the state exerts ‘control through welfare provision’, and how COs react to these at-

tempts. We have chosen the policy field of HIV/AIDS prevention and care of People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHIV). Our choice is based on the fact that the AIDS pandemic became a nation-threatening risk in the early 2000s and rulers of many states, even those under authoritarian rule, decided that something had to be done to reduce the further spread of the disease, which at that time had reached the ‘middle of the society’ in many countries. It is safe to assume that rulers also foresaw negative consequences for themselves if they did not take action. These rulers have given COs a role in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Third, we turn to the issue of economic policies, especially the promotion of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This policy field contains active social strata (parts of the so-called middle class) that might be seen as a potential threat to those in power and that have close relations with, for example, state-owned or at least state-controlled enterprises. We assume that the state invites carefully selected COs representing specific social strata to participate in policy formulation and decision-making processes in the National Assembly. However, these COs are kept away from those places where the ‘real’ decisions are made (such as the Vietnam Communist Party’s Central Committee or its Politburo). Thus, what takes place is ‘control through limited participation’. We examine whether COs have been co-opted by the state, and if so, which ones; which mechanisms have been used in order to reach this goal; whether and how COs have defied those offers; and what follows from the respective options actors have chosen to pursue.<sup>2</sup>

Fourth, we turn to the issues of gender equality, women’s rights and the rights of sexual minorities. The exertion of discursive power by the state in the form of a sustained influence on gender norms and gender relationships is not at all coincidental, because gender is:

a central component in the field of state hegemony, since state discourses produce hegemonic masculinity and gender hierarchy. [...] Conversely, the state develops out of gender relationships. State and gender are reciprocally constitutive discursive formations with respectively specific ways of interaction and institutionalization. (Sauer 2001: 166f. Our translation.)

We examine whether COs support the state discourse and state’s policies in this field and/or whether they offer criticism of this discourse, and

---

2 “Cooptation [is ...] the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence. [...] Cooptation may be formal or informal, depending on the specific problem to be solved” (Selznick 1949: 13).

which critique of and alternatives to this discourse and which state's policies they develop.

It is possible to draw conclusions from the empirical findings regarding whether Vietnamese COs can be labelled as supporters of or obstacles to further democratisation and, if so, which ones. Here, we start from the assumption that collective and individual self-determination and autonomy are at the core of what democracy is about. More specifically, autonomy is the fundamental democratic ideal of a deliberative understanding of democracy and

describes the essential meaning of democratic self-rule. [...] Autonomy means that individuals – both individually and collectively – hold their interests with due consideration, and are able to provide reasons for holding them. (Warren 2001: 62)<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, in the area of intra-organisational decision-making and the three policy fields named above we explore whether, in a general sense, COs support the development of citizens' individual and collective self-determination and autonomy and/or whether they stand for the negation of such self-determination and autonomy – a state of affairs that is at the core of authoritarianism.

With regard to our understanding of authoritarianism, we follow Stenner's definition, which says that authoritarianism repudiates individual self-determination and autonomy and strictly negates the supremacy of the individual over a group or a system. Authoritarianism is an ensemble of attitudes and ways of acting that link the uncompromising denial of difference and diversity with an unconditioned demand for homogeneity and uniformity. This, in turn, leads to coercive action towards and suppression of people who are "different" (Stenner 2005: 16–20).

Based on this understanding, the following four patterns of authoritarianism are critical to our assessment of the interviewed COs' qualities and matters such as the examination of intra-organisational decision-making processes:

- A lack of tolerance of others, of views that diverge from one's and the group's own, and a strict rejection of pluralism.

---

3 "Autonomy in its individual dimension has nothing to do with separateness, anomie, individualism, or even self-sufficiency. Rather it has to do with individuals' capacities to take part in critical examinations of self and others, to participate in reasoning processes, and to arrive at judgements they can defend in public argument – capacities that are, in the end, delicate and valuable social and political achievements" (Warren 2001: 63).



- A rejection of difference and an insistence on sameness and prioritisation of the group over the individual, as well as group interests over those of the individual (“groupiness”).
- Personal coercion of and bias against people who are “different” (ethnically, politically, morally), as well as political demands for authoritative constraints on their behaviour (that is, forms of state coercion).
- Structures and mechanisms that ensure prioritisation of the group over the individual, as well as group interests over those of the individual. Such structures and mechanisms are accepted because they help to achieve uniformity, or are even actively supported because they are thought of as prudent principles for guiding social and political development (Stenner 2005: 14–20).

A list of various democracy-promoting effects that COs might produce helps us to identify such effects. The most important of these are developmental effects (for example, the development of general individual political skills and attitudes such as public speaking); public sphere effects (for example, exertion of influence on public opinion in various ways); and institutional effects (such as representation of interests or resistance to planned or made decisions) (Warren 2001: 142–205).

In our understanding of COs, we differentiate between a more general, theoretical view and a more concrete, research-related view. From a theoretical point of view, we understand COs as part of the whole societal-political complex and of societal conflicts, all of which constitute the state. This understanding includes the realisation that COs are themselves the site of societal conflicts, are part of specific practices of state power exertion, and can therefore also contribute to the maintenance of state power. However, they can also change these practices, insofar as their actions are not one-sidedly and mechanistically determined by the economic base because states are “constantly contested projects” and because a (capitalist) “state per se is characterised by compromise” (Sauer 2011: 134; our translation). For this reason, there is at least a chance of “changing and transforming the class and gender relationships” (Sauer 2011: 134; our translation).

From a more concrete research-related point of view, we use the term ‘civic organisation’ as a generic term that encompasses a whole array of various societal organisations: mass organisations (such as the Vietnam Women’s Union), professionals’ organisations (for example, the Vietnam Economic Association), business organisations (for example, the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industries, VCCI), NGOs (such as the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment,

iSEE, based in Hanoi), and faith-based organisations (for example, the Mai Linh Shelter, based in Ho Chi Minh City). In our survey, we did not include ‘voluntary associations’. These organisations are very popular in the rural areas of Vietnam. Most of the voluntary associations have no legal status and see themselves as apolitical (Dang Thi Viet Phuong 2015).

There are several reasons for choosing the term civic organisations instead of civil society organisations. First, the former does not imply any assumption about the civil society likeness and/or whether COs have civil society action-like qualities (for this approach, see Wischer-mann 2010 and 2011). In a way, it remains debatable whether the term civil society organisations can be applied to societal organisations in Vietnam and, if so, which ones. By using the term ‘civic organisation’ we avoid taking sides in this discussion. Second, the term civic organisation does not have a ‘democratic’ connotation, or any other connotation, and since our approach is fundamentally open to various developments (COs can be supporters of democracy and/or autocracies), it is much more appropriate to use this term. Third, the term civic organisation is politically neutral, which helps enable empirical research in this field in Vietnam. Fourth, the term civic organisation and the classification of Vietnamese COs that we use (differentiating between mass organisations, professionals’ organisations, business organisations, NGOs, and faith-based organisations) is built on empirical research that our team carried out in three subsequent surveys (between 1999 and 2015), exploring the political roles such organisations play, and has proven its theoretical and empirical usefulness.

## Methodological Considerations

The research proceeded in two waves. Researchers from VASS (Bui The Cuong led the Vietnamese research team comprising Nguyen Quang Vinh, Dang Thi Viet Phuong, and Nguyen Thi Minh Chau) interviewed representatives from 21 COs of various types based in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. We selected these 21 COs using the typical case sampling method and confined our research to these two cities because it is only there that we find the whole spectrum of CO types. In both cities, the same interview guidelines were used. In the first part of the survey, we explored the impact the state and other conditioning factors have on various types of COs. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted between 17 June and 15 August 2014. The second phase consisted of analysing what impact various types of COs have on various forms of

state power. In this phase we focussed on nine COs that had been interviewed during phase 1 of the survey, and supplemented the sample with one case (NGO 5). The 10 interviews of this phase were carried out between 10 February and 27 April 2015. Interviewers wrote reports in Vietnamese, which were translated into English. All citations in the next sections of this paper are citations from these (translated) reports. For obvious reasons, we have anonymised the names of the interviewed organisations and the names of their representatives. The appendix contains a list of all interviewed COs.

Methodically speaking, a fair amount of “process tracing” takes place within this case study. In the sense of “causal process observations” and “process tracing per se,” with “dense description” as the prerequisite (in the sense of Collier 2011: 823), we explore and identify the impact various forms of state power have on various types of COs and vice versa. The qualities of COs that promote authoritarianism or that promote democracy are identified through “pattern matching” and are deduced from the two criteria catalogues (see above).

## Main Findings

Before we start the presentation of the main findings, a brief explanation of Vietnam’s political system may be beneficial for some readers. Essentially, Vietnam is an authoritarian one-party state.<sup>4</sup> Since re-unification in 1975/1976, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has ruled the country alone and has not tolerated any organised opposition. In name, Vietnam is a socialist republic. Epitomising the socialist orientation is the state sector, which, according to the 2013 constitution, plays the leading role in the economy. Another essential characteristic of this “socialist orientation” is the mechanisms and principles defining the functioning of the state apparatus. Here, the Marxist-Leninist mechanism of “democratic centralism”, enshrined in the 2013 constitution, stands out. The policy of renovation (*Doi Moi*), approved at the sixth party congress in 1986, is largely confined to economic reforms. To date there has been no transition to a more democratic and pluralistic form of rule.

---

4 We understand authoritarian political system as “political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually predictable one” (Linz 2000: 159).

## COs and Infrastructural Power in General

In general, infrastructural power has a strong impact on all types of COs. We found, first, that the interviewees from various mass organisations, professionals' organisations and business organisations adhere to and apply various principles of democratic centralism. This implies, for example, that a small group of people or even a single person makes prior decisions; that the principle of "collective leadership, individual responsibility" is abided by; and that after a vote the minority must follow the opinion of the majority. Second, we found that these organisations are either directly or indirectly under the "leadership of the Party" and are firmly and solidly integrated into the political-administrative system of the Party and the state. The Communist Party – more precisely, some key figures in the Party cells in these organisations – has/have the final say in all aspects concerning the "human resources" of the respective organisations and the activities they pursue. Third, even some NGOs apply certain principles related to the State's and the Communist Party's organising principle of democratic centralism. What makes things even more remarkable is that these organisations' representatives (at least those we interviewed) seem to believe in the usefulness of such principles. There is no discernible difference between decision making in the Communist Party, the state and COs when it comes to the application of another principle related to democratic centralism – that which says that the minority follows the opinion of the majority after a decisive vote: "Once consensus is reached, everyone must be committed to follow. If someone is not satisfied, he/she must still 'follow the masses' [the collective strength]."<sup>5</sup> Almost all of the interviewed representatives of COs felt that reaching consensus was the ultimate goal of decision-making processes.

Finally, in general terms, almost all of the interviewed COs are hierarchically structured and their internal decision-making processes follow a top-down model. Here, mass organisations, professionals' organisations and business organisations stand out. However, most NGOs also have a "Direktoratsverfassung" (directorates' constitution, a term used for the French Constitution of 1795: *la Constitution de Directorat*). In those organisations, the director and/or the board of directors is the most powerful body; these people make the most important decisions.

However, in terms of intra-organisational authoritarianism there are "outliers"; an example is NGO 5, based in Hanoi. This organisation does not seem to bow to the power of the Vietnamese state, the Communist

---

5 This statement came from an NGO 4 representative.

Party, and the organisational principles related to state and Party. Suffice it to mention the experiments at this NGO with the “acting director regime” and the idea and practice of “project holders”, both mechanisms that seem suited to weakening at least some forms of intra-organisational authoritarianism. In a similar way, one can at least assume that, in NGO 1, “the opinion of the expert is considered to weigh more than the opinion of the manager.”

NGO 5 started the “acting director regime” in 2014 when it was in the process of a leadership transition. The founder and long-time director resigned in July 2015. The directorship was handed over to a successor who had filled the position of an “acting director” on two separate occasions. In order to get staff used to such a replacement, since late 2013 NGO 5 encouraged its staff:

to self-nominate for the position of the acting director for a three-month term. The goal is for people to have the opportunity to learn to operate and lead the organisation, and at the same time, to get acquainted with having a new director and still being able to maintain the organisation’s culture.

The second innovation concerns the position of the project leader. This position rotates among members of the organisation. Additionally, “accepting the position of project manager is not synonymous with higher wages, instead, it is considered a management experience learning process.”

Members of NGO 1, which is based in Ho Chi Minh City, claim that in terms of decisions a more “functional” approach is taken and that their rather hierarchical decision-making process in practice is softened by functional imperatives.

NGO 1 has a functional outline, called functional matrix in every field: project, personnel, finance [...]. There are three levels: right to participate in, right to consult, right to participate in and to make decisions. [...] In each project, we have a separate framework of management and operation to allot specific tasks. Sometimes the director becomes a junior, while the director of a project has the highest position.

What seems undeniable is that mass organisations, professionals’ organisations and business organisations (at least those we interviewed) are integrated in one way or another into the specific system of rule the CPV has erected. In those COs where there are Party cells, the Communist Party has a decisive voice in terms of decisions concerning the selection of personnel, and at least an important say in terms of activities chosen.

## COs and Infrastructural Power Called “Control through Welfare Provision”

The form of infrastructural power we call “control through welfare provision” also has a strong impact on COs. To varying extents, the involvement of COs in state programs (and, thus, their dependency on state funding) impacts the activities these organisations undertake, as well as the selection of the social groups these COs cater to. On the occasions when the state assigns single tasks to these organisations, it usually also supplies them with the budget to fulfil the tasks. Only one of the interviewed NGOs (NGO 2, based in Ho Chi Minh City) is integrated into a state-funded programme, called the National Targeted Programme. The state’s strong impact on such NGOs is detectable in an NGO 2 representative’s explanations.

The representative stressed that it is necessary to have a close relationship with the state apparatus, namely Ho Chi Minh City’s AIDS Prevention Committee: This is necessary because this Committee “assists us to look for sponsorship.” As a matter of fact this Committee decides whether a project or a program is “essential”, as the interviewee puts it. If the Committee is of the opinion that the project or program is not essential “we won’t receive the support.” NGO 2 accepts the decision of the (local) state’s agency.

Examining the potential impact that COs have on the state and this form of state power, it is striking that the (interviewed) NGOs and the (interviewed) business organisation accept and act strictly within the authoritarian and authoritarianism-promoting state-determined political structures and rules. Furthermore, these organisations support the state’s welfare policies (at least in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention, on which we focussed).<sup>6</sup> The interviewed COs neither question nor criticise the

---

6 It makes sense to focus on this policy field and the situation of PLWHIV because it is here that the Vietnamese government in the late 1990s and early 2000s faced a severe crisis as the pandemic spread. Thus, this policy field became very important to the state and the party. Moreover, it is here that we can observe a remarkable U-turn on the part of the state and the CPV. From denouncing PLWHIV as (related to) ‘social evils’ in the 1990s, state and party in 2005 shifted policies to enacting a law that stipulated that PLWHIV have ‘in-prescriptible rights’ and should be treated without any stigmatisation and discrimination at their workplace, in institutions of health care, and in schools. Sanctions were put in place against offenders of such rules and regulations. This complete turnaround was supported by many stakeholders in and outside the party and the state; for example, the National AIDS Committee, members of the Committee on Social Affairs of the National Assembly and the Ministry

existing political structures and rules (at least not openly and not in the interviews), nor do they question or criticise the policies the state stands for and/or has once pursued. Moreover, COs contribute to the widespread perception of the Vietnamese state as the most important actor in this policy field and the one who pulls the strings and keeps the AIDS pandemic at bay.

In terms of welfare policies, COs of various types help to fill the gap that the state intentionally or unintentionally leaves. COs provide services for people such as PLWHIV, sex workers, men who have sex with men (MSM) and others whom the state is not able and/or not willing to reach and to provide with services. Thus, COs relieve the state's burden. However, COs do not question and/or criticise (at least not openly and not in the interviews) the gap that the state intentionally or unintentionally leaves in terms of social welfare for various social groups.

COs contribute to the widespread perception of the Vietnamese state as the most important actor in this policy field. They do not criticise the discrepancy between the position the state claims and, for example, the support for and funding of various activities, not only COs', in the field of prevention of and care for PLWHIV. Here, the lack of state funding for activities of NGOs in this policy field stands out.

Insofar as some NGOs support the development of citizens' individual and collective self-determination and autonomy, and insofar as they help to present alternatives to the dominant politics and policies, such activities support further democratisation. However, interviewed COs' representatives made it clear that if and insofar as they pursue such activities, they do so in an indirect way and without explicitly criticising any state politics and policies. Here, the statement from NGO 1's representative is instructive. Initially the representative rejects the idea that this CO, for example, uses a rights-based approach. In practice, however, NGO 1 would apply such an approach. However:

---

of Labour, Invalid and Social Affairs. Furthermore, international donors played a crucial role. However, the turnaround was finally achieved when the Central Ideology and Culture Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 2005 issued Directive No. 54-CT/TW. In this directive (which did not mention the term 'social evils' or that idea) the party committee, amongst others, explicitly suggested that the state should develop measures to 'prevent stigma and discrimination towards PLWHA'. This complete turnaround from all former positions was precipitated and supported by a close co-operation between the Central Committee's National Ideology and Culture Department and experts from local NGOs. For details, see Wischermann (2011: 400–405).

we do not call it rights-based approach, although in fact it is that. NGO 1 always regards the rights as the base to assist our activities [...] but NGO 1 does not call it rights-based, because this is very rude.

They also pursue the aim of self-empowerment of PLWHIV and other social minority members:

NGO 1 enhances [...] self-empowerment. [...] I think we do all we can for clients, including immigrant workers in factories, patients and sex-workers, who are put in the centre in projects related to HIV/AIDS.

However, the interviewee also stressed that, in discussions with state officials,

NGO 1 does not want to put the state agencies as well as target groups on the opposite side. We must stay on the same side. [...] If a state agency, the police, or any other organization opposes, we will invite them to participate in the discussion, at which we will share ideas, opinions, and will communicate and listen to each other in order to achieve mutual understanding. We all should look in the same direction. If the way of criticism is not smart, it will lead to confrontation. [...] All methods we have used are critical in nature, but we never use that word. In the context of present politics, I do not want to put NGO 1 at risk.

## COs and Infrastructural Power Called “Control through Limited Participation”

Analysing the impact that infrastructural power called “control through limited participation” has on COs, it is noticeable that there is an intense cooperation between the state and certain professionals’ organisations and business organisations. It seems that this cooperation that the state supports mainly, but not exclusively, benefits the state: the collaboration between these COs and the state helps to embed the state further in society. However, COs also benefit from the intensified cooperation in a way, as it helps them to improve their performance in terms of activities, services offered, etc. Here, a representative’s statement from Business Organisation 3, based in Hanoi, is instructive:

In the consultation on state policies related to businesses and trade, Business Organisation 3 better communicates the needs and aspirations of the businesses to the state. At the same time, its participation in the activities of the government (policy consultation,



trade negotiations) helps Business Organisation 3 to have access to and update information and policies, which in turn helps better serving the training courses and information provision programmes which Business Organisation 3 holds for businesses. The participation in the policy-making process does not only encourage Business Organisation 3 to perform new activities, but it helps Business Organisation 3 to do its current jobs better and to improve the quality and reputation of the services it provides. (Business Organisation 3 a)

These empirical findings can be further refined when we examine the impact that COs such as Business Organisations 2 and 3 and Professionals' Organisation 1 have on the state and on this form of state power. Our interviews show that those organisations not only accept the political structures and the state's invitation to work within those structures, but that they are also strongly engaged in helping to improve policies (especially, but not exclusively as regards the promotion of SMEs) formulated and decided within those structures. Over time, these organisations have gained a favourable position in those policy formulation processes, and the state has rewarded them for their contribution to improving policies through various means.

In terms of support for SMEs, one of the most important activities of Business Organisation 3 has been its contribution to the development of the Law on Enterprises. The process of amending this law has been cumbersome and:

has been going on for many years. Since the 1990s, Business Organisation 3 has attended the drafting processes of the Law on Enterprises. [...] The process of making the Law was very difficult [...]. At that time [the 1990s; authors' note], thinking of and accepting a private sector was difficult for state officials [...] due to the conflicts between the deeply ingrained thinking in terms of "Ask-and-Give" mechanisms and the new ways of thinking in terms of "openness"; for example, as regards the registration of enterprises. [...] Business Organisation 3 articulated and communicated the problems the community of enterprises had with practical constraints, which was a motivation for reform, although this would put more pressure on [...] the Government. [...] During three rounds of improvements [1999, 2005, 2014; authors' note] Business Organisation 3 achieved a lot of improvements for the business community; for example, the abandonment of hundreds of business permits (in 2005), first changes (in 2005) and finally the abandonment (in 2014) of the so-called certificate of investment registration, improvements as regards regulations concerning

the market entry for SMEs, etc. [...] in recent years [...] the law was approved quickly and received a high degree of consensus [among members of the Law Editing Team and among members of the National Assembly; authors' note]. The law has the consent of the National Assembly, especially from the Chairman of Parliament: a stark contrast to the difficult situation that existed in 2000 and 2005.

All in all, Business Organisation 3 has “examined 16 laws, including the Law on Investment and the Law on Enterprises” (Business Organisation 3 b).

Business organisations like Business Organisation 2 and 3 and professionals' organisation such as Professionals' Organisation 1 enjoy a favourable position within the political-administrative system. These organisations are involved in the final stages of decision-making processes taking place in the National Assembly and/or in committees and councils at the city level. Furthermore, since 2008 Business Organisation 3 has been responsible for collecting the opinions of SMEs regarding various new laws and for transmitting these opinions to the state. Since 2012, Business Organisation 3 has also represented the business community vis-à-vis the state in terms of transnational negotiations. Professionals' Organisation 1, as an umbrella organisation, represents, guides, and leads various organisations of businessmen based in Ho Chi Minh City.

The state strongly supports all three organisations. The state pays for the staff and the offices of Business Organisation 2 and 3 and also for the cars these organisations use; in the case of Professionals' Organisation 1 the state pays for the headquarters and the cars and provides funds for paying specialised party and managerial personnel, and also for administrative staff, drivers, guards, etc. (the money for the latter comes from state budgets for permanent activities, paid on an annual basis).

However, the processes of policy formulation and the processes of decision-making are under the firm control of the Communist Party, which is the real decision-maker. Interviewees from Business Organisation 3 and Professionals' Organisation 1 made it abundantly clear who really makes the final decisions:

[...] the opinion of the Party leaders is the most important (Business Organisation 3 a); because there are the Party and the Union present at Professionals' Organisation 1, everything has to go through the Party and the Union first. [...] the Party and the Union are the comprehensive leaders, so they determine the direction

and orientation, both for human resources and activities (Professionals' Organisation 1).<sup>7</sup>

## COs and Discursive Power

Gender equality and women's rights are essential for a socialist state and a communist party ruling this state. There are various ideological and historical reasons for this (including the general idea that women's liberation is closely tied to the struggle for socialism; that socialism implies full gender equality; and, in the case of Vietnam, the great significance of women in the fight against colonial and imperialist powers and for the re-unification of the country). Therefore, Vietnam's constitution (2013) recognises gender equality and prohibits gender-based discrimination. Exploring the issue of rights of sexual minorities, and especially the discussion on marriage equality (which started in 2007/2008), is also rewarding. This is because these issues became important to the state and the party since achievements on these policy fields brought benefits to the state (and the party). Vietnam could have been the first state in Southeast Asia to recognise marriage equality, and through changes in this policy field Vietnam aimed to improve its international reputation regarding its human rights records. Moreover, in terms of rights for sexual minorities the Vietnamese state and the CPV revised their position, at least in a comparable way as they have done vis-à-vis PLWHIV. It is worth noting again that these changes occurred because of the influence exerted by actors outside the state and the party; in this case the social movement of LGBT and a network of COs (for details see Faludi 2016).<sup>8</sup> Thus, apart from more general theoretical reasons (saying that

---

7 In this context 'union' means the leadership of Professionals' Organisation 1; that is, the Steering Committee of this organisation. This committee is the leader of all business organisations that are members of Professionals' Organisation 1. Of course, the Party leads this steering committee. Therefore, the interviewee says that the Party and the union are leading this organisation (that is, the associations whose members are organised in this association).

8 In the 1990s, state policies and the public discourse saw homosexuality as a disease that was closely associated with the outbreak and spread of the AIDS epidemic and with crime; however, these views and related policies changed in the 2010s. The revision of the Marriage and Family law (enacted 2014) and the aim of the Vietnamese government to gain a seat in the United Nation's Human Rights Council (achieved in 2015) opened a political opportunity for the LGBT movement and a network of NGOs. They used this opportunity to start a creative campaign that aimed to change the public's perception of LGBT in the long term and achieve marriage equality in the short term: "The downplaying of sexuality, the accentuation of homophilia, shared values, the strive for

the exertion of discursive power by the state in the form of a sustained influence on gender norms and gender relationships is not at all coincidental, because gender is a crucial component in the field of state hegemony; see 2 above), the policy field of gender equality, women's rights and rights of sexual minorities is important to the socialist (Vietnamese) state and the Communist Party, and those issues are very suitable subjects for the examination of the influence state's discursive power has on COs and vice versa.

Based on our survey's rather limited empirical foundation, we argue that the Vietnamese state's discursive power in the field of gender equality, women's rights and rights of sexual minorities is not as strong as its infrastructural power, and that there might be a difference in the state's impact (as far as its discursive power in this policy field is concerned) on different types of COs – namely, some NGOs and faith-based organisations on the one hand, and mass organisations, business organisations and professionals' organisations on the other.

Most interviewees saw similarities between their organisation's position on gender equality and the state's position, but only one stated that the state exerts a direct influence on that particular group's conception of women and that the state impacts what her CO is doing in terms of gender equality. Other interviewees' statements (from an NGO and from a faith-based organisation) clearly and openly rejected any influence of the state on their conception of women and their understanding of women's roles in politics and society. These organisations maintain positions that are different from the party's and the state's positions, or at least imply a critical distance from the Party and the state.

In their statements, the representatives of the Faith-based Organisation 1 in Ho Chi Minh City rejected any state influence on what they think and do in terms of gender equality. They referred to the principle that men and women are equal in every respect. Here, the sisters did see similarities between the state's conception of women and the shelter's conception. However, in terms of a potential state influence on what their organisation thinks and does, "there are only overlaps, there is no influence." Another Sister added that, in her view, the Vietnamese state is only echoing what Catholics have believed in for centuries:

---

love and happy family life became pivots of the positive image the movement and NGO networks attempted to build" (Faludi 2016: 93). However, the result of this campaign was moderate. The new Marriage and Family Law decriminalized same-sex marriages but did not legally acknowledge them. The extent to which changes in public perception of LGBT have been achieved remains to be seen.

We are nuns, very open and loving, and we respect human dignity [...]. For those who do not know, they consider acting in a way based on respect for human dignity, it seems, as if this is given by the state, as if the state gives them light. But for us, this is normal. God has taught us that the sick and the women must be respected just like everyone else; they must not be treated with disdain. Therefore, the state's idea is nothing new to us.

The next issue is how COs impact the state and this form of state power, and whether which types of COs support and/or criticise the state discourse on and state policies in the field of gender equality, women's rights and rights of sexual minorities. In this regard, the interviews suggest that one part of the Vietnamese COs (Mass Organisation 3) supports the state, whereas a different part (some NGOs) support but also criticise the state discourse and state's policies in this policy field. Support comes from NGOs, for example, regarding a complete ban of domestic violence and that "housework is considered an income-generating job." Adequate legal clauses regarding both issues have been added to the new Law on Marriage and Family, discussed and enacted in 2014. Regarding the issue of same-sex marriage however, strong differences have emerged based on principles between Mass Organisation 3, probably the majority of National Assembly members, state and Party representatives, on one hand, and some NGOs on the other hand. It is here that fundamental differences arise regarding concepts and the fundamental understanding of gender, gender norms, and gender relations. The interviewed NGOs do not share Mass Organisation 3's basically biologicistic and essentialist understanding of gender, and they reject one general type of gender system.

The Hanoi-based NGO 4 does not intend to build a common image of women:

The image of women varies according to groups; it also varies according to the groups that NGO 4 supports. For example, there is the group of women entrepreneurs, women who have been abused, or women who have been the victim of human trafficking. [In its work; authors' note] NGO 4 identifies different outputs depending on the [various; authors' note] target groups.

The above quotation suggests that NGO 4 follows the idea, represented for example in feminist studies, that uses the intersectionality approach; that is, that there is an interplay of race, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, class, and gender that results in multiple dimensions of disadvantage if not

oppression. Thus, in NGO 4's and potentially other NGOs' view, there cannot be a common image of women.

NGO 5 goes one step further and moves past the male–female gender binary. NGO 5 sees straight men and women, lesbians, gay, transsexuals, etc. as different, but nevertheless equal in terms of their rights:

When NGO 5 talks about equality and diversity, this implies that differences should be respected. This also applies to gender differences; male and female, for example. However, NGO 5 sees those differences in its diversity, such as there are males and females, transgender people, lesbians, gays, straight men, etc. Thus, NGO 5 sees differences, but such differences also exist among men [...] and [...] among women [...]. Therefore, [...] the idea of NGO 5 moves past the male–female gender binary, and at the same time NGO 5 is looking at men and women, gay and lesbians, etc. as elements of a whole. While doing so, it becomes important that everyone has a right to be treated equally. NGO 5 opinions are quite open and not framed by the fact that a person is male or female.

In stark contrast to those NGOs' rejections of a single general type of gender system, Mass Organisation 3, as well as probably the majority of National Assembly members and state and Communist Party representatives, have a biologicistic and essentialist understanding of gender, and they are strongly in favour of *one* general type of gender system:

[...] people think that equality is that men and women are same. However, there are biological differences that determine a difference between men and women. Men have a wrong awareness of such differences, so they do not share the responsibility with women as regards the family. Women unintentionally put more responsibility on their shoulders. This viewpoint of women originates from the natural characteristics of female's vocation of mother. (Mass Organisation 3 b)

Mass Organisation 3's interviewees make the same biologicistic and essentialist argument regarding gays and lesbians. They distinguish between those who have been born with one gender's reproductive organs but appear to be a member of the opposite gender, and those who are absolutely 'normal' in their reproductive organs and their appearance, but whose mentality is oriented towards the opposite sex (as the interviewee put it): "This implies that their [the latter; authors' note] gender identity is determined mentally, not biologically. The population of LGBT in Vietnam includes both sorts of people" (Mass Organisation 3 b). The

interviewees of the Mass Organisation 3 suggest that only members of the group with “biological specifics”, if not “deviations”, are “true” gays or lesbians. They are suited for the institution of marriage, although the interviewees’ feel that the laws should not recognise this, at least not yet. One interviewee argued that for those who feel their gender identity does not match their sex, this might be just a way of living or following a new trend among the youth today: “Parts of the youth are excitable, they live according to trends” (Mass Organisation 3 b).

## Discussion of the Findings

In what follows, we discuss the above-described empirical findings regarding the main question of this paper; that is, are Vietnamese COs supporters of and/or obstacles to further democratisation? We will answer this question in the concluding section. Our respective assessments are based on the use of two criteria sets named above (see ‘Theoretical Framework’ above). Essentially, we assume that collective and individual self-determination and autonomy are at the core of what democracy is about. Authoritarianism, however, repudiates individual self-determination and autonomy and strictly negates the supremacy of the individual over a group or a system. A list of four patterns of authoritarianism and of various democracy-promoting effects that COs might produce helps us to identify the respective effects.

Concerning the interdependencies between the state’s infrastructural power (in general) on intra-organisational decision-making processes and COs, Vietnamese COs of all types succumb to this form of infrastructural power (in the general sense of “control of society”). Although this happens to a varying extent and though there are exceptions to this rule, most Vietnamese COs have structures and mechanisms in place, which ensure the prioritisation of the group and its interests over the individual and his or her interests. There is a certain rejection of difference and insistence and prioritisation of what can be called “groupiness” (for example, when they make use of the mechanism ‘minority follows majority’ after a decision has been made). Thus, we find an intra-organisational authoritarianism. In terms of intra-organisational decision-making processes, some individual skills and attitudes (public speaking, for example) and maybe some pre-civic virtues (reciprocity, trust, and self-respect) might be acquired under such conditions, although this will happen only to a certain extent. However, knowing how and when to strike a compromise and the acquisition of critical thinking abilities (particularly the ability to deal with conflicts and criticism) are probably not found

very often, if at all. This suggests that most Vietnamese COs are not “schools of democracy” (to use Tocqueville’s famous dictum). However, there are exceptions to this rule, such as NGO 5, based in Hanoi.

With respect to the interdependencies between the infrastructural power of the state, which we call “control through welfare provision,” and COs, the empirical facts suggest that most if not all of the interviewed COs not only act within the authoritarian state’s structures, but also refrain from articulating critique and offering alternatives to those politics and policies (at least openly and in the interviews). Presumably, this is because of the strength of this form of state power. The acceptance of structures and policies implies that COs engaged in this policy field generally help to support the very substance of authoritarianism; that is, the negation of collective and individual self-determination and autonomy.

However, some NGOs undertake carefully crafted steps to support PLWHIV and other people who are stigmatised in politics and society (such as sex workers, MSM, etc.). They make use of and practice rights-based approaches (which put the individual at the centre) and they support those people’s self-empowerment processes. Such NGOs help to strengthen processes that support the development of collective and individual self-determination and autonomy, core elements of processes leading towards democratisation. These COs’ practices might help engaged people, both inside and outside these organisations, to develop pre-civic virtues (reciprocity, trust, self-respect). These NGOs might even exert a certain influence on the public by emphasising the depiction of commonalities between ‘affected’ parties and the general public, thereby potentially helping to change the public’s view of ‘those people’. Finally, these COs might even carry out and take over roles and responsibilities that enable greater participation of persons concerned (such as community-based organisations) and enhance state agencies’ responsiveness vis-à-vis affected people. However, since they undertake activities that might have democracy-promoting effects on the premise that they do not lead to any conflicts with the authorities, and since they explicitly do not intend ‘to put the state agencies as well as target groups on the opposite side’ (as an NGO 1 representative put it), such democracy-promoting effects might be very limited, if they develop at all.

With regard to the interdependencies between infrastructural power (known as ‘control through limited participation’) and COs, the initial empirical results are somewhat ambivalent in terms of whether business and professionals’ organisations (such as Business Organisation 2 and 3 and Professionals’ Organisation 1) develop democracy promoting effects



or whether they help to stabilise the existing authoritarian political system. On one hand the data analysis suggests that these organisations' activities produce democracy-promoting institutional effects (such as the representation of certain interests or resistance to decisions, both planned and made), although this happens within certain limits. Furthermore, those COs carry out/take over roles and responsibilities that enable greater participation and responsiveness. We would even assume that members of those selected COs develop general individual political skills and attitudes (such as public speaking, learning from negotiations, etc.), and develop pre-civic virtues such as trust and self-respect. Additionally, those COs' activities might have some public sphere effects since they influence at least a certain public. Thus, these organisations perform activities that lead to democracy-promoting effects.

On the other hand – and in our view, this is decisive – those activities are examples of “limited participation” (Selznick 1949), and they lead to the co-optation of those COs. In a general sense, the strategy of inviting professionals' and business organisations to participate in and contribute to discussions of economic policies at various venues can be seen as part of a strategy by the state to concentrate the representation of certain social sectors in the hands of selected COs, which serve as monopolised channels for transmitting the demands of these social sectors to the state. The state uses Business Organisations 2 and 3 and Professionals' Organisation 1 to control the representation and transmission of professionals' and entrepreneurs' demands, and to alleviate potential pressure that might come from those social strata. The decision about who should be brought into policy-determining structures and who should have access to venues where fundamental decisions on politics and policies are made is left to the ruling Party and its decision-making bodies. Thus, the interviewed business and professionals' organisations help to legitimise decisions taken in opaque Party structures. Furthermore, through their positive engagement within the given political structures, they help to subject various business organisations (for example, those organised in Professionals' Organisation 1) to decisions of the 'Party/State' (as the amalgamation of the state and the Communist Party is called in Vietnam). In the case of Professionals' Organisation 1, it might even be that these COs' activities help to limit the room that organisations working under this umbrella have to manoeuvre, if not to curb their autonomy and self-determination and that of their members.

Finally, in respect to the interdependencies between the state's discursive power and COs in the area of gender equality, women's rights and rights of sexual minorities, Mass Organisation 3 and NGOs general-

ly support women's collective and individual self-determination and autonomy. Women active in Mass Organisation 3 might develop democracy-promoting qualities such as general political skills, aptitude in public speaking and the ability to learn from negotiations. Mass Organisation 3 clearly influences the public through the development of specific framing and exerts influence on public opinion by emphasising the depiction of contrasts (for example, between affected women and the general public). Finally, this organisation represents certain interests. However, such democracy-promoting effects have clear limits. This is mainly, but not only, due to Mass Organisation 3's biologicistic and essentialist understanding of gender. In their representatives' view, women's role is unchangeable due to biological specifics, and bodily differences determine that women should be caregivers, mothers, peacemaker at home, etc. This clearly restricts women's self-determination and autonomy.

Moreover, at least the interviewed representatives from Mass Organisation 3 reject equal rights for LGBT and their position vis-à-vis LGBT unveils patterns of authoritarianism. They show a lack of tolerance vis-à-vis those who diverge from their and their organisation's view; show a bias against people who are 'different'; and they reject the idea and practice of difference and insist on sameness. Finally, Mass Organisation 3, as an integral part of the Communist Party's system of rule, plays its role within this system and helps to legitimise policies and political decisions in the policy field of gender equality, women's rights, and rights of sexual minorities. These policies are made by the 'Party/State' and usually are made in an authoritarian manner. Thus, we can summarise that Mass Organisation 3's position and activities in the fields of gender equality, women's rights and rights of sexual minorities are linked to some democracy-promoting effects, but that these effects are more than offset by activities that lead to the negation of women's self-determination and autonomy, and thus authoritarianism-preserving effects.

The interviewed NGOs' positions and activities in this policy field can be relatively clearly and consistently linked to the support of democracy-promoting effects, insofar as the positions the interviewees articulate are thought of as supporting collective and individual self-determination and autonomy of women. We would even be cautiously optimistic regarding the possibility that members of those (interviewed) NGOs develop some individual political skills (public speaking and learning from negotiations) and appropriate pre-civic virtues (reciprocity, trust, self-respect). Finally, it is safe, in our opinion, to assume that members of those interviewed NGOs have the opportunity to acquire

critical thinking abilities, and that those NGO's positions and activities help to:

- influence the public through the development of specific framing;
- exert influence on public opinion by emphasising the depiction of contrasts (for example, through the creation of a counter-public discourse) and through emphasising the depiction of commonalities between affected parties and the general public;
- represent certain interests;
- show resistance to decisions planned by the 'Party/State'.

## Conclusion

We conclude this paper by answering the question of whether Vietnamese COs could be seen as supporters of or obstacles to further democratisation and, if so, which ones. The answer to this question is derived from the thick description above and the subsequent analysis of the interdependent and reciprocally influential relations between COs and four forms of state power in the area of intra-organisational decision-making and three policy fields. We put the following conclusions briefly into the broader context of sociological and political science research on the role of COs in the Vietnamese and other authoritarian political systems. We stress that these concluding remarks are theses that need to be verified and/or falsified in further research.

Seen from the perspective of intra-organisational decision-making processes, most Vietnamese COs are hierarchically structured, if not organised in an authoritarian way. In the sense of Tocqueville, they are not "schools of democracy". There are exceptions to this rule, namely some NGOs, but we assume them to be a tiny minority. Thus, the results from this survey validate the findings of Wischermann (2013) and Wischermann et al. (2015), but also those of Hai Hong Nguyen (2014: 154). These authors claim that Vietnamese COs have serious deficits regarding democratic standards in terms of intra-organisational decision-making processes. Thus, the results of our survey could dampen the hopes of those who see Vietnamese COs as sites where meaningful participative democracy is learned (e.g., Bui Hai Thiem 2013: 93).

Most Vietnamese COs that are engaged in the welfare provision sector, either willingly or unwillingly, help to foster the foundations of authoritarianism. This means that whether they intend to or not, these organisations help to negate citizens' individual and collective self-determination and autonomy. Thus, they could be called obstacles to

further democratisation. However, there are NGOs that very cautiously undertake steps that might help the development of democracy-promoting effects. In view of the threatening power of this form of infrastructural power, these COs place so many restrictions on themselves that they can at best be called potential supporters of further democratisation. The assumption that Vietnamese NGOs, especially those that deliver services to the public, are apolitical and closely related to if not befriended with the state (Thayer 2009; Wischermann et al. 2015: 28), might be true in some sense or to some extent. However, statements based on this assumption should be made only with further specifications.

Business organisations and professionals' organisations such as Business Organisation 2 and 3 and Professionals' Organisation 1 are not agents of further democratisation. Although they help to change various economic policies and although their activities produce some democracy-promoting effects, these organisations overall help to secure existing power structures and help to secure those in power. Therefore, they can be assessed as obstacles to further democratisation. In our view, the widespread assumption among modernisation theorists that the business organisations and organisations of professionals built by the middle class help to promote democracy – at least at a certain point of socio-economic and political development of authoritarian regimes – needs modification. More consideration should be given to the interests that those organisations represent *and* to the fact that many authoritarian regimes have the means to pacify those strata and keep them under the state's thumb without using force. With regard to the effectiveness of the means used for the integration of these organisations, various surveys on co-optation (such as Selznick 1949) are relevant. These surveys show that the pacifying effect of processes of co-optation is not confined to democracies, but is also highly effective in autocracies.

In the policy field of gender equality, women's rights, and rights of sexual minorities, Mass Organisation 3 can be called an obstacle to further democratisation. Although this organisation's positions and activities help to develop some democracy-promoting effects, these effects are eclipsed by that organisation's fundamental understanding of gender, its position of principle regarding the rights of sexual minorities, and its role as a mass organisation under the leadership of and within the system of rule of the Communist Party. By contrast, some NGOs active in this policy field can be considered supporters of further democratisation.

Overall, there is no simple and straightforward answer to the leading question of this paper, and there is no one type of CO that, without

further qualification, can be called a supporter of *or* an obstacle to further democratisation. However, there are indications for the validity of the assumption that NGOs in some policy fields already play or at least have the potential to play the role of agent of further democratic change.

Our research confirms that research on COs should not start from the assumption that these organisations are supporters of democracy *or* supporters of authoritarian rule. It is more fruitful to see them as “poly-valent,” as Kößler (1994) once put it, and to analyse their role using a relational perspective.

## References

- Bebbington, Antony J., Samuel Hickey, and Diana C. Mitlin (2008), Introduction, in: Antony J. Bebbington, Samuel Hickey, and Diana C. Mitlin (eds), *Can NGOs Make a Difference? The Challenge of Development Alternatives*, London: Zed, 3–37.
- Berman, Sheri (2003), Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society, in: *Perspectives on Politics*, 1, 2, 257–272, online: <carnegiendowment.org/pdf/files/berman.pdf> (8 July 2016).
- Bui, Hai Thiem (2013), Pluralism Unleashed: The Politics of Reforming the Vietnamese Constitution, in: *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 9, 4, 1–32.
- Carroll, William K., and Jean Philippe Sapinski (2015), Transnational Alternative Policy: Groups in Global Civil Society: Enablers of Post-Capitalist Alternatives or Carriers of NGOization?, in: *Critical Sociology*, online first, 3 June, 1–18, online: <crs.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/06/01/0896920515589004.full.pdf+html> (8 July 2016).
- Cavatorta, Francesco (2013), Civil Society Activism under Authoritarian Constraints, in: Francesco Cavatorta (ed.), *Civil Society Activism under Authoritarian Rule*, London: Routledge, 1–12.
- Collier, David (2011), Understanding Process Tracing, in: *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 44, 4, 823–830.
- Dang, Thi Viet Phuong (2015), *The Collective Life. The Sociology of Voluntary Associations in North Vietnamese Rural Areas*, Hanoi: Vietnam National University Press.
- Edwards, Bob, and Michael W. Foley (1996), The Paradox of Civil Society, in: *Journal of Democracy*, 7, 3, 38–52.
- Faludi, Laura (2016), *The Vietnamese LGBT Movement and the Media. Framing and re-Framing Homosexuality in Vietnamese Public and Media Dis-*

- courses*, wissenschaftliche Hausarbeit zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades eines Masters of Arts der Universität Hamburg.
- Gladius, Marlies, and Armine Ishkanian (2014), Surreptitious Symbiosis: Engagement between Activists and NGOs, in: *Voluntas*, December 2015 (first online: 25 November 2014), 26, 6, 2620–2644, online: <<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11266-014-9531-5>> (8 July 2016).
- Göbel, Christian (2011), Authoritarian Consolidation, in: *European Political Science*, 11, 176–190.
- Hyden, Goran (2010), Civil Society in Africa: Constraints and Opportunities for Democratic Change, in: Cheema G. Shabbir and Vesselin Popowski (eds), *Engaging Civil Society. Emerging Trends in Democratic Governance*, Tokyo, New York, Paris: United Nations University Press, 249–264.
- Köbler, Reinhart (1994), *Postkoloniale Staaten. Elemente eines Bezugsrahmens*, Hamburg: Deutsches Übersee-Institut.
- Linz, Juan F. (2000), *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes. With a Major New Introduction*, Boulder/Colorado, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Mann, Michael (1984), The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results, in: *Archives européennes de sociologie*, 25, 185–213.
- Nguyen, Hai Hong (2014), Political Parties, Civil Society and Citizen Movements in Vietnam, in: Hanns Seidel Foundation, Asia Europe Foundation, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2014 (eds), *Political Parties and Citizen Movements in Asia and Europe*, Bangkok: IDEA, 141–159, online: <[www.idea.int/publications/political-parties-and-citizen-movements/](http://www.idea.int/publications/political-parties-and-citizen-movements/)> (8 July 2016).
- Roth, Roland (2004), Die dunklen Seiten der Zivilgesellschaft. Grenzen einer zivilgesellschaftlichen Fundierung der Demokratie, in: Ansgar Klein, Kristine Kern, Brigitte Geißel, and Maria Berger (eds), *Zivilgesellschaft und Sozialkapital. Herausforderungen politischer und sozialer Integration*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 41–64.
- Sauer, Birgit (2011), “Only paradoxes to offer?” – Feministische Demokratie- und Repräsentationstheorie in der „Postdemokratie“, in: *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, 40, 2, 125–138.
- Sauer, Birgit (2001), *Die Asche des Souveräns. Staat und Demokratie in der Geschlechterdebatte*, Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag.
- Selznick, Philip (1949), *TVA and the Grass Roots. A Study in the Sociology of Formal Organization*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Stenner, Karen (2005), *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Thayer, Carlyle A. (2009), Vietnam and the Challenge of Political Civil Society, in: *Contemporary Southeast Asia. A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 31, 1, 1–27.
- Warren, Mark E. (2001), *Democracy and Association*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wischermann, Jörg (2013), *Civic Organizations in Vietnam's One-Party State: Supporters of Authoritarian Rule?*, Hamburg: GIGA Working Papers, 228, July, online: <[www.giga-hamburg.de/de/publication/civic-organizations-in-vietnams-one-party-state-supporters-of-authoritarian-rule](http://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/publication/civic-organizations-in-vietnams-one-party-state-supporters-of-authoritarian-rule)> (8 July 2016).
- Wischermann, Jörg (2011), Governance and Civil Society Action in Vietnam. Changing the Rules from Within – Potentials and Limits, in: *Asian Politics and Policies*, 3, 3, 383–411.
- Wischermann, Jörg (2010), Civil Society Action and Governance in Vietnam: Selected Findings from an Empirical Survey, in: *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 29, 2, 3–40, online: <<http://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jsaa/article/view/260/260>> (5 August 2016).
- Wischermann, Jörg, Bui The Cuong, Nguyen Quang Vinh, Dang Thi Viet Phuong, and Nguyen Thi Minh Chau (2015), *Under the State's Thumb. Results from an Empirical Survey on Civic Organizations in Vietnam*, Hamburg: GIGA Working Papers, 276, July, online: <[www.giga-hamburg.de/de/publication/results-from-an-empirical-survey-of-civic-organizations-in-of-civic-organizations-in-vietnam](http://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/publication/results-from-an-empirical-survey-of-civic-organizations-in-of-civic-organizations-in-vietnam)> (8 July 2016).

## Appendix

### List of Cited Interviews and Dates

#### Mass Organisations

Mass Organisation 3: Headquarter of a Mass Organisation addressing women's rights, gender issues, and family affairs, based in Hanoi, 12 August 2014 (Mass Organisation 3 a); 27 April 2015 (Mass Organisation 3 b).

#### Professionals' Organisations

Professionals' Organisation 1: An umbrella organisation of businessmen, based in Ho Chi Minh City, 11 July 2014; 24 April 2015.

#### NGOs

NGO 1: An NGO working in the field of prevention of HIV/Aids and care for PLWHIV, based in Ho Chi Minh City, 4 July 2014; 3 April 2015.

NGO 2: An NGO working in the field of prevention of and care for PLWHIV, based in Ho Chi Minh City, 20 July 2014; 30 March 2015.

NGO 4: An NGO working in the field of gender issues, women's rights and family affairs, based in Hanoi, 4 July 2014; 24 April 2015.

NGO 5: An NGO engaged in the field of gender issues, rights of sexual and ethnic minorities, based in Hanoi, 10 February 2015.

#### Business Organisations

Business Organisation 2: Local chapter of a nationwide operating business organisation promoting (amongst others) the support of SMEs, based in Ho Chi Minh City, 18 June 2014.

Business Organisation 3: Headquarter of a nationwide operating business organisation promoting (amongst others) the support of SMEs (Business Organisation 3 a), based in Hanoi, 1 July 2014; legal department of a nationwide operating business organisation promoting (amongst others) the support of SMEs (Business Organisation 3 b), based in Hanoi, 4 March 2015; 5 March 2015.



## Faith-based Organisations

Faith-based Organisation 1: A shelter for young pregnant women, based in Ho Chi Minh City, 17 July 2014.