




The State in a Capitalist Society: Protests and State Reactions in Vietnam and Indonesia

Jörg Wischermann^a , Thi Viet Phuong Dang^b  and George Martin Sirait^c 

^aInstitute for Asian Studies, German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Hamburg, Germany; ^bInstitute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam; ^cDepartment of Business Administration, Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

When, how, and why do states take what kind of action vis-à-vis protests? This article tackles these under-researched questions with respect to Vietnam and Indonesia. The theoretical frame applied focusses on the state–society nexus and in-built biases of the capitalist state and its actions. It draws on Poulantzas’ idea of the state as a material condensation of the relationship of social forces as well as on Jessop’s “strategic-relational approach” and his concept of the “state in a capitalist society.” The method used is Protest Event Analysis, using data for 2016 and 2017 from four Indonesian and Vietnamese newspapers. This is complemented by data drawn from various newspapers on protests and state reactions for the period 2018–2020. The focussed theory frame used helps to explain similarities and differences of state reactions in Indonesia and Vietnam. Both states may govern protest in slightly different ways. Ultimately, however, both those states’ reactions indicate strong similarities in that they serve to maintain existing patterns of political, economic, and socio-cultural domination and the accumulation of capital as the very basis of the capitalist economy. To put these tentative findings to the test, longer-term data and cross-regional comparisons on state reactions to protests should be used.

KEY WORDS

Vietnam; Indonesia; protest; state in a capitalist society; protest event analysis

When, how, and most importantly, why the state takes which kind of action in relation to protest is an under-researched topic. This holds true for Vietnam-related studies and, to a lesser degree, those devoted to Indonesia. This under-researching has to do with the fact that very few analyses conceptualise Vietnam as a capitalist society and a capitalist state, whereas Indonesia is commonly conceptualised in this manner.

This has consequences. Many analyses of Indonesia’s recent past and present start from a very close, sometimes even theory-based understanding of the relationship between politics, economy, and culture, and embed reactions of the Indonesian state vis-à-vis societal demands in such theoretical and political contexts. Such close relationships

CONTACT Jörg Wischermann  wischermann@giga-hamburg.de  Institute for Asian Studies, German Institute for Global and Area Studies, Neuer Jungfernstieg 21, Hamburg, 20354, Germany

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– let alone assumed causalities as regards the relationship between politics (the state) and the economy. Meanwhile, with exceptions like the works of Fforde and Gainsborough, one usually searches in many Vietnam-related studies of politics and economics in vain for such attention. And they are almost completely missing as far as primarily empirical work on the relationship between the Vietnamese state and protest in the country is concerned. Kerkvliet's (2019) book makes this shortcoming all too clear: his publication, though exceptionally rich in empirical evidence, does not allow conclusions to be drawn as to when, how and, most importantly, why the Vietnamese state reacts to what kind of protest.

This article seeks to contribute to closing this research gap. To move forward, a theoretically informed concept of the state–protest nexus, Jessop's (2016) “the state in a capitalist society” and of relevant state reactions vis-à-vis protest, is employed. Guided by Rueschemeyer's (2009) “focused theory frame” and using Protest Event Analysis (PEA), data were generated from local newspapers on protest and state reactions in Indonesia and Vietnam for 2016–2017 and compiled into a data set. Also used were individual data concerning the continuation of protest and state reactions in two policy areas, infrastructure and ecology, from various newspapers for the period 2018–2020.

The analysis and interpretation of the resulting data are designed to provide a tentative confirmation of the leading hypothesis which runs as follows: Vietnam and Indonesia's respective states may govern protest in different ways and reactions vis-à-vis protest may, at times, differ to a certain extent. But both states' reactions nevertheless indicate similarities, if not sameness, because both are “states in a capitalist society.” They have in common that their reactions are intended to help maintain existing patterns of political, economic, and socio-cultural domination and the accumulation of capital – the latter the very basis of the capitalist economy.

States in Capitalist Societies: Theoretical Reflections

No fixed and closed theoretical framework is employed in this article. Rather, the investigation is based on a “focused theory frame.” The assumptions in play, and the frame of reference that is built up, contain causalities. They do not, however, inevitably result in a closed theoretical principle.

The State as a Material Condensation of Relationships of Forces

The starting assumption is that institutions, bureaucratic practices, and state apparatuses, whether they are governed democratically or via authoritarianism, and changes in those institutions and practices (in whichever direction that may occur), are “subject to the dynamics of the deeper power structure and struggle that underpins them” (Veerayooth and Hewison 2016, 381). Furthermore, it is assumed that those societal dynamics are reflected in the state. Poulantzas (1978, 127) has argued that the state “constitutes the political unity of the dominant classes, thereby establishing them as dominant” and that the state is “a relationship of forces, or more precisely the material condensation of such a relationship among classes and class fractions, such as this is expressed within the state in a necessarily specific form” (Poulantzas 1978, 128–129). Within the state, certain societal forces and ideas can temporarily achieve hegemonic positions. Subsequently,

the state has inbuilt biases that privilege some agents and interests over others; but whether, how, and how far these biases are actualized depends on the changing balance of forces and their strategies and tactics. Poulantzas added that social conflicts and contradictions are reproduced inside the state, albeit in ways that reflect its specific forms of organization and operation (Jessop 2016, 54).

The “State in a Capitalist Society”

Jessop has further developed this perspective on the “state in a capitalist society,” calling his framework a “strategic-relational approach.” This approach emphasises that “the biased composition of constraints and opportunities can only be understood concerning specific strategies pursued by specific forces to advance specific interests over a given time horizon in terms of a specific set of other forces, each advancing its interests through specific strategies” (Jessop 2016, 55). In his view, structures are not equally constraining or facilitating for all agents. Rather structure “consists in differential constraints and opportunities that vary by agent; agency, in turn, depends on strategic capacities that vary by structure, as well as according to the actors involved” (Jessop 2016, 55).

Basing the research frame on Veerayooth and Hewison’s and Poulantzas’ assumptions and making use of Jessop’s idea of a “state in capitalist society,” it is assumed that the concept of such a state applies to Indonesia and Vietnam, and the political and economic system that exists in these countries. A detailed analysis of the Indonesian and Vietnamese states along with Jessop’s (2016, 116) list of specifications cannot be presented here. Instead, reference is made to the respective state of knowledge for the specifics of Indonesia’s and Vietnam’s state, political system, economy, society, and the relationship between these. This knowledge should underpin the assumption of the existence of a “state in a capitalist society” in Indonesia and Vietnam.

Indonesia and Vietnam: “State in a Capitalist Society”

The Indonesian State Before and After *Reformasi*

Regarding Indonesia, there is a relatively rich tradition of research about the nature of the state in the period of the New Order (1965/66–1998) and also for the *Reformasi* era (since 1997/98), meaning after the demise of Suharto. Robison and Hadiz (2004), Hadiz and Robison (2013, 2014), and Hadiz (2017) portray the current Indonesian capitalist state as basically under the same rule of class(es) as it was before 1997. Other scholars do not contradict this in principle but are more optimistic and see a newly emerging middle class and a strengthened civil society gaining influence (see, for example, Aspinall 2014; Mietzner 2014; Ufen 2015). According to Robison and Hadiz, middle-class representatives, workers, various forms of civil society organisations, and similar are not contenders against an oligarchy and the “predatory networks” that control the Indonesian state, but can and indeed do make use of institutions such as parliaments, and thus make sure that their voice is heard (see also Rosser 2014, 79).

With respect to the state and nature of democracy in Indonesia, Ufen’s (2015, 205) view that the country is an “electoral democracy, not a liberal democracy” is widely shared. Such a characterisation implies that “money politics” and oligarchs have a decisive influence on politics and policies and that there is an almost symbiotic relationship between politics and the economy. Oligarchs have held the state and the state’s institutions prey, both in the New Order days and since.

The Vietnamese State

Compared with Indonesia, the “nature” of the Vietnamese state is somewhat under-researched. Among other things, this has to do with limitations on conducting research inside the opaque structure of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) and the state which it has ruled since 1975/76. Consequently, existing studies of politics and

policies “rarely maintain a systematic focus on the state, and when they do, the term ‘state’ alternately indicates an institutional structure, an arena of contention, a set of interest group relations, and various components of government” (Vasavakul 2019, 2).

Bucking this trend, Gainsborough (2010) dares to conceptualise the Vietnamese state in the pre-reform era between 1976 and 1986 as well as in the so-called reform era that followed. In his view, during this latter period, the state can be seen as an “‘instrument,’ tending (but not guaranteed) to act in the general interests of capital” (Gainsborough 2010, 183). He refers to a series of examples of where and when the Vietnamese state decided in favour of “acting against individual capitalists,” because not to do so risked the “whole edifice” coming down. Here the “whole edifice” is “understood in terms of the emerging capitalist economy over which the state was presiding and in which ... its interests were increasingly bound up” (Gainsborough 2010, 183). In a recent publication, Gainsborough (2017, 183) does not revise his view of the Vietnamese state as acting “in the general interest of capital” and dismisses other approaches vis-à-vis the state to be found in Vietnam-related research: the dominating-state approach, developed by Porter (1993), Womack (1987), and Thayer (1992); the mobilising-corporatism approach, created by Jeong (1997), Stromseth (1998), and Turley (1993); and, the dialogical approach, developed by Kerkvliet (2005).

Despite Gainsborough’s post-structuralist approach, what he has in common with Veerayooth and Hewison, Poulantzas, and Jessop is that they all see the state as “a practice or ensemble of practices,” the “outcome of political activities as well as a contribution to them” (quotes from Gainsborough 2017, 132). This is more generally spoken of as a social relationship.

Regarding the character of its political system, Vietnam is a one-party state and a socialist republic in name. The assumption is thus that Vietnam and Indonesia are both capitalist societies. In what follows, the ladder of abstraction is a step down through reference to economists and political scientists who have analysed empirically both economic systems and societies and their relationship with the respective state.

Indonesia: Oligarchic Capitalism that Develops Features of “Nationalistic Capitalism”

Regarding Indonesia, economists and political scientists alike identify a capitalist economy and society. Rosser (2014, 79) calls Indonesia’s business system “oligarchic capitalism” in which “non-market variables continue to play a key role.” Its economy is dominated by “large, highly diversified, and politically connected family-owned private conglomerates,” although “the role of SOEs [state-owned enterprises] has increased significantly since the Asian economic crisis in 1997–1998, as has that of foreign capital” (Rosser 2014, 80).

In Hadiz’s (2018, 580) view, Indonesia has a “particularly predatory form of capitalism.” During President Joko Widodo’s administration (since 2014) new, additional forms of “Indonesian capitalism” developed. The government emphasises some kind of “nationalistic capitalism,” where “the state should be the engine of development and efforts to regain control of key economic sectors” (Diprose, McRae, and Hadiz 2019, 702). Nevertheless, Indonesia can still be called a “predatory state” (Witt and Redding 2014, 679) – “[one] in which top leaders and their families use the state to enrich themselves” (Witt and Redding 2014, 680). Democratic institutions are maintained and used to continue the rule of “oligarchs,” although this happens in new ways: “[T]his time with many business owners entering the sphere of politics directly and openly,” as Diprose, McRae, and Hadiz (2019, 701) argue.

Vietnam and “Rent-Seeking Networks”: From “State Capitalism” to “Crony Capitalism”

On Vietnam, economists like Ngo and Tarko (2018) and political scientists like Vuving (2013, 2019) identify Vietnam as a “rent-seeking state.” Economists Truong and Rowley (2014, 298) speak of a “co-ordinated market economy” with characteristics of a “post-state” business system (Truong and Rowley 2014, 283). SOEs still occupy the heights of the economy, while the state encourages private sector development. Witt and Redding (2014, 675) characterise Vietnam’s business system as “crony capitalism,” and its state as a “predatory [one] with developmental trend[s].” Within this system, politicians and bureaucrats (all belonging to the ruling VCP) are in close alliance with the leading personnel of big SOEs, large economic groups (such as the biggest of all: the privately owned “Vingroup”), state-owned and other banks, the military and its enterprises (such as Viettel), personnel from the security sector, and the like. Vuving (2019) describes and analyses the progression of the “political-business complex” that developed during the three decades of “renovation” (*doi moi*). In this period, “the state’s ownership of land, policy, firms and funds for private interests” have been commercialised (Vuving 2019, 376).

A further assumption of the theoretical framework used here is that capitalism and the “state in a capitalist society” can combine with different forms and mechanisms of rule and domination; accordingly, they may demonstrate different patterns of domination.

Mechanisms and Patterns of Domination

Based on Linz’s definition, Vietnam’s political-administrative system is an “authoritarian” one. This has as a characteristic feature a “limited, not responsible, political pluralism” (Linz 2000, 161).¹ In delineating the mechanisms on which Vietnam’s rulers base their dominance, it is useful to follow the idea that authoritarian rule is founded on a specific mix of coercion and generation and obtaining of consent. In this respect, Nguyen Hong Hai (Nguyen 2018, 149) ascertains that VCP rule and its regime:

embraces three characteristics: “smart authoritarianism” where the VCP is responsive to public demands and put in place mechanisms aimed at absorbing and managing civic outrage; “competitive authoritarianism” where competitive spaces are somehow permitted and democracy is practised within the VCP; and “full authoritarianism” where political opposition is not entirely tolerated.

In “everyday politics,” Vietnam’s rulers use a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness, which above all – but not exclusively – accommodates people at the local level (Nguyen 2018, 149). However, it does so “without challenging the structural or institutional dominance by the party-state” (Koh 2006, 5).

For Indonesia, many political scientists, economists, and regional experts would probably agree with Robison and Hadiz, who state, as noted, that the state is dominated by predatory networks and oligarchs – if one does not call the Indonesian polity an outright “oligarchy” (Winters 2014; see also Ford and Pepinsky 2014). Also, as a collective reaction to (and since) *Reformasi*, these oligarchs (ab)use political parties and various political-administrative tools, nationalistic fervour, and religious sentiment (especially a conservative and inward-looking religious nationalism) for their narrowly defined goals (see Buehler 2014; Hadiz 2018; Bourchier 2019). Under pressure from populist, religious, nationalistic, authoritarian politicians and movements, at least since autumn 2019, President Joko Widodo has adopted an increasingly illiberal and nationalistic policy

agenda, leading to widespread protest (see, for example, Diprose, McRae, and Hadiz 2019; Mietzner 2021). Given the great importance of formal procedures and proceedings for those working within the political-administrative system, after Schumpeter (1943, 269), it can be called a “procedural democracy.”

Despite the existence of different forms of political rule and varying patterns of domination, similar policies can be and indeed are applied in Vietnam and Indonesia. Those, in turn, lead to various forms of protest. Such is the contention of another assumption informing the approach used here.

Neo-Liberal Policies and Protest

Neo-liberal policies would be enacted in Indonesia both during and after the period of the New Order. President Widodo’s preference for an economy more open to foreign and local investors, associated with a policy of “deregulated regulation” of economic relations – especially but not exclusively associated with the country’s chronically underdeveloped infrastructure – and state reactions vis-à-vis protest against such policies are a case in point. Similarly, protest against the strategy of externalising production costs in the field of ecology and the president’s preference for giving national and international companies and consortia a relatively free hand in mining and related industries can be understood in the same context.²

In Vietnam, neo-liberal policies were put in place with those of “socialisation” – the official term for policies of privatisation – enacted in the fields of healthcare, education, and infrastructure in the first decade of this century. They were then carried further during the following decade. Here, various forms of public discontent – not necessarily taking the form of public protest – could be understood as disaccord with individual forms of neo-liberal policies.

Leading Hypotheses Embedded in the Focussed Theory Frame

The leading hypothesis used here takes as its starting point Tilly’s (1978, 4–27) assumption which says that *any* state’s reaction vis-à-vis protest ranges from repression, to toleration, to facilitation. His “crude hypothesis” posits: “[T]he extent to which a given collective action by a given group is subject to repression, toleration or facilitation is mainly a function of two factors: (1) the scale of action, (2) the power of the group. The larger the scale of the action, the more likely its repression; the more powerful the group, the less likely repression” (Tilly 1978, 4–27).

Accordingly, the Indonesian and the Vietnamese states are expected to both react on a scale from oppression, to ignoring, to accommodating protest, depending on the sensitivity of the issue and the power of the protesting group.³ Which measures the state initiates and at what time vis-à-vis which form of protest, depends on the relationship of social forces, the sensitivity of the issues at stake, the power that societal forces can develop and which societal forces and ideas temporarily achieve hegemonic positions within the state (see below). The Indonesian and the Vietnamese states are expected to react similarly if not in the same way in responding to protest, at least that which touches sensitive issues and mobilises powerful societal forces. Finally, another assumption is that state reactions are also similar in the sense that they ultimately aim at preserving the existing patterns and means of rule and domination, because these are the reactions of a “state in a capitalist society.”

Methodology

Protest Event Analysis

For generating data, the PEA was applied. By focusing on individual or aggregated protest events, the second and third generations of PEA were used (for overviews see Koopmans and Rucht 2002, 232–234; Hutter 2014, 337–340). The fourth generation of PEA research was not employed mainly for methodological reasons: aggregating reports on a protest event and the respective state reaction(s) is a complicated issue. Following Cook and Weidmann's (2019) advice to stay at the “report level” has the advantage that anyone working with the data can easily replicate the calculations and validate or refute the authors' interpretations and conclusions. Problems related to deciphering complicated aggregation procedures and getting to the original data are thus avoided.

Empirical Aims

The first empirical aim of the project was to identify any protest event where the target is the state/government and where such a protest involves more than three people. Covering all forms of state reaction was the second empirical aim of the project.

Definition of Protest

“Protest” is defined as a form of conflicting interest articulation in a broad sense, drawing on PRODAT's definition of it as “collective, public action by a non-governmental actor who expresses criticism or dissent and articulates a societal or political demand” (Rucht and Neidhardt 1999, 68).⁴ The low threshold of protest as a gathering of more than three people is reasonable given the political circumstances in Vietnam, and since the project aims to obtain a comprehensive picture of protest and state reactions to it.

For an occurrence to be coded as a protest event and find entry into the database, it must:

- be (at least in an indirect way) action-oriented or calling others to action (for example petitions and open letters that call for public protest);
- include a societal or political demand;
- be public;
- be promoted and supported by collective and non-state actors⁵; and
- be targeted at the domestic state or its policies.

Since the outcome of interest is exclusively protest vis-à-vis the state, state policies, and politicians, inter-communal demonstrations were only coded if and when protest asked the state to pursue certain policies and/or change ones as regards other communities. In a similar way, “protests that involve an industrial enterprise that is affected by state policy such as labour rights ... does represent a codable activity ... if the people take to the streets to demand better conditions, wages, safety, and the outcome is the function of state-level policy decisions” (Clark and Regan 2015, 3–4). Also following that project's definition of a “political rally,” events were not coded as such as long as they are not for or against the state, state policies, and similar.

Data Sources

Data come from selected issues of four daily national print-edition newspapers: in Vietnam, *Tien Phong* and *Tuoi Tre*; and in Indonesia *Koran Tempo* and *Kompas*. In the case of Vietnam, the two newspapers are officially published. Using PEA helps researchers to address the issue of protest and state reactions to it. Using two sources per country increases not only the number of protest events but enables “controlling for qualitative sources biases” and also “allows one the identification of discrepancies or errors in factual information” (Koopmans and Rucht 2002, 242). Due to limited time and other resources, the selectivity of the sources could only be tested based on the authors’ expertise and that of individuals working at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences and at Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia.

Sampling helps to “reduce workload without great losses of information” (Koopmans and Rucht 2002, 239). Since identifying, selecting, and entering the data from the articles is enormously time-consuming, and due to resource constraints, the selection and coding got confined to issues from 2016 and 2017 and two editions per week, for Tuesday and Saturday. Thus, 416 issues of the chosen newspapers were examined (208 per country). This sampling method seems reasonable since events that have taken place on the weekend or at the beginning of the week are potentially covered in the Tuesday edition; events taking place after Friday prayers in Indonesia should be found in the Saturday edition.⁶ Confining the research to and selecting articles in this way lead to 96 articles in Indonesia and 56 in Vietnam.

As regards comparability of the sources, those relied on are *grosso modo* comparable. They are all considered national newspapers which are more likely reporting protest events nationwide than other newspapers in both countries (for example, *Jawa Pos* or *Nhan Dan*). All four newspapers cover political and other events that take place in the most important regions of both countries, which helps to avoid a capital city-centred or region-centred coverage. *Tien Phong* has more extensive coverage of events taking place in the north of Vietnam, whereas *Tuoi Tre* covers more extensively developments taking place in the country’s south. The reporting of *Koran Tempo* and *Kompas* cover most parts of Indonesia and support ideas of freedom, democracy, and social justice. *Koran Tempo* is an investigative journal, critical of authoritarianism, Islamisation of politics and everyday life, and related tendencies. *Kompas* is politically independent and describes itself as being committed to the “conscience of the people” and an “in-depth source of information.” In the section where the data gets interpreted, the authors return to potential ramifications of the fact that *Tien Phong* is under the direct management of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union Central Committee in Hanoi and *Tuoi Tre* is the official mouthpiece of Ho Chi Minh Youth Union in Ho Chi Minh City.

Accessibility and availability led to choosing the print versions of these newspapers to work with. The print version of these newspapers, written in Vietnamese and Bahasa Indonesian respectively, were chosen since these editions are readily accessible at the National Library in Hanoi and at the Indonesian National Library in Jakarta. Earlier editions are also available at these institutions, meaning reports from those issues could be added to the data set. The same could not be said regarding the electronic versions of these newspapers. In Vietnam, the English and online versions of both newspapers differ significantly from the print versions written in Vietnamese. Even more importantly, it is not possible to assess how reliably and for how long English versions of those newspapers are stored electronically and where precisely this happens. Storing electronic versions of these newspapers inside Vietnam allows certain agencies to either block access at any time and/or change the content of them.

Remaining Methodological Issues

Five additional methodological issues remain. First, nobody knows the exact number of protest events that took place in Indonesia and Vietnam in 2016 and 2017. In this article, it is not possible to address the problem as to whether one could equate *one* article with *one* event and/or what constitutes *one* event and/or *one* state reaction. The assumption is, however, that most of the reports in the data set describe a single event.

Second, due to time and budget restrictions, thorough PEA could only be carried out for the period 2016–2017. For the period 2018 to mid-2020, protest and state reactions were dealt with in two policy areas, with reports collected and analysed from various newspapers – different from the ones used for the database – covering the progress of known events from the previous period. Those data were not entered into the database. Thus, the database is uneven in terms of data covering the entire period (2016–2020). For a systematic PEA, the observation period is short; certainly, the existence of data from a decennium and their systematic analysis would be desirable not least since a short period of time can lead to false conclusions if not statistical artefacts.

Third, it was not possible to conduct a systematic and comparative analysis of possible reporting biases in Vietnam and Indonesia in terms of coverage and cases.

Fourth, not least because of and related to this deficiency, where the data analysis and interpretation is based on PEA and thus on reports from newspapers whose reporters can be influenced, even instructed, by officials and/or by economically influential persons or groups of persons in both countries to report in a certain way, it is methodologically correct to speak of analysing protest and state responses as presented in those newspapers, not of protest and state responses as such. Methodologically, those cases represent socially constructed realities, not reality itself. Not least for linguistic reasons, however, the authors refrain from inserting in the relevant text passages that they are referring to *reports on* protests and *reports of* state reactions.

Fifth, further research should include statistically demanding reliability checks of the data and should double-check coding procedures – checks that the authors were unable to perform themselves.

Protest, Policy, State Reaction: Empirical Results

Protest and Policy

In terms of the policy fields in which protest took place in 2016 and 2017, there is a clear order of ranking in Vietnam and there are discernible policy-related priorities in Indonesia. In Vietnam, protest takes place (in descending order) in the policy fields of infrastructure, ecology, social affairs, economy, education, and the working world. In Indonesia, protest is observed and reported on (in descending order) in the fields of infrastructure, the working world, democracy/authoritarianism/civil and human rights, other specific problems, political system/politicians, economy, ecology, and education.

More concretely, protest in Vietnam in the field of *infrastructure* expresses discontent with: the (mis-)use of land and forms of land grabbing; the privatisation of roads; planned (re-)location or building of roads; and the establishment of rubbish dumps and similar. *Ecology* expresses dissatisfaction with the externalisation of production costs, and protesters contest the pollution of the air, water, and soil caused among other sources by factories and garbage dumps. *Social affairs* expresses discontent with environment-related issues and their health-related implications, while the *economy* is, again, basically protest against the fallout of economic processes causing environmental problems. *Education* is

mainly discontent with the merger of community-level schools; *the working world* is dissatisfaction with the termination of long-term contracts for vendors in a particular marketplace.

In Indonesia, protest in the field of *infrastructure* articulates the general demand for regulation of online businesses (especially in the transport sector) and expresses discontent with the absence of state regulation concerning those and related business operations. Moreover, there is resentment vis-à-vis the state's negligence of infrastructure and dissatisfaction with the planned relocation of houses, marketplaces, and the like. *The working world* is about a protective environment for workers, discontent with low wages in general and with those of temporary workers, and dissatisfaction with worker layoffs and the outsourcing of labour. *Democracy/authoritarianism* expresses discontent with civil and human rights violations past and present and articulates the demand that offenses should be punished. Furthermore, protesters call for greater democratisation in decision-making processes. They also articulate the wish for or protest against the dissolution of radical Islamist organisations.

Political system/politicians focuses on problems of widespread corruption and articulates demands for stronger measures against it; protesters want the swift implementation of decisions made by the judiciary. *Economy* focuses on specific demands to regulate online businesses (mainly taxis), discontent with the planned relocation of vendors, but also plans of an amnesty for tax evaders. *Ecology* is discontent with the externalisation of production costs, damage done to the environment, and with the repercussions for people's health, as mainly inflicted by enterprises in the mining and related sectors. *Education* is, among other things, about disaccord with government policy in the health-care sector and student protest against the ministerial policy of five-day schooling.⁷

Data indicating the striking difference that protest takes in Vietnam are not to be observed in the fields of democracy/authoritarianism and human rights and civil rights (at least not in the analysed reports) which will get addressed in the relevant section below.

Forms of Protest

Regarding the forms that protest takes in both countries, certain differences become apparent. In Vietnam, both newspapers report on (in descending order) submission of petitions, followed by building blockades, submission of signatures under protest notes, organising of disturbances and creating hindrances, the realisation of rallies, but also damage done to property and attacks – and even looting – the occupation of sites and finally the filing of procedural complaints. There seems to be a glaring gap between protest forms in which petitions are delivered to authorities on the one hand and the construction of blockades, the organisation of disturbances, damage done to property, occupations, and similar episodes that feature on the other one.

Significantly, compared with Indonesia, protest taking the form of rallies/demonstrations, the distribution of leaflets, gatherings, and similar is much less reported on – if, indeed, it is to be found at all. In Indonesia, in contrast, various forms of public gatherings – especially staging demonstrations, showing banners/posters, organising rallies, assembling in public, filing procedural complaints, and the like – are reported very often and seem “normal.” Meanwhile, reports on blockades and doing damage to property, attacks, and looting feature much less frequently in the two Indonesian newspapers.

More or less violent forms of action are much more common in Vietnam than in Indonesia. Data allow for different interpretations, which will be addressed in the

following section. In both countries, most reports are on what is categorised as “other forms of protest.” In those cases, reports in Vietnam mention calling newspaper hotlines (a very specific but effective form of protest), paying toll fees with small coins (thereby causing traffic jams), talking with journalists who then report on the issue at hand, the refusal to talk with authorities or also having various informal forms of dialogue with high-ranking officials and the like. In Indonesia, a variety of imaginative and theatrical forms of protest exist alongside the more conventional strikes, meetings with politicians (particularly representatives from the local and/or the national level), and talking with an ombudsperson.

State Reactions

Number of Reports

An important difference between reports from Indonesian and Vietnamese newspapers is that, in general, Vietnamese newspapers, at least in 2016 and 2017, report far more frequently on state reactions. And, as will be shown, Vietnamese newspaper reports contain to a greater extent “positive responses” from the state vis-à-vis various forms of protest where the state eventually approaches protesters, at least partially meets their demands, and so on.

Differences on State Reaction

In Indonesia, at least for 2016 and 2017, authorities tended to be reported as “meeting protesters” or “promising to take up their demands in formal meetings” (25.9%), and with “ignoring” the protest reported for 18.5% of reports. In Vietnam, authorities were reported as often “accommodating” the demands of protesters (37.8%). That said, state representatives in Vietnam “meet” less often with protesters (13.3%) than their peers in Indonesia do (23.9%). Vietnamese authorities seem to be less “ignorant” (6.7%) vis-à-vis protest than their Indonesian counterparts (18.5%).⁸ Moreover, the difference between state reactions in two polities is significant in the statistical sense ($\chi^2 = 30.44$; $df = 1$; $p < 0.05$).

However, chi-square tests prove that significant differences are found only in two policy fields: infrastructure and ecology (infrastructure, $\chi^2 = 26.50$; $df = 4$; $p < 0.05$; ecology, $\chi^2 = 11.25$; $df = 3$; $p < 0.05$). Applying the chi-square test and analysing state reactions in all other policy fields does not indicate any statistical significance. Furthermore, the chi-square tests show that “missing data” (relevant in the case of Indonesia) and “unspecified” state reactions (important for Vietnam) are not significant in a statistical sense.

Linkages between Forms of Protest and State Reactions

Analysing possible linkages between various forms of state reaction and different forms of protest, potentially leading to certain state reactions, no cross-tabulations are conclusive. They do not lead to any further results as regards what brought about those state reactions. Applying the chi-square test is also inconclusive. This leads to the conclusion that the notion specific forms of protest action, for example carrying out blockades, lead to certain state reactions cannot be proven empirically – at least not through using methods of descriptive statistics. Thus, the violent character of many forms of protest in Vietnam does not seem to have a decisive impact on the state resulting in specific reactions. But also that the form of protest that is so dominant in Indonesia, namely “playing to the rules,” has no significant influence on how the state reacts.

Similarities of State Reactions

The search for similarities – if not sameness – is possible in four policy fields and leads to some recognisable similarities.⁹ In *infrastructure* policy, a certain common pattern in state reactions was identified. A first reaction is often that the state ignores protests. But, then, promises are quickly made, including those of making various concessions. However, this procedure only applies to large, “sensitive” protests. In Vietnam these were the cases of disputed land claims (Dong Tam) and toxic marine pollution in the central part of the country (caused by Formosa Plastics Group’s subsidiary Ha Tinh Steel Corporation, hereafter referred to as Formosa). In Indonesia, it concerns the regulation of online businesses – taxi companies (GoJek and Grab). With less “sensitive,” smaller, and, above all, less “powerful” protests, such common procedures are not observed.¹⁰

In the policy field of *ecology*, initially, differences between the Vietnamese and the Indonesian states’ reactions seem to dominate. Whereas in almost half the reports it is stated that the Vietnamese state accommodates protesters’ demands, such an outcome is not reported for Indonesia.¹¹ Rather, Indonesian state officials meet with protesters. Nevertheless, there are similarities, because in Vietnam less successful protests and less positive state reactions might *not* have been reported; in Indonesia, specific parts of the state would be quite accommodating of imaginative action in front of the presidential palace *after* 2017, as will be shown below. Thus similarities in state reactions in Indonesia and Vietnam in this policy field cannot be excluded, specifically in the form of accommodating protesters’ demands, but also of the partial, temporary, or complete rejection of those demands.

In the *education* policy field, in two-thirds of all reports on cases, there are striking similarities in state reactions – in both countries, the state ignores protest in this field. Protesters could not achieve any success in the period of observation.

Finally, in the policy field of *economy* the state sometimes accommodates protesters’ demands. In Indonesia, this was in one out of four instances; in Vietnam, this response was seen in two of four cases. In the remaining cases, similarities cannot be excluded since in half the reports from Vietnam state reactions are “not specified.” This implies that, again, reporting tends to be one-sided in favour of a high level of government responsiveness, with other reactions under-reported.

In sum, in three out of the four policy fields similarities dominate as far as state reactions vis-à-vis protest are concerned; in the fourth, for good reason, alignment cannot be excluded. This empirical finding is all the more important since what the protest is about in the policy fields of *infrastructure* and *economy* is very different in both polities while rather similar in the fields of *ecology* and *education*.

Additional Evidence Indicating Similarities of State Reactions

Even more support for the assumption of similarities of state reactions becomes apparent in additional, anecdotal evidence that include reports on events observed in 2018, 2019, and mid-2020. From a methodological point of view, including such data is also an effective means of checking the validity of the earlier data, at least to some extent. Moreover, the inclusion of such data helps to counteract the possibility that the relatively short observation period leads to rash and wrong conclusions. In this way, we counteract possible methodological shortcomings of the study.

In Vietnam, focusing on cases of protest in the infrastructure field (the case of Dong Tam and the protest against the introduction of toll booths on newly built highways) and ecology (the case of Formosa) is instructive. In Indonesia, doing so regarding protest against the operations of online taxi businesses like GoJek and Grab (infrastructure) and

against a cement factory in the Kendeng Mountains of Central Java, coal mining in Sumatra, and gold mining in East Java (ecology) the same proves true. The results provide support for the assumption of similarities in terms of state reactions.

Whereas in 2016 and 2017 the Vietnamese state accommodated the demands of protesters and could appear to be responsive to, and acceding to, protesters' demands, already in mid-2017 and then in 2018–2020, those successes turned out to have been only temporary. Peasants from Dong Tam, although they had been promised impunity for, among other things, taking 38 police officers hostage, found themselves in court and sentenced to various prison terms. The land they claimed remained in the possession of the military. The villagers found their lease had expired in 2012. The case was ongoing in 2020, with a team of lawyers arguing on the villagers' behalf pro bono (*Southeast Asia Globe*, May 23, 2018).

The conflict simmered during 2018 and into 2019, before exploding on December 31, 2019 when the military began to build a wall around the contested land. The accounts of what happened on January 9, 2020 differ significantly. The state press recounts that a group of peasants attacked the police, that three police officers and one protester, Le Dinh Kinh, the 84-year-old community leader, died. It is also reported that 30 villagers were arrested and, later, 25 of them were charged with murder of the three policemen (*VNExpress International*, January 9, 2020; *VNExpress International*, January 10, 2020; *VietnamNet.VN*, January 10, 2020). A report by protesters, lawyers, and activists about the events of that night contradicts the representations of the Ministry of Public Security and various accounts in the official press (Trang and Nguyen 2020).

In the Formosa case, the Taiwanese firm agreed on June 30, 2016, to compensation of US\$500 million, paid to the Vietnamese government for relief work. This was very modest for the victims of the ecological disaster caused by the firm which had discharged toxic chemicals into the sea and had deprived the fishers of their livelihood. Formosa agreed to pay estimated at between \$1,000 and \$2,430 per household (an amount only able to meet each affected person's expenses for one year, based on gross domestic product per capita in Vietnam). It is likely that this compensation did not reach all those who had suffered extreme economic hardship as a result of the toxic spill (*Globalvoices*, June 11, 2019).¹² Moreover, the installation of a monitoring and warning system to prevent pollution from future spills, offered in compensation by Formosa and mandated by Vietnam's central government for completion by the end of 2019, had to be postponed as no money had been received to do the work (*Radio Free Asia*, December 17, 2019). In infrastructure, the victory of protesters against the construction of toll booths achieved in 2017 was diminished:

[Whereas in] specific cases such as that of ... BOT Cai Lay (Tien Giang) investors were required to relocate the toll booths ... the majority of BOT toll booths are still intact. [Even worse,] numerous protest leaders and BOT activists have been harassed, imprisoned and subjected to inhumane treatment (The 88 Project 2020).

In Indonesia, protesters were partially successful in infrastructure. Here, they targeted the operations of GoJek and Grab. In 2018, the central government ordered these online operations to be classified as transport businesses and to ensure that conditions for fair competition were in place. In 2019, the government ruled that the drivers for those firms receive fair wages (*The Star*, April 2, 2018). In the field of ecology, protesters against the cement factory in the Kendeng Mountains could not stop its construction and could not prevent PT Semen Indonesia from starting production (*Jakarta Post*, May 1, 2018). In a similar way, in 2018, the mining industry was able to assert itself and its interests in the course of sometimes very long and highly controversial disputes. In a case in

Banyuwangi, East Java, the mining industry was able to secure the assistance of the judiciary. In another case in Sarolangun, Sumatra, decisions were deferred to the central level; it also helped that the central level remained passive (*Mongabay*, May 2, 2018). Though some concessions were made, including some compensation payments, the coal and mining industries prevailed.

In sum, additional individual data from 2018, 2019, and the first half of 2020 concerning protest and state reactions in those two policy areas where data from the PEA indicate that significant differences (infrastructure and ecology) exist show that in both polities the state decided against the protesters or included their interests only in part. Thus, including those data suggests that the degree of similarity as regards state reactions in both polities increases and the degree of difference further decreases.

Interpretation of the Data

Identifying patterns and mechanisms of political and economic domination, pinpointing of specific interests behind state reactions, deciphering which deeper power structures and struggles might underpin them, and using other elements of the “focused theory frame” enables a comparative analysis of state reactions in both polities. In what follows, the empirical results are interpreted by ascending the ladder of abstraction. The starting point is the most tangible manifestations of the patterns and mechanisms of political domination in Vietnam and Indonesia.

Patterns and Mechanisms of Domination

Vietnam’s political-administrative system has specific patterns and mechanisms of political domination that can be explained in interpreting the finding that newspaper reports mainly try to sketch the picture of a responsive state. Both newspapers examined are integral parts of:

a long-established and well-functioning system of media control under the Ministry of Information and Communication [where weekly] guidance is sent out to the mass media on what is and what is not permissible to report on [and where] Party organisations in the mass media ensure that party/state guidelines are adhered to (Thayer 2020, 2).

For this reason, it can be assumed that if *Tuoi Tre* and *Tien Phong* report on state reactions vis-à-vis protest, then there is a high possibility that they have been instructed by party or state officials to report on those forms of action and state reaction positively and not to report on the state’s negative decisions, rejections of protest and similar reactions that might stir further discontent. This could also explain the high proportion of “missing” or “not specified” cases of state reaction in the reports.

In Indonesia’s electoral democracy, no directly comparable mechanisms to control media coverage of state reactions exist. Yet the possibility remains that the “dictate of sales” can influence what is reported and in what form. This argument can also be made for Vietnam, but in more limited terms.

The fact that in Vietnam organising and staging demonstrations is “difficult” is related to the fact that the legal situation is unclear. Article 25 of the 2013 Constitution has guaranteed the right to assemble and demonstrate, but there is no law specifying this fundamental right. Even worse, after nine years of drafting and discussion between various state agencies, in 2020, the prime minister permitted the Ministry of Public Security to further indefinitely postpone the date of submission of the draft public demonstration law to the National Assembly (*VNExpress International*, May 12, 2020). And since neither

protestors nor local and higher-ranking authorities know which form of action is authorised or prohibited, people often do not dare to organise rallies or public assemblies. When, however, citizens are denied this means of peacefully expressing their protest, anger and resentment may accumulate – which then may manifest itself in violent forms of protest. The latter might, then, be the last means of drawing attention to grievances. Such a causal cascade could help explain the high level of violent demonstrations in Vietnam.

Conversely, that protest events are allowed “in principle” shows that those in power in Vietnam accept protests against maldevelopment and problems, although these issues and policy areas are restricted; it is “limited pluralism” (Linz 2000): protest in the field of civil and human rights and addressing fundamental questions of democracy is not tolerated. Most-recent examples of such limitations and intolerance include arrests as a result of Facebook posts by critics of the government’s clampdown on protest in Dong Tam, the “invitation to working sessions” related to COVID-19-related Facebook posts that the government deemed to contain false information, and the detention of bloggers and others for writing posts online on such issues (see, for example, *Radio Free Asia*, June 22, 2020).

Meanwhile, Indonesia’s electoral democracy permits the organisation of protest in the field of civil and human rights, especially religious rights, but also staging demonstrations against, for example, mass murder during “the events” of 1965. Even though violent repression of protest may have increased in recent years, domination, for the most part, seems to be secured by other means than those typically used in the New Order period: namely, unleashing exclusive police and military force to quell potential discontent and/or to prevent other accounts of recent history from being made public. And consequently, and as means of rule distinct from those used in the New Order period, the possibility to organise demonstrations for and against the dissolution of certain Islamist organisations helped to neutralise the protests of both camps, at least temporarily.

Another mechanism of domination can explain preferred state reactions in Indonesia. It involves shifting decisions to other levels and other places of discussion and decision-making. It seems many Indonesian politicians and administrators view “their” polity primarily as a “procedural democracy” (Schumpeter 1943, 269). For them, it seems that formal procedures and their observance may be much more important than an understanding of democracy that includes forms of co-operation and deliberation that includes protesters, autonomous groups, and the like. Also, they may think that protesters should follow strictly procedures and rules and leave decisions on the matters at hand to those responsible at the respective level of the political-administrative system. Finally, even in “decentralised” Indonesia, both of the lowest political-administrative levels have no significant say as regards many of the protesters’ demands and issues. Consequently, their personnel prefer to defer most protesters’ demands to higher political-administrative levels, where decisions can be taken. Such mechanisms, in turn, reinforce the nature of Indonesia’s procedural democracy.

Explaining Differences: Struggling against and Fighting for State Reactions

The following refers to two statistically significant differences regarding state reactions to protest over infrastructure and ecology in the two countries in 2016–2017.

In Vietnam, protest in these two policy fields is basically *against* certain party/state decisions, made especially at lower levels of the political-administrative system, and causing problems for parts of the population. This kind of protest is *against* the decisions of

politicians, bureaucrats, factory owners, investors, and of other influential persons. The disputed transfer of land titles in Dong Tam, the neglect of Formosa discharging toxic substances into the sea, and the building of toll roads were all ultimately based on decisions made by party cadres at various levels of the state apparatus. Thus, the state and its personnel stand directly in the firing line in all these cases. And this all the more so since the country's Constitution states at Article 2: "Vietnam is the country where the People are the masters and all the state power belongs to the People."

In Indonesia, protesters are *for* certain kinds of state action. Especially and most importantly *for* the regulation of business operations and for better regulation of those businesses already regulated. So they protest against the state's *inaction*, *inertia*, and *ignorance* at various administrative levels on a diverse range of problems. This is especially true regarding infrastructure, but also on the externalisation of ecological costs. Other forms of *negligence* in what protesters see as being tasks of the state, such as the speedy implementation of court decisions, also attract ire.

Thus, protest both *for* and *against* state action can be understood as discontent with the application of neo-liberal policies, their potential implications and the protection of particular interests.

Explaining Similarities I: Neo-Liberal Policies and Interests

Examples of the application of neo-liberal policies are: the privatisation of land (in both polities, irrespective of who owns the land, the state has far-reaching rights and the power to acquire and/or distribute it); the opening of policy fields such as infrastructure to foreign and local investors; the externalisation of ecological costs as a result of easing restrictions as regards investments for local investors such as those in the mining industry, or for foreign industries producing, for example, steel and aluminium; and leaving large segments of the business system unregulated and/or reducing established workers' rights. Concerning the period 2016–2020, the first of these phenomena was only reported in Vietnam, the second and third issues were observed in both polities; and the fourth in Indonesia only. On the whole, we observe protests against neo-liberal policies in both polities. The fact that these policies are not called such by those in power in Vietnam and are consequently not articulated as such by the protesters does not contradict this interpretation.

Whatever one may call such policies pursued, it is clear that they serve to safeguard certain interests: in Vietnam – where, for example, the interests of Viettel, Formosa, and companies investing in the tollways remain protected. Vietnam's Law on Public-Private Ownership Investment, passed in June 2020, is illustrative. In the case of infrastructure, this law, among other things, does not provide a clear definition of a *new* project, which leads to abusive practices such as fixing or expanding an existing road, and keeps "the process of bidding, appraising, negotiating and signing contracts ... confidential ... In short the process is rife with corruption" (The 88 Project 2020).

In the Formosa case, while there was a temporary halt in production and the company finally agreed to pay compensation, all this happened only after weeks and months of denial by state officials. They denied there was an environmental disaster, that Formosa was the polluter, entered secret negotiations with the company, and failed to publicly coordinate with the persons affected. These long and secret negotiations effectively protected the interests of Formosa and prevented the factory's closure. A Vietnamese lawyer argued Formosa's compensation payment to the Vietnamese government might even be seen as a

kind of payment for those both within and outside the state apparatus who protected Formosa and its interests (Green Trees 2016, 115).

More fundamentally, it can be argued that the Vietnamese government was complicit in the pollution incident and the cover-up of its consequences. It made the settlement of the Formosa case possible as part of its economic reform policy, with the promise of creating jobs and economic prosperity in rural and other areas through the establishment of industry. It therefore acted in its own interests when it finally declared Formosa to be the sole culprit for the disaster, thus not critiquing its own economic and other policies – not to mention the state’s supervisory duties towards such companies (Fan, Chiu, and Mabon 2020, 11). Finally, the seemingly decisive action taken against Formosa then brought increased legitimacy, at least for the authorities of the central state, if less so for those of the provincial and lower levels (Vasavakul 2019, 61).

In Indonesia, the interests of domestic business groups such as GoJek and Grab were protected by the explicit pursuit of neo-liberal policies related to infrastructure – especially with the state’s late efforts at regulating their operations. However, in a difficult and lengthy process of incorporating various existing interests, such as the conventional taxi industry and other small- and medium-sized enterprises, a compromise was found, but not until 2018, and not least because of massive protest. In the case of peasants’ protests against mining and related industries, it was only the interests of national coal, gold and copper industries, and cement producers that were protected by the state as it pursued the neo-liberal and nationalistic policies favoured by the president.

Explaining Similarities II: State, Power Relations and Struggles

It is here argued that both state reactions and inactions are the results of the “dynamics of deeper power structure and struggle” that underpin them and are reflected in the nature of the state too (Veerayooth and Hewison 2016, 381). Due to the limitations on researching the opaque structure of the VCP and the state it rules, we can ascertain mainly effects – but not the actual deeper power structure and struggle that inform them. In this context, therefore, we can only discern the consequences of broad shifts within the relationships of powerful social strata and how all of this is reflected in certain government decisions in relation to protesters.

Such power shifts and their consequences are clear in the case of Dong Tam. The initial success of the protesting farmers in 2016–2017 was followed by the significant setback of the violent events of January 9, 2020. It is fair to assume that those who favour the interests of the military and the Viettel corporation it owns seem to have gained the upper hand, while those who did not want to see the interests of the farmers completely ignored appear to have been silenced. But it may also be that there was a consensus among the politically and economically powerful that a precedent regarding who ultimately has the power to determine the use of land (owned by and in the name of the people) had to be “cleared” before the VCP Congress which then took place as scheduled in early 2021.

At first glance, one might think that state reactions to the Formosa toxic spill were at least a partial success for protesters. The temporary cessation of the plant’s operations, the declaration of the factory as the cause of the ecological disaster, the compensation paid to the government and subsequently to at least some of the affected appear to suggest a degree of success. It may be speculated that those political forces in the state apparatus who advocated that Formosa should be named and should pay for the damage caused gained the upper hand and that permissive forces had to give way. This may have

resulted because the investor proved to be hard-nosed, with a statement from Formosa's public relations director who declared that "[s]ometimes there is a trade-off!" He stated that Vietnam had to choose between steel and fish (*Vietnam Investment Review*, April 27, 2016). In this context, however, it is true that all political forces in the state and party apparatus had the common interest of not letting their own complicity become apparent, since it was they and their policies that made the operation of the factory possible (Fan, Chiu, and Mabon 2020, 11). Therefore, in the face of massive environmental disaster and protest, the obvious move was to declare Formosa the culprit and make them pay. Given the extensive damage and ongoing protest, inaction or further denial would have been unwise for the local, provincial, and central state. This suggests that in this case there were likely no conflicts between different powerful circles in the state apparatus and society. It may be assumed, then, that there was dispute over when to publicly identify the cause of the disaster and who would receive what in compensation. Ultimately, the identification of the offender and the compensation to the fishers enabled the factory to survive, to maintain the alliance of investors and supporting politicians, uphold their common narrative of economic development through the attraction of industry and of foreign and other investors alike, and to safeguard their respective and common interests.

In sum, it can be concluded that at least in two policy fields – infrastructure and ecology – those forces in Vietnam's state apparatus and society seem to be hegemonic, which privileges the interests of state-owned enterprises (which include a military-owned corporation such as Viettel), large foreign (such as Formosa) and local corporations, and semi-private and private enterprises (such as Vingroup).¹³ Hughes (2020, 118) has aptly called this conglomerate of interests the "state-party-business alliance," which includes the military and its economically very active companies (such as Viettel). The state in which and in whose actions the hegemonic position of the "alliance" is "condensed," has succeeded in suppressing protesters, who in turn have not been able to find appropriate means of expressing discontent and mobilising enough people important to the powerful, at least not over the long term. Moreover, protesters have not established successful counter-measures against rulers' strategies such as tactical retreats and surprise attacks and ways and means to withstand an overwhelmingly strong police force, the threat and/or enactment of intimidation, administrative fines, physical assaults, and detention. Inevitably, individual protesters were forced to accept the compensation offered.

In Indonesia, protest in the field of infrastructure and the – at least partial and temporary – success of "traditional" business owners against unregulated online operations is all the more remarkable given the president's and his government's fondness for online businesses. Their aim is to promote economic development through new technologies. Those industries have strong representation in and close relationships with the state apparatus and with government. In contrast, peasants' protest against a cement factory in Central Java, against coal mining in Sumatra, and against the activities of a gold and a copper mine in East Java could not prevail. Those extractive industries received strong support from the president and his policy of "nationalistic capitalism," and they one-sidedly benefit from laws such as the "Omnibus Law."

Nevertheless, the Indonesian state is not monolithic. Whereas the coal, mining, and cement industries' interests seem strongly entrenched in the state apparatus at the provincial and central levels, and governors and other state officials acted *against* protesters' demands, the judiciary acted *in favour* of protesters and against the industries. Those parts of the state apparatus seem to represent and serve different interests and/or therein different factions gain or retain – at least at times – the upper hand. Ultimately, however, at least in the last two to three years, various political-bureaucratic-economic alliances

representing a bundling of “new” (emerging technologies-focused) business orientations and the interests of “old” industries (mining and similar, but also palm oil) seem to have gained hegemonic power, much to the detriment of farmers and workers. And, this happened even though protest, at least against the mining and cement industries, was able to mobilise many people over a long period and often found a very effective visual language to represent its causes. In this context, it is worth recalling the “feet-in-cement actions” in front of the presidential palace in April 2016 and March 2017 when protesters from the Kendeng Mountains in Central Java demonstrated against the plans of the cement factory with their feet in cement (*theinterpreter*, May 18, 2018).

Conclusion

In light of the data and their interpretation presented in this article, both facets of the guiding hypothesis seem to be confirmed: one states that there are variations in how the Indonesian and the Vietnamese states respond to protest; the other claims that those reactions are similar at least for protest that touches on sensitive issues and has the potential to mobilise societal forces important to the country’s ruling forces. In such cases, state reactions in both polities serve the interests of those in power and are designed to preserve the foundations of the political and economic system – capitalist social relations and, therefore, the accumulation of capital.

Admittedly, the article provides only rudimentary confirmation. Further detailed research is needed to analyse, for example, decision-making processes in Vietnam’s “party/state” and its apparatuses, detailing the connection between decision makers in the state apparatus and (state, semi-private, or wholly private) conglomerate(s), and which ones. What are the public and hidden reasons for decision makers in making their choices and on which dynamics of the deeper power structure and struggle, actual and/or possible shifts in power relationships and their political implications are those decisions based? Exploring those issues implies considerably expanding the database compiled and complementing quantitative data with qualitative information.

From a theoretical perspective, a comparison of polities in Southeast Asia with those in other world regions would make it possible to answer – at least tentatively – the question of how far the concept “state in a capitalist society” can travel. Can it serve as an explanation of state reactions to protest elsewhere? This is to be tackled in a follow-up research project.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. However, the authors disagree with those political scientists who tend to overestimate the importance of political regimes in terms of possible different state reactions to protest and underestimate or even disregard the importance of political, economic, and socio-cultural forms of domination rooted in capitalism.
2. A recent example of neo-liberal policies is the pro-investment “Omnibus Bill,” passed in October 2020, which has hit workers’ rights, made close ties between government and business obvious, and led to widespread protest (see [McBeth 2020](#); [Puspa 2020](#)).
3. Because PEA usually cannot measure the “scale of action,” for example in terms of the number of protesters (because this is usually not given in reports or insufficiently quantified), the authors have chosen the indicator “sensitivity” as a substitute.

4. PRODAT was a German research project analysing protest in that country between 1950 and 2010 (Rucht/Neidhardt 1999, 66, fn 2).
5. Vietnam's "non-governmental actors" include "amphibious" members of the state administration who have a certain amount of knowledge *and* initiate *and/or* support protest in various ways and forms.
6. The manual of the project, code sheet and claim list are available on request from the corresponding author.
7. In Indonesia, the label "other specific problems" seems to be a residual category in the truest sense of the word – though the protests subsumed under this heading are somewhat numerous.
8. Note, however, the high percentage of "not specified" (42.2%) state reactions and the "missing cases" (19.6%) in the reports from Vietnam, while in Indonesia, "missing cases" were 43.8% and the "not specified" were 14.8%.
9. There are five policy areas in which state reactions in both polities were found. However, in the policy field of *the working world*, comparison is hardly possible, since in Vietnam there is just one case, whereas in Indonesia there are 18. This low number of cases in Vietnam has to do with the fact that only in one case related to economic issues was there a connection to state-level decisions. This is different from Indonesia. Note that, based on the definition used here, protest related to the economy and working world represent a codable activity only if the people take to the streets to demand better working conditions, wages, safety, and so on, with the outcome being state-level policy decisions.
10. "Powerful" in the Vietnamese context means that peasants and fishers (an important social pillar for the ruling VCP) have been involved in big protests, the extent and urgency of which makes them "sensitive," unable to be ignored by the state. "Powerful" and "sensitive" in the Indonesian context mean that the state could not ignore them. For example, city dwellers' strong critique of the neglect of infrastructure and the pressure to come up with a solution also emanating from small and medium-sized enterprises. Indonesian farmers and other rural dwellers made the high urgency and the health-related costs of ecological problems caused by industrial plants and extractive industries forcefully visible to politicians.
11. In Vietnam success for protestors covered in these reports was not confined to big, sensitive issues but could also be achieved in less sensitive cases of environmental pollution where production costs have been externalised by various actors.
12. The marine disaster is described in detail in Green Trees (2016). On the flaws in the negotiations and fixing of compensation, see Green Trees (2016, 107–115).
13. An example of Vingroup's influence and the willingness of those in power to be support it came in June 2020 when Prime Minister Ngyuen Xuan Phuc approved the construction of a \$9.3 billion tourist resort led by Vingroup and despite civil groups, local media, and environmental activists warning of the profound environmental impacts (see *Nikkei Asia*, June 18, 2020).

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ORCID

Jörg Wischermann  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2487-336X>

Thi Viet Phuong Dang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3767-0863>

George Martin Sirait  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0740-189X>

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