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## INTRODUCTION

### **Political Criticism and the Party-State**

Since 1975, after thirty years of war, people in Vietnam have largely lived in peace under a political system that in several respects has scarcely changed. The Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) remains the country's only authorized political party. Its Secretariat, Political Bureau, and Central Committee set national policy priorities. The government's prime minister and other top officials are invariably high-ranking VCP leaders. Every five years, nationwide elections select National Assembly delegates to represent the numerous constituencies within the country. Most constituencies have more candidates than the total number of seats, so voters have some choice among persons but not among political parties. Nearly all nominees are VCP members and hence nearly all the delegates elected are too. Similar procedures are used to elect officials at each subnational level of government.

Despite these continuities, however, political life in Vietnam has changed dramatically. Since the late 1980s to early 1990s, the country's political economy has been renovated: markets have replaced the centralized state-run economic system; family farming has displaced collectivized agriculture; and state-owned enterprises no longer dominate all production and services, much of which is now under the sway of private businesses and foreign companies. The state's reach into Vietnamese citizens' lives has receded significantly. For instance, in the 1970s to 1980s, the government enforced tight restrictions on travel, people had little freedom to form their own associations outside of state-authorized organizations and activities, nearly all urban residents lived in government-controlled housing, and citizens had almost no access to information and publications beyond what official agencies provided. Today, Vietnamese citizens travel quite easily and live in private housing. They also form, usually with little interference from authorities, their own groups, clubs, and organizations around such interests and needs as health, environment, religion, sport, commerce, science, education, and politics. Some civic organizations register with government agencies; many do not. Official government and VCP-run organizations are still active but no longer monopolize associational life in the country.

Sources for news and other information have also been diversifying. State-authorized newspapers, radio and television stations, and publications continue and are still censored. But they have become more numerous, and their content, style, format, and funding have expanded enormously. Meanwhile, media beyond the state's control have vaulted from practically nothing in the 1970s and 1980s to virtually countless. Many Vietnamese now readily access international television and radio stations and read—often online—newspapers and publications from around the globe. Social media, especially Facebook, have become extremely popular in Vietnam. Citizens also use—and create—newsletters, magazines, blogs, and websites produced in Vietnam with content ranging from the very personal to the highly political.

The change in Vietnam that most interested me when preparing this book is the rise and range of public political criticism. Until the early 1990s, discontent about the economy, housing, education, employment, land use, government officials, state policies, and practically all other political issues was rarely voiced openly. It was whispered among family and friends, and acted on in surreptitious and quotidian ways out of sight and earshot of untrusted others lest the critic suffer reprimands that could include imprisonment. Such everyday disapproval and resistance is still ubiquitous. In addition, however, Vietnamese people since the mid-1990s have been speaking out publicly and in many ways on numerous political matters. I focus on four clusters of critics: factory workers striking to demand better wages and living conditions, villagers demonstrating and petitioning against corruption and land appropriations, citizens opposing China's encroachments into Vietnam and authorities' reactions, and dissidents criticizing the entire regime and pressing for democratization.

The book argues that public political criticism since the mid-1990s has evolved into a prominent feature of Vietnam's political landscape, and state authorities have dealt with it with a combination of responsiveness, toleration, and repression. Indeed, one important reason why public political criticism has grown is that authorities have been unable and to a degree unwilling to stifle it. A second reason is Vietnamese people from many walks of life and in numerous parts of the nation have pushed, sometimes aggressively, to expand the arena for speaking out on a wide range of issues.

Foreign commentaries have often described Vietnam's Communist Party government as a totalitarian or authoritarian system that countenances little or no criticism. Reports from Freedom House stress that the regime has been "silencing critics" through numerous means and that every year since about 2007 the "intolerance for political dissent" has been "growing" and a "climate for civil liberties and political freedoms" has been "worsening." The only book-length examination of how Vietnamese authorities deal with dissent concludes that the government "tolerates no dissent or opposition." Similar views have been expressed by several members of the U.S. Congress. In recent years, annual reports about Vietnam from Human Rights Watch and the U.S. State Department, while not branding the Vietnamese government as totally repressive, depict it as extremely intolerant of political dissent of any kind.

Several scholars on Vietnam, however, see the country's political life very differently. For instance, one long-time Vietnam researcher has written that since the late 1990s, "political development has entered an extraordinary, if undefined and not yet formally recognized phase. Coercion and repression remain menacing, though not dominant, features of daily social life" and there are forums for "dissent and contentious politics, which are more difficult to deal with than in the past when ... harassment, arrest, and imprisonment were the hallmarks of the state's repressive capacities." Actually, observed another scholar of Vietnam, the country "has exactly the kind of political system that stimulates dissidence. It is sufficiently open to tolerate a certain degree of dissent, but dissidents do not lose their lives. At the same time, political opposition carries sufficient risk to provide the dissident with an aura of moral courage." Writing about communication facilities in Vietnam, another analyst said, "There is no legal, independent media in Vietnam. Every single publication belongs to part of the state or the Communist Party. But this is not the whole story—if it was, there would be very little dynamism at work in Vietnam and, as we know, it is one of the most dynamic and aspirational societies on the planet. This has been enabled by the strange balance between the [Communist] Party's control, and lack of

control.” “Political control,” argued another scholar, is certainly present in Vietnam “but this does not mean that all criticisms and opposition to the VCP and the government are disallowed.”

This book shows with more detail and analysis than any previous study that public criticism in Vietnam ranges from lambasting corrupt authorities to opposing the political system, from condemning repression against bloggers to resisting land confiscations, from protesting working conditions in factories to questioning the state’s foreign policies. The citizens speaking out are also diverse: rural villagers, urban workers, religious leaders, intellectuals, students, environmental activists, leaders of professional associations, and former (even some current) government and VCP officials. The extent, variety, and vibrancy of public political debate and dissent in today’s Vietnam correspond to the assessments of the scholars just cited rather than to the commentaries noted earlier. Even if one focuses, as chapters 4 and 5 do, on the regime’s harshest critics—those advocating the demise of the one-party political system and the rise of a democratic government—the claim that Vietnamese authorities tolerate no dissent or opposition is erroneous.

Common labels applied by scholars, journalists, and diplomats to Vietnam’s political system are totalitarian, authoritarian, and dictatorship. Each, however, is problematic because Vietnam under Communist Party rule has never conformed well to long-standing definitions for these terms. For instance, one feature of a dictatorship is “emergency rule that suspends or violates temporarily the constitutional norms” for exercising authority. Communist Party rule in Vietnam, by contrast, is provided for in the country’s constitution and it is not a temporary arrangement, having lasted since 1954 in half the nation and since 1975 throughout. Authoritarianism is a political system that, among other features, lacks an “elaborate and guiding ideology” and, if there is a political party, it “is not a well-organized ideological organization.” The VCP, however, is ideological and highly organized, even though analysts do debate its abilities to deal with challenges facing the nation. Among the features of totalitarianism that do not conform to Vietnam’s system are central control of the economy and a secret police that terrorizes the country.

Because these general labels are inadequate, scholars have proposed alternatives for one-party political systems, particularly those in Vietnam and China. Each of these two countries has a well-organized Communist Party that led successful revolutions for national independence, espouses an ideology based on socialist principles, sets policy agendas for governing, penetrates virtually all levels and institutions of the state (including the military and police), and successfully oversaw the conversion of a centralized and collectivized economic system to a market economy. To summarize these features, Jonathan London has made a strong case to apply the label “market-Leninism” to the regimes in Vietnam and China.

That term, however, does not capture interactions between the governors and the governed—how authorities and citizens relate, how governing is done, and how policies are made and implemented. There may have been a time when such interactions were irrelevant, and maybe even now that could be true for some aspects of governing. But since at least the late 1970s, relations between authorities and citizens have created a significant dynamic in the politics of both China and Vietnam. To reflect that in a summary label for the political system scholars have proposed such terms as soft authoritarianism, consultative Leninism, contentious authoritarianism, deliberative authoritarianism, networked authoritarianism, fragmented authoritarianism, resilient authoritarianism, and responsive authoritarianism.

Proponents of these terms say little to explain the nouns “authoritarianism” and “Leninism” beyond highlighting the prominence of the Communist Party, the absence of competitive elections, and the frequency of repression. What they emphasize is the meaning of the adjectives, which, despite some differences, all try to encapsulate the same phenomena: the political systems in Vietnam and China, in addition to the features summarized above as market-Leninism, also include methods, opportunities, institutions, and organizations through which citizens can advocate changes, criticize policies, and resist government actions; authorities, in turn, often listen, respond, discuss, and even accept citizens’ concerns. These aspects help to account for the durability of the regimes in Vietnam and China. And they can be acknowledged without ignoring or downplaying repression, which is also prominent in each country. As two analysts have put it, significant reforms “have fundamentally altered the two states’ interactions with their citizens, often for the better. Recognizing that these countries are authoritarian and use coercive policies regularly should not blind us to the significant, well-documented governance changes that are improving people’s lives.”

Research for this book and studies by others have led me to regard Vietnam’s political system as a Communist Party-state that deals with public political criticism in ways ranging from responsiveness and toleration to repression. Responsiveness means to consider, accommodate, or make concessions to the concerns, criticisms, and demands of individuals, groups, and sectors of society. Toleration refers to countenancing criticism and dissent without doing much to stop it or respond positively to it. Repression means to prevent, stifle, or suppress, through force and other methods, citizens saying or doing things objectionable to authorities. My summary label for this system is a “responsive-repressive party-state.”

Responsiveness and toleration along with repression have figured in some other analyses of Vietnam and China. An evaluation of the political dynamics in both countries since the 1980s concluded that, although both party-states have some authoritarian and totalitarian features, their form of governance challenges “the assumption that effective political responsiveness requires competitive parliamentary politics.” Referring specifically to how Vietnam’s Communist Party reacts to political dissent, one study said the party “is well aware that ‘hard’ repression should only be exercised as a last resort.... It has taken certain measures to show that it is responsive to criticisms in a bid to consolidate its power foundations and improve its legitimacy.” In China, the regime has reacted to street marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, and other public protests “with a mixture of repression and sympathy.” One study showing that Chinese authorities react to labor unrest in both repressive and responsive ways went on to speculate that the “ability of governments like China’s to both demonstrate concern for popular grievances and yet erect some parameters on how far protesters can go in pressing their claims may provide a partial explanation for such governments’ surprising longevity.”

The hyphenated term “party-state” is used in several analyses of Vietnam as well as China. It conveys that the VCP is entwined with the state. The VCP is an organization in its own right, extending from its central offices and leaders in the nation’s capital, Hà Nội, to its local offices and officials in virtually every town and village throughout the country. State institutions—ministries for finance, agriculture, health, education, etc., as well as the military and police—also extend from Hà Nội to every province, city, district, ward, and subdistrict. The principal officials at each of those levels are VCP members. In that way and by setting national and local government agendas, the VCP controls most functions of the state while at the same time deriving much of its income from the state. In addition, VCP members are typically leaders of

the sectoral organizations—for peasants, workers, women, youth, artists, journalists, minority groups, and others—authorized and partly funded by the state.

This summary, I recognize, glosses over tension, debate, rivalry, negotiation, corruption, and other complexities within Vietnam's party-state as leaders and agencies at all levels make and implement policies, mobilize resources, and contend with the myriad aspects of governing. I note those dynamics when they influence how authorities deal with public political criticism, but for the most part they are beyond the scope of this book.<sup>25</sup>

## **Methodology**

Just as the Internet and other electronic technology have helped Vietnamese citizens to speak out, journalists and news agencies to disperse their articles, and government agencies to publicize their policies and activities, so too that technology has enabled me to trace and scrutinize the expansion of public political criticisms and the variety in party-state authorities' behavior. Much of this book draws on materials critics themselves wrote, interviews they gave to journalists, video clips they shot, and recordings they made that were circulated on websites, blogs, and social media. It also uses online newsletters and newspapers that critics produced as well as newspapers and magazines published (in printed and electronic formats) by the party-state's media outlets and by several foreign news agencies. Also valuable for this book are reports and documents that government ministries and research centers and the VCP prepared and often posted on their websites.

Realizing the rapid growth and diversification of relevant Internet materials is partly what convinced me in 2002–3 that extensive research on this topic was possible. A research assistant, Phạm Thu Thủy, and I developed a list of topics and subtopics pertaining to political discord and authorities' actions and a list of websites from which we could regularly download pertinent materials. From the outset, I wanted to know what Vietnamese in Vietnam were saying and doing, and hence I focused mainly on information coming from them and paid much less attention to materials from overseas Vietnamese organizations and media. Initially the number of relevant websites was manageable for us to monitor regularly. But soon there were several hundred, far more than we could handle, so I had to focus on those that were most useful. I also reduced the list of topics and subtopics.

Augmenting online resources were my several stays in Vietnam, mostly in Hà Nội and vicinity, between 2006 and 2016. During those trips I met Vietnamese who shared with me their knowledge and experiences. Initially, because political criticism was a delicate subject, I usually described my interests very broadly and I did not attempt to meet critics themselves for fear of getting them or me in trouble with Vietnamese authorities. From about 2012, however, the subject had become less controversial and Vietnamese scholars, journalists, lawyers, and others talked more forthrightly with me. I also met several critics active in issues pertaining to labor, land, Vietnam-China relations, and democratization, the four broad topics I had decided to emphasize. Besides face-to-face discussions with such people, I communicated with some by e-mail. Also while in Hà Nội I located in Vietnam's National Library some newspapers, magazines, and books that I had not been able to find elsewhere. While collecting and analyzing material from all these sources, I kept in mind five clusters of questions: (1) what are critics saying and what are their rationales and objectives; (2) who are the critics and what are their backgrounds; (3) to what extent do critics emphasizing one issue, such as Vietnam-China relations or land appropriations, interact and collaborate with critics stressing a different matter,

such as workers' conditions or democratization; (4) what are the reactions of party-state authorities and how does their behavior affect what critics say and do; and (5) what does the content, form, and range of public political criticisms and authorities' actions reveal about Vietnam's political system?

Throughout my research, I also had a broad conception of "politics" and "political," similar to that articulated by other studies. Politics is about the control, allocation, and use of important resources and the values and ideas underlying those activities. Resources include land, labor, water, money, power, education, among numerous other tangible and intangible assets. Political ways to control, distribute, and use resources can range from cooperation and collaboration, to discussions and debates, to bargains and compromises, to conflicts and violence. Political activity occurs in numerous settings, not just in governments and other state institutions but also in corporations, factories, universities, religious groups, villages, families, and many other entities. And it has numerous forms, not just the behavior of government officials, actions during elections, and efforts to influence public officials, but also often people's activities while they work, study, raise families, and live their lives. Factory employees criticizing their working conditions and pressing employers to improve them are being political; so are employers as they accede to or oppose such efforts. Also political are discussions, disputes, and protests about how land is used and distributed, about fishing in contested waters, about relations between Vietnam and China, and about Vietnam's system of government.

I end my analysis at 2015, roughly twenty years after political criticism became increasingly public in Vietnam, a sufficiently lengthy period to demonstrate its prominence. Public contestation on political issues in the country persists, and hence researching it could continue. But I needed to stop in order to write this book.

## Chapter Previews

The book's chapters focus on topics around which considerable public debate and protest emerged, starting in the mid-1990s. **The topic in chapter 1 concerns labor.** Between 1995 and 2015, Vietnamese workers frequently and publicly criticized the conditions under which they labored in enterprises, some owned entirely by the party-state but most owned partly or fully by private, especially foreign, companies. Workers' foremost ways of speaking out were thousands of strikes, some with thousands of participants each. None of the strikes were legal. Few were highly organized; most erupted with modest preparation. The chapter explains how these protests occurred, what workers wanted in order to improve their conditions, and why authorities did not criminalize the strikes and rarely were repressive. Often government officials were sympathetic to workers' demands.

**Chapter 2 is about land.** Villagers in numerous parts of Vietnam spoke out against local government officials and property developers who, the protesters claimed, were confiscating their farmlands. The chapter identifies two patterns in how villagers protested: in one, people in the same vicinity peacefully pressed their claims and sought help from higher officials to force local authorities to meet their demands; in the second, villagers from numerous places collaborated and sometimes used force. In both patterns, villagers' reasons for speaking out were similar and their notions of fairness and justice went beyond what the law recognized. They also sought support and advice from Vietnamese in other sectors of society. Authorities' reactions ranged from tolerating, even trying to accommodate, villagers' complaints to violently evicting them from their fields, breaking up demonstrations, and arresting participants.

Public criticism aimed at protecting the nation is the subject of chapter 3. It examines what fishers, students, writers, and citizens from other walks of life did to speak out against Chinese encroachments into Vietnamese territory. These Vietnamese sought to defend their nation's sovereignty and pressure party-state officials to join them. To some extent authorities did, but often they harassed, combated, and occasionally arrested critics, reactions that puzzled many Vietnamese. In trying to understand why party-state authorities were frequently hostile to patriotic citizens while apparently docile toward China, numerous critics came to doubt the regime leaders' commitment to preserving the Vietnamese nation.

Democratization is chapter 4's topic. It analyzes the views and actions of regime critics who wanted to replace the party-state with a democratic political system. Their objective was much more threatening to the regime than those of the critics who briefly emerged in the mid-1950s and the late 1980s, the only previous occasions the party-state faced significant public criticism. Although regime critics in 1995–2015 agreed on their objective and to pursue it nonviolently, they disagreed on how to displace the party-state. They also differed on the VCP's role, if any, in changing the regime and on the relationship between development and democracy.

Chapter 5 continues the topic of democratization by examining how Vietnamese authorities dealt with regime critics. The analysis shows that to some extent party-state officials tolerated dissidents and that repression was not uniform. Some regime critics were not detained; many more were confined for brief periods but never imprisoned. Others were imprisoned but after serving their prison sentences and resuming their political dissent, they were not imprisoned again. Only a few dissidents served additional prison terms. Also, crimes for which dissidents were convicted became less onerous and the length of their imprisonment became shorter. Compared to the past, when the party-state decisively repressed critics of the political system, it was unable to do so in 1995–2015.

Chapter 6 reprises the book's argument and speculates on the future course of public political criticism in Vietnam. The diversity and intensity of speaking out will likely continue and become more pronounced. That, however, may not evolve into a massive movement aimed at replacing the party-state with a multiparty and election-based democratic system, particularly if the present regime effectively combines repression with toleration and responsiveness.