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The politics of civil society narratives in contestation between liberalism and nationalism in authoritarian Vietnam

Anh Ngoc Vu[a] and Binh Quang Le[b]

[a]School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, Newcastle, UK; [b]People's Participation Working Group, Hanoi, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

The liberal-dominated civil society theory tends to obscure the dynamics and intricacy of state-society relations in authoritarian contexts. Existing accounts on Vietnam have not cast adequate light onto the struggles of ideology and positions between the state and civil society. Drawing on the most recent data from social media in Vietnam, the article contributes a new analytical approach to understanding state-society relations by offering granular insights into the contrasting but mutually reinforcing narratives adopted by the state and civil society actors. In particular, the article steers attention towards the opportunities that crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have provided for ideological struggles and legitimacy building between these actors. The paper argues that rather than continuously pushing forward the rhetoric 'civic space is shrinking', these alternatives must be steeped within wider historical understanding, attuned to particularities of the social-political context, and ultimately reflective of the evolving intricate state-society relations.

Introduction

Doi moi (renovation) policy launched in 1986 that marked Vietnam's transition from state socialism to market socialism has transformed the country socially and economically and had a profound effect on state–society relations. Adopting 'open-door' policies, being a poor, post-war and transitional country, Vietnam conveniently became eligible for international aid. Multi- and bi-lateral donors and neoliberal institutions quickly arrived in the country to exercise their 'good governance' agenda and exert their presence in advising and financing Vietnam's economic and management reforms (Lux & Straussman, 2004; Salemink, 2006). The country has thus enjoyed steady and prolonged macro-economic growth, made significant progress in relation to many of the former Millennium Development Goals' (MDGs) targets, and now the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and reduced the proportion of the population in poverty (US$1.90/day) from over 32% in 2011 to below to 2 percent (World Bank, 2021). Nevertheless, the economic liberalisation did not equate with the political liberalisation, multi-party democracy is not tolerated by

the ruling Communists. 'Leaders talk about democracy, but one-party rule continues' (Turley, 1993, p. 2). The pursuit of the market-Leninist governance since the late 1980s has led to the emergence of some forms of civil society such as non-government organisations, discrete mini-scale public protests, and more recently a vibrant virtual public sphere, which are to some extent tolerated or at least not so easy for the state to control as observed through growing online activism (Bui, 2015). Notably, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) continues to maintain a monopolistic control of state institutions, and contain genuine public participation, as well as the space within which civil society can manoeuvre (Gainsborough, 2002; Vu, 2017a). The CPV enjoys a practical monopoly over ideology, which is disseminated by the party organs, state and mass organisations, and through educational, cultural and other activities.

This article offers a nuanced and updated account on ideological struggles between state and civil society. The emphasis on the divergence and convergence of narratives by both the state and civil society is important, and forms part of the article's claim to originality, since this point is often missed in the literature which tends to place the emphasis on civil society resistance or NGO-led activism. It also argues that there is the need for alternatives to liberal rhetoric to protect and advance the political space of civil society, which are to be steeped within the historical understanding, attuned to socio-cultural specificities and ultimately reflective of the complexity of evolving state–society relations rather than simply continue to push the cliched rhetoric 'civic space is shrinking'. In Vietnam, public protests or any forms of street activism tends to quickly invite state repression, thus civil society actors and ordinary people seek refuge on social media (e.g. Facebook) to voice their concerns and exercise civic activism. Therefore, elucidating how and in what way state and civil society interact with and contradict one another on social media provides a crucial epistemological and ontological slant of changing state–society relations in authoritarian contexts. Understanding these granular insights and dynamics is of particular use to numerous actors, including donors, development partners and civil society itself in their efforts to build a healthy ecosystem for civil society to manoeuvre in the country.

In this article, we first introduce the methodology of our research, then examine how different political traditions are understood, paying particular attention to their perspectives on civil society and state. Following this, we provide key insights into Vietnam's civil society in the contemporary politics. The final section prior to the conclusion turns to the analysis of narratives regarding civil society on the social media.

Civil society in different political traditions

Liberalism

Civil society theory has been dominated by liberalism. For classical liberals, civil society is made up of voluntary organisations that exist between individuals and the state, and most social problems can be more effectively dealt with through these voluntary organisations because they have the knowledge about the individuals that they are dealing with (Diamond, 1994). In terms of free market, economic exchange should be left to voluntary activities between individuals. For classical liberals, the goal of the government is simply to protect people's life, liberty and property, and anything beyond that is not

justifiable. Since the last decades of the last century, liberalism has been intensified by the emergence of neo-liberalism that strongly advocates deregulation, free market and limited state intervention into the capitalist economy (Harvey, 2006). How civil society works or how it should be is strongly influenced by the dominant neo-liberalism. The cult of neo-liberalism was heightened when the Socialist Block led by the Soviet Union collapsed in early 1990s. For liberals, civil society is supposed to restrict state power; and emancipation can only be pursued and attained in the associational sphere outside the state (Chandhoke, 2007). Liberals advocate the importance of a free public sphere, separate from the apparatus of the state and economy, where citizens can freely debate, deliberate and engage in collective democratic will formation (Charney, 1998). Such liberal view has been embraced by development agencies over the past decades, especially with respect to the discourse of development aid, the rhetoric of governance reform and NGO support (Hannah, 2007).

Liberals' emphasis on state and society as two distinct spheres is normative, too analytically simplistic, and obscures the dialectic and complex relationships between the two. This counters local evidence regarding associationalism in authoritarian contexts where civil society and state are enmeshed within a grid of heterogeneous relationships ranging from co-optation to collaboration, from complementariness to ambivalence and from antagonism to contention (Farrington & Lewis, 2014).

Conservatism

'Conservative' is a generic term for right-wing viewpoint occupying the political spectrum between liberalism and fascism (Skorupski, 2015). This political tradition is sceptical of abstract reasoning in politics, and appeals to living traditions, historical, non-state institutions such as civil society including family, community and church. Conservatism is not in favour of radical or wholesale revolutionary change, but advocates a piecemeal, more moderate reform. Change must be cautious, because knowledge is imperfect, and there will be unintended consequences (Goldberg, 2018). Conservatives reject the liberal's notion of abstract, ahistorical and universal rights, and treat rights and duties on the model of the common law, depending on tradition and practice, rather than abstract notions of human rights (Scruton, 1980). Conservatives aim to 'conserve the political arrangements that have historically shown themselves to be conducive to good lives thus understood' (Kekes, 1998, p. 27). They regard history as 'the best guide to understanding the present and planning for the future' (Kekes, 1997, p. 352). Conservatism's organic social vision is inherently sceptical of the state, and puts faith instead in the family, private property and religion. For conservatives, individuals and local communities are better assessors of their own needs and problems than distant bureaucrats. Scruton (2014) demonstrates that people live a life based on compromise and the common law which tells them that the ordinary person oversees the law, not the people who are pretending to impose it on them. Not all social problems have market solution; there is therefore a need for maintenance of traditions in education, culture and the common law (Scruton, 2014). Conservatives think that progressive ideologies such as communism and socialism seek to create a kingdom of heaven on earth, which stands in contrast with conservatism that is imperfectionist, pragmatic and anti-utopian (Scruton, 1980).

Over the past ten years, across many parts of the world from the post-communist states to the long-established Western democracies, conservative forms of civic activism have been multiplying and gaining traction. Amidst the rise of conservative civil society, more precaution is required to avoid falling into a reductionist judgement of conservative civil society as an ontologically bad thing. The existing accounts define conservative civil society as that which promotes one or a combination of the following: conservative social values, religious values, strong national identities, exclusionary ethnic identities, traditional or customary identities and institutional forms, conservative political ideology, or a curtailment of liberal personal rights (Youngs, 2018). However, these accounts contend that groups under the label of conservative civil society are not identical and there needs to be a nuanced understanding of these emerging forms. It would be a reductionist or extremist view that conservative civil society are merely reflexive of the rise of extreme nationalism, nativism, anti-immigration sentiment, illiberalism, or authoritarianism (Youngs, 2018). While conservative civil society does not necessarily involve antidemocratic agendas or violent tactics, some prominent groups do include one or both. However, existing research highlights that conservative civil society is not synonymous with uncivil society (Youngs, 2018). Some parts of it may indeed be uncivil in these terms; other parts are peaceful and democratic mobilisers, even they can be critical of social liberalism. Conservative forms of civil society are diverse across the globe. For example, conservative activism is long entrenched in Indian society. It underpins Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist political project and continues to deepen the centuries-old caste system that divides Indian society and the patriarchal norms that still prescribe dress codes for women, in line with the ideas of the earliest Hindu thinkers (Vijayana, 2018). Thailand's conservative civil society that is closely associated with nationalist-royalist movement, has sought to uphold mainstream Thai identity premised on the belief that upholding monarchical rule and Buddhism ensures national survival (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018). They believe that democratisation is challenging this identity, therefore conservative movements have aligned with other CSOs that are disillusioned with electoral democracy to counter the perceived threats. This development has contributed to Thailand's recent democratic breakdown (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018).

The rise in conservative civil society signals how conservative movements define themselves explicitly as a counterpoint to internationally supported civil society. Notably, many conservative civic organisations insist they have deeper and more authentic societal roots than their counterparts, liberal civil society, which are created mainly at the behest of international donors (Youngs, 2018).

Nationalism

Nationalism is a contested concept. It is seen as inborn and self-nourishing cultural bonds which link members of a nation into a relational whole (Lawrence, 2016). It is not imposed from above but living energies emanating from within; it reflects the shared meanings and sentiments which in time form a people's collective soul (Lawrence & Lawrence, 2005). In modern times, definitions of nationalism are varied (see Table 1 for some examples). Sociologists conceptualise nationalism as an ideology mobilised by political elites, i.e. 'a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent' (Gellner, 1983, p. 1). However, nationalist ideology is not solely

Table 1. Conceptions of nationalism.

	Political (focus on elites' political projects and discursive practices)	Quotidian (focus on lived culture, ideas, and sentiments of non-elites)
Ideology ('nationalism' refers to narrow set of ideas)	Gellner (1983, p. 1): 'a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent'	Kosterman and Feshbach (1989, p. 271): 'a perception of national superiority and an orientation toward national dominance'
Practice ('nationalism' refers to a domain of meaningful social practice)	Brubaker (2004, p. 116): 'a claim on people's loyalty, on their attention, on their solidarity […] used […] to change the way people see themselves, to mobilise loyalties, kindle energies, and articulate demands'	Brubaker (1996, p. 10): 'a heterogeneous set of "nation"-oriented idioms, practices, and possibilities that are continuously available or "endemic" in modern cultural and political life'

Source: Bonikowski (2016, p. 423).

the domain of political elites seeking to legitimise their rule over a territorially bounded people. For political psychologists, 'nationalism is a set of dispositions that cohere at the level of individual actors' (Bonikowski, 2016, p. 429). Kosterman and Feshbach (1989) define nationalism as a perception of national superiority and an orientation toward national dominance' – that is chauvinism (Bonikowski, 2016, p. 429 cited in Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). In light of this view, the nation and the state are not in question; the nation-state is not only legitimate but is exalted above all others. Analytically, nationalism is understood as a set of attitudes that shape the perceptions and behaviours of ordinary people as they interact with political institutions (e.g. by voting) and engage in social interaction (e.g. with immigrants or ethnic minorities) (Bonikowski, 2016). In literature on Europe's anti-immigrant parties, nationalism – indeed a specifically xenophobic and nativist form of nationalism – has become the primary connotation of 'populism' (Brubaker, 2020).

From a distinctive standpoint, Harari (2018) throws light onto the bright side of nationalism, i.e. nationalism finds a way to make people care about strangers (i.e. country fellow citizens) whom they have never met and places they have never visited. Harari argues that the large project of nationalism is to make humans bond with strangers, and the right kind of nationalism is not about hating foreigners, rather it is about loving our compatriots. He provides examples about countries such as Iraq and Syria where internal hatred or weak national sentiments have led to the complete disintegration of the state and murderous civil war. Leaders who present themselves as nationalists should strengthen national unity and trigger human empathy rather than widen the rifts within society by using inflammatory language and divisive politics and by depicting anybody who opposes them not as a legitimate rival but rather as a dangerous traitor. Similarly, Goldberg (2018) highlights that nationalism comes in different kinds, and there is a certain kind of civic nationalism that he argues is healthy because it embraces civic patriotism and civic spirit.

Understanding civil society in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the term 'civil society' remains unrecognised in the official state discourse. The pressure to use this term, Hannah (2007) indicates, was placed on the Vietnamese state by the donor community, since the international development discourse in the 1990 s advocated the strengthening of civil society of liberal democracy model and there was a need to translate into Vietnamese donor documents that use the English term extensively

(Hannah, 2007 cited in Vu, 2017a). A common agenda by these actors focused on supporting the creation of effective institutions of civil society (e.g. grassroots democracy, grassroots organisations and especially local NGOs) that keep the state accountable (see United Nations Development Pogramme, 1999; World Bank, 2001).

Public debates on civil society in the country are influenced by the liberal tradition, thereby Vietnamese scholars tend to define civil society as an ideal, good and democratic organisational model of society. Phan Xuân Sơn (Nghĩa Nhân phỏng vấn) (2006), for instance, says that 'civil society a has natural propensity towards the values such as transparency, openness and fairness, therefore they have abilities to monitor and limit state power, as well as to counter negativities and corruption' (Phan Xuân Sơn (Nghĩa Nhân phỏng vấn), 2006, p. 3). Observing how civil society was promoted in Vietnam, Quang (2010) contends that, discussions and perceptions about civil society in Vietnam are influenced by the definitions of international organisations so much that 'civil society' has been reduced to civil society organisations or nongovernmental organisations, and thereby this concept is inevitably trivialised and deprived of its dialectical nature in relation to the state.

Large scholarship demonstrates that the liberal concept of civil society does not fit into the Vietnamese context (Gray, 1999; Lux & Straussman, 2004; Vu, 2017a). Through thick Western lenses, the concept obscures particularities of historical and political contexts in Vietnam and runs the risk of being backlashed by the ruling regime (Thayer, 2009; Tran-Thanh, 2003). Existing literature tends to view civil society as agents of political and social change (see Kerkvliet, 2010; 2014; 2019; Vu, 2019; Wells-Dang, 2010), or as a process of cross-sectoral networking and alliance building (see Wells-Dang, 2011). It also tends to lay focus on civil society development (see Bui, 2015), or varying forms of civil society activism (see Kerkvliet, 2019; Vu, 2017a), or certain forms of civil society organisation such as civic or issue-oriented organisations (see Wischermann, 2003, 2013), or highlight socio-economic functions of civil society (see Sinh, 2003; 2011). Recently, a tiny fraction of this literature draws attention to the rise to prominence of online activism (see Morris-Jung, 2015; Thi, 2021; Vu, 2017b).

Nevertheless, these existing accounts have not cast adequate light onto the struggles of ideology and positions between the state and civil society, especially how these struggles are portrayed through the political salience of varying narratives or political discourses taken up by both sides on social media is missing. In addition, the resurrection of nationalism and the rise of conservative civil society in many corners of the world, coupled with complexity and heterogeneity of narratives concerning civil society on Vietnam's social media, leads us directly to capturing these timely narratives. In doing so, we attempt to provide a new and nuanced analysis of the struggles of political discourses advanced by the state and civil society. The discourse analysis adopted in this article finds that civil society has tried to legitimate their role, existence and their political space by working within the discursive orbits of the state, especially, by advancing the continuity of culture and positive nationalist values such as 'compatriot-loving' (*yêu đồng bào*).

Methodology

The article captured timely how civil society is narrated and perceived in the virtual sphere (Facebook). In this article, a narrative is viewed in terms of processes rather than in static terms.

Narratives are a form of power, they can divide and isolate, but they can also mobilise and connect (Crabtree-Condor, 2020). We first developed key search words that draw on the literature review and inputted them in the Search engine on Facebook. Multiple preliminary concepts include civil society, right-wing, left-wing, liberal, conservative, independent, autonomous, hostile, reactionary forces, anti-development, Marxist, counter-Marxist, socialist, patriotic, nationalistic, pluralist, democracy, etc. Using this broad-ranging search catalogue enabled us to capture as much as possible the different slants of narratives on civil society. Next, upon the search completed, Facebook displayed a list of accounts (either individual Facebook accounts or Facebook pages) that contained these words. The search results were used for deeper investigation. Exploring narratives on social media became a strategic methodological approach amidst the intensified impact of the COVID-19, because it enabled us to articulate a range of vantage points that emerged from diverse actors pertinent to varied positions and structures. This also allowed us to examine in breadth as well as in depth how narratives concerning civil society are performed, negotiated and/or countered by different actors in relation with the positions within which they are enmeshed. All data collected were inputted into NVIVO for coding and developing analytical themes.

Ethical issues regarding this online research were addressed thoroughly. A prime concern relates to whether data collected on social media is considered public or private data. Key to this argument is that social media users are required to accept a set of terms and conditions of the platform that they use so that they are granted access to it, and these terms and conditions include clauses on how one's data may be accessed by third parties, including researchers (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Equally notable, we only collected data from openly, publicly accessible sites on Facebook. We did not collect any data in a closed or private group or a closed discussion forum, of which membership approval or permission is needed. This helped to secure research ethics, since data accessed from open and public pages present less ethical issues than that found in closed or private online groups (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). As emphasised by Hewson et al. (2003), 'data that have been made deliberately and voluntarily available in the public internet domains should be accessible to a researcher providing anonymity is ensured' (Hewson et al., 2003 cited in Madge, 2007, p. 14). Emphatically again, data for this research was exclusively collected from publicly accessible posts on pro-state Fanpages, and Facebook accounts with high number of followers. Once their posts are published publicly, they seek to disseminate them to as many audiences as possible. In this research, we chose not to anonymise the public pro-state Fanpages because the aim of their platforms focuses on the propagation and dissemination of the state agenda and discourse. The same approach was applied to the Facebook accounts whose posts, once republished, are perceived not to cause any harm to their safety.

Key findings and discussions

On the ground, civil society in Vietnam has for decades been fighting a battle for its legitimacy, voice and space, and it is not winning. Since 2010, the adversity it faces has surged. The government managed to suppress critical voice, in particular, they stirred different

competing narratives of what civil society 'is' or 'should be', what it 'does', and 'how it does' in terms of functions of civil society. The Communist Party's resolution No. 04-NQ/TW issued in 2018 was an escalating state intolerance to civil society, whereby all civil society-related discussions were suspended, and civil society were de facto labelled as a force that undermines the Marxist ideology. In its aftermath, state-controlled mass media were not allowed to mention the term 'civil society' which has subsequently been removed from all government documents. In addition, inter/national NGOs and the UN agencies in Vietnam were compelled to remove the term from their project and strategy documents. Apparently, the increased government aggression arose to eliminate discussions and narratives around civil society on state-controlled platforms. From every podium, including national television and social media, the government is pushing a narrative discrediting civil society, for example, activists and critical civil society groups are labelled as anti-government, counter-development, donor-funded disrupters, especially as counter-revolutionary or hostile forces.

On social media, the battle of narratives on the nature of civil society and its roles in addressing social, economic and environmental problems accelerated. Two distinct groups emerged. One group led by dissidents and activists emphasised the need to have an independent civil society to expose corruption and power-abused policemen and defend victims of human rights violation. These narratives generally aimed at criticising the government and the CPV for their failure in tackling social, economic and human rights issues. They blamed the one-party system for pervasive corruption, power abuse and human rights violation, therefore they advocate for multi-partyism and independent civil society. The other group led by government-funded propaganda force and government sympathisers attacked dissidents, activists and (multi-party) democracy supporters as counter-revolutionary force. They labelled those who criticised the government as foreign-backed forces who received money from overseas organisations to overthrow the government and undermine the party leadership. Coupled with the introduction of the cyber security law and the imprisonment of dissidents, they framed civil society as anti-government and caused fear among the public to intimidate them from supporting and taking part in civil society movement. They used the footages of riots, protests and violations that happened in other countries to place blame on the multi-party system and independent civil society for chaos and development failures. They associated one party system with stability and economic growth. They demonstratively argued that the problems such as inequality, environmental pollution, land grabs or lack of fundamental rights are simply inevitable costs of development – not the problems caused by the one-party system or lack of independent civil society. The clash of narratives was unabated. Each group told their own stories advancing their world views and motivations. There was no dialogue or conversation between both sides but accusation and insult.

Predominant narratives concerning civil society help to reinforce existing power relations and make them relevant to the average people. In Vietnam, the compelling narratives strongly promoted by the state aim to undermine civil society and entice the public to comply with the status quo, i.e. the authoritarian rhetoric in which the self-claimed greatness and glory of the Communist Party must not be challenged and must be embraced by the people of all societal spectrum. Voice and deed of criticism towards this rhetoric are vulnerable to state aggression. Alongside with this rhetoric are state-dominated narratives about civil society with negative virtues repeated over and over in all sorts of channel and

platform from mainstream media to virtual sphere, from the party cells of the whole state apparatus to grassroots neighbourhoods. These narratives are forcefully imposed on people's emotions and beliefs. This affects solidarity and public trust, and more troubling, it creates despair that discourages the public from joining civic action and undermines civic responsibility. The paragraphs that follow first throw light onto the state-led narratives about civil society, then narratives arising from civil society itself.

State-led narratives

First, the pro-state agenda advances nationalist narratives that label civil society as a powerful instrument by 'hostile forces' to implement the strategy of 'peaceful evolution' and counter 'our country', 'our national unity' and 'the people's government'. They skilfully use nationalist tactics to discern between 'us' and 'them', while the former comprises of 'pure' party members, public officials and 'patriotic', state-loyalist populace, the latter are perceived as external 'hostile forces' and civil society as their powerful instrument. They equate criticism of the party state with 'treason' (*tội phản quốc*), i.e. countering the party monopoly of power means countering the Fatherland, the national unity, the national interests and the people's government, and the 'Socialist regime' is equated to 'our Fatherland'. This aims to tap into Vietnamese people's deeply seated patriotism and provoke their suspicion and hostility against civil society. In a critical account towards a prominent independent activist, the pro-state Fanpage 'Vững Tin Theo Đảng' (Loyal to the Communist Party) that attracts almost 65,000 followers and receives over 52,000 likes, writes:

> […] He (the activist) returned to Vietnam to undertake disruptive activities; he is an extended arm of overseas reactionary organisations. He colluded with several domestic treason groups *against the country*, calling for the overthrow of the people's government *(chính quyền nhân dân)*. […] Surely one day he must pay a very expensive price for his *most despicable act against human life, i.e., treason* (Vững Tin Theo Đảng, 2020, italics for authors' emphasis)

The post was then shared by nearly 400 people, and among total 64 comments it received, most of which used derogatory language to convey their support to the post. Most notable are the comments that accused the activist of betraying the national interests and the nation, so he deserves a severe punishment. One called him 'a dog that betrayed the country, countering the national interests, attacking the revolutionary achievements that were obtained by the blood and lives of our fathers and predecessors'.

From a class-based perspective, Tuyen Giao (2020) (a party propaganda online platform) vividly states that

> many civil society organisations in Vietnam do not take the stance of the working class and the working people, nor they work to contribute to building and protecting the Fatherland, but the leaders of these organisations seek to serve the interests of a group of people, as opposed to the Nation and the national interests.

Likewise, Công An Nhân Dân Online (The People's Public Security) (2020) demonstrates:

> 'In order to oppose the regime, in recent years hostile forces have aggressively taken advantage of civil society to exercise "peaceful evolution", in which exploiting the fundamental rights such as right to association, citizenship rights, or right to freedom of press, the external hostile forces have colluded with the internal retrograded and degenerated elements (*phần*

tử thoái hóa biến chất) to use civil society to put pressures and interfere in Vietnam's internal affairs, demand the state to ensure unlimited freedom in societal sphere. […] In particular, these groups advocate for the right to unlimited freedom of expression and the formation of *independent* organisations that participate in community everyday life and *reject the party leadership and the state management*' (Công an nhân dân Online, 2020, italic for authors' emphasis).

The excerpt above is from the article 'Identifying wicked plots in using civil society to destroy Vietnam' in Công an Nhân dân Online, which was later circulated on a large scale by pro-state Facebook fanpages with high number of followers and viewers, such as 'Yêu nước thời kỳ 4.0' which is liked and followed by 14,286 and 14,742 people respectively, or 'Lửa Hàn' liked and followed by 5000 people, or in particular 'Cờ đỏ Tp. Hồ Chí Mình' fanpage that obtains over 66,000 likes and nearly 70,000 followers, and 'Hòa Bình' Fanpage that receives nearly 48,000 likes and attracts almost 63,000 followers. The combined synergy of these Fanpages in attacking civil society is comprehensible, because when the propagation apparatus targets civil society, the pro-state articles equipped with detailed defamatory narratives about civil society are published on mainstream media, then circulated widely on pro-state Facebook fanpages.

The state-sponsored propaganda groups understand the need to create a narrative that could attract the wider public to stand on their side. In achieving this, they resort to emotional factors such as patriotism, great national unity and trigger an anti-Western cultural sentiment, to spark wider social support. A pro-state Facebook page Lửa Hàn writes:

> … *independent civil society groups* inside the country collude with external hostile forces to mobilise and develop resources and manpower, they work on the principle of "nonviolence", propagate and *entice separatist sentiment, autonomy*, and distort history, *deepen national conflicts and divisiveness*, *undermine the great unity bloc of the entire people*, deteriorate public trust in the Party and the State; create premises for developing and strengthening forces and opponent political organisations.

It continues its storyline:

> These subjects (i.e. independent civil society groups) take advantage of internet to disseminate fabricated information, defame the party and the government, […], they deny national cultural values and history; incite anarchist ideology; *propagate the preeminent values of Western culture*, … Through civil society sphere, these forces seek to entice the masses to oppose the Party's policies and State laws and demand pluralism, multi-party, and accuse our State of violating international human rights treaties … (Lua Han, 2020)

Research elsewhere highlights the role of emotion in shaping political attitudes and responses (see Vu, 2017b). The state propaganda advance 'nationalist' sentiment to find route to the people's minds and souls. They mobilise people to believe in the story they tell about civil society through provoking patriotic feeling, conflating criticism of the party state with the nationhood and country, championing national pride over Western values and amplifying the rhetoric about the threat arising from the 'perceived' hostile forces.

In an extensive account by Tapchimattran.vn, the news site of Vietnam Fatherland Front (the party-controlled umbrella mass organisation), highlights a number of distinctive features of hostile forces to warn the publics, including (i) rejecting the leadership role of the CPV and fabricate rhetoric about the party such as 'lack of democracy', 'authoritarian', 'monopoly of power', 'coercion'; (ii) disrupting the party's foundational ideology

that follows Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh ideology; (iii) dismantling national independence and socialism of our party and our people; (iv) segregating the unity bloc within the party and among the people; and (v) hindering national development (Tran, 2020).

The simplistic but persuasive rhetoric discerns 'us' (the party, the state and the people) from 'them' (hostile forces, civil society, NGOs). Simple language accompanied with historical stories (revolutionary achievements, national liberation, imperialist occupation) and vivid examples relevant to people's everyday lives (e.g. humanitarian, charity, superstition, lack of knowledge, sight-seeing tours, bribes, investment projects or trainings) is used strategically to create divisions in society and keeps the public distant from civil society actors including NGOs. As Smith (2003) illustrates, the goal of a narrative is to lead as many people as possible; in doing so, the narrator needs to anticipate the pre-existing stories as potential forces so that they could portray themselves as the only viable representatives who have empathy for and understanding of the public and the national cause, as well as who are viable and legitimate forces to build a nationhood for people.

Second, state-dominated narratives attack liberal approach to civil society. In retrospect, liberals believe that civil society is supposed to restrict state power and emancipation can only be achieved in the associational sphere outside the state.

The pro-state narratives directly condemn normative values of liberal tradition such as autonomy, self-organisation and civil society-conducive to-democratisation. Vietnamese civil society, especially those who are calling for 'independent' civil society or claiming to be 'independent' civil society organisations (*các tổ chức xã hội dân sự độc lập*) are framed as the political agitators or 'elements' (*phần tử*) that seek to escape the party leadership and state management. The state narratives continuedly emphasise that advocating for independent civil society is equated with state confrontation and anti-party leadership. Tuyen Giao (2020) vividly states that:

> Civil society is trying to escape the party leadership and state management. […] Many CSOs' founders are called "dissidents" by hostile forces, they are political opportunists with confrontational views, opposing the Party's lines, the state policies and laws, openly requesting *our party* to give up its leadership role, to remove the Constitution's Article 4, demanding a change of the Party's name, the country's name, to give up the path of building *socialism* that *our party, our state and our people* have chosen to pursue.

Attacking liberal civil society is not a unique phenomenon for Vietnam, but it aligns well with that in many parts of the world, from authoritarian regimes such as China, Turkey, or the Arab world to democracies where authoritarian populism is rising to pre-eminence as observed in Poland or Hungary (Szabó, 2020).

In the first place, state-led narratives condemn *'autonomy'* that liberal civil society promote. The pro-state Facebook page 'Yêu nước thời kỳ 4.0' (Patriotism 4.0) writes:

> The hostile forces want to absolutise "*relative autonomy*" of civil society in relation with the state. Through different tricks and tactics, they have accelerated propaganda about the *so-called boundary between the state and civil society*, between "public" and "private", between "political" and "apolitical" (Yêu Nước Thời Kỳ 4.0, 2019)

It continues its rhetoric in condemning liberal civil society's role in democratisation:

> Hostile forces advocate civil society as a force for *democratisation*, they raise their absurd demand for democracy. […] The formation of politically independent civil society is

propagated as a premise for the guarantee of freedom, democracy, citizenship rights and human rights (Yêu Nước Thời Kỳ 4.0, 2019)

The narratives frame independent civil society with negative attributes such as evil, dangerous, wicked, regime opponents, social agitators. For example, Quân Đội Nhân Dân Online (The People's Army Online) (2018) vividly demonstrates:

> *Independent* CSOs are simply the instrument of the hostile forces to *disrupt and control the people's everyday lives.* Through these organisations' activities, they train and nurture the forces to oppose the regime. Moreover, they are considering calling for the foreign intervention into the country's internal affairs when they have opportunity […]. Independent CSOs are essentially a wicked political tactic and intention in order to abolish the socialist regime led by the CPV, transform the regime into a pluralist, multi-party model following the West, which *goes against the rights and interests of the majority of our people* (Quân Đội Nhân Dân Online, 2018).

 Equally salient from these narratives is the attack on key features of civil society, i.e. 'self-organisation' and 'self-mobilisation'. They warn the wider public to be more vigilant of the risks that self-organising civil society would bring. Cờ Đỏ Tp. Hồ Chí Minh (2020) (with 70,000 followers) illustrates that:

> … illegal organisations inside and outside Vietnam coalesce together to *mobilise social forces,* provide training, and expand opposition and disruption, they are waiting for a right moment to accelerate the so-called "street revolution", confronting the government, seeking to change the political institutions in Vietnam, to overthrow the party leadership and the state management, to build a regime of pluralism and multi-party, separation of power and civil society in Vietnam. People need to recognise a true face of these reactionary, illegal organisations and to avoid being exploited and manipulated by them.

Third, the narratives aimed at challenging universalism and Western's liberal democracy. Through their nationalist discourse, pro-party state narratives attack universalist standards led by liberal democracy and praise the pre-eminence of the Vietnamese-style democracy under the leadership of the party. This reverberates with the political climate elsewhere where authoritarian and populist states stir a cultural backlash by advancing traditional values, religion and education steeped within national history (Habets, 2015; Kuhn, 2018). The counter-narratives, for example evidenced in Russia, China and other undemocratic regimes, confront liberal democracy in some important ways: first, they trivialise the violation of individual liberties for the sake of increasing state security; second, civilisation diversity including democratic values are framed incompatible with their culture; and third, they accuse the West of deteriorating their traditional values (Habets, 2015). Authoritarian regimes such as Vietnam take advantage of the overwhelming sentiment of the crisis of the West abundantly covered in the mainstream media (e.g. terrorism, shooting, over-consumerism, the rise of far-right parties, flawed democracy, weak opposition parties, etc.) to justify their regime survival strategies.

The overarching narratives among the pro-state camp emphasise that the liberal democratic discourse represents the West's geopolitical interests, and in fact the West's civilisation paradigm is not better than anyone else's. Over the past decades, authoritarians worldwide experimented and refined varying new tools, practices and institutions that are meant to shield their regimes from external criticism

and erode the norms that inform and underlie the liberal international political order (Cooley, 2015). Vietnam is not an exception, which could be seen in their pervasive counter-narratives towards the liberal democracy's universalist standards and civil society.

> 'Civil society has been advocated and used by evil forces to realise their political agenda. They *often exploit discourses about freedom, democracy, human rights*, or "*for the progressiveness of the society*" to propagate and distort political, socio-economic issues, to slander the Party and the State. [...] Under *the guise of "democracy", and "human rights"* they steer civil society into political issues that advance their political agenda. They use CSOs to *uphold the values of freedom, democracy and human rights of capitalism*' (Yêu Nước Thời Kỳ 4.0, 2019, italic for authors' emphasis).

The *first* counter-narrative emphasises an alleged trade-off between state (the whole nation), security and individual liberty, especially in the context of Vietnam where historical paths were constantly marked by disastrous national struggles against the colonisers and imperialists, and the CPV has done whatever in its capacity to hold on this triumph to justify the legitimacy and propriety of its single-party regime. To guarantee security and safety for all, they argue that it is necessary to crack down on 'the abuse of the so-called democracy and human rights'. They refer to abundant examples about mass shooting in the US, or counterterrorist legislation in which civil rights have become subordinate to state security. In these counter-narratives, pluralism or multi-party system only makes Vietnamese society fall into chaos. The leadership of the CPV is therefore extremely important in the wartime as well as in peace period, and those who are advocates of multi-party, pluralism and capitalism are in fact abusing the so-called democracy and human rights to carry out their political propaganda and slander the government. As Yêu Nước Thời kỳ 4.0 writes:

> The political intention of international hostile forces is to create opposition forces against the CPV right in the heart of the Vietnamese society, so they try in different ways to push for the creation of *Western-style CSOs* that exercise criticism, from which to evolve into opposition and eventually become reactionary, hostile organisations against the party and the state. In fact, *the Western hostile forces are trying to use CSOs as an instrument for peaceful evolution towards "non-peaceful evolution" (colour revolution) to overthrow the leadership of the Communist Party and the Socialist State of Vietnam* (Yêu Nước Thời Kỳ 4.0, 2019, *italics for authors' emphasis*).

The *second* counter-narrative emphasises the socio-cultural differences between countries and between civilisations. Globally, this can be vividly evidenced in extensive accounts on China and other authoritarian regimes, whereby these narratives claim the incompatibility of their cultures with liberal democracy's universalism. As Quân Đội Nhân Dân Online (2019) proclaims:

> The US and other western capitalists have used the strategy of peaceful evolution and used concepts such as democracy, human rights, civil society to infiltrate their own values of democracy and human rights into the socialist countries, step by step "unleash the iron curtain of the Communist regime" (*mở tung bức màn sắt của chế độ cộng sản*) (in their own words).

The *third* counter-narrative defends traditional values, harmony and cooperative nature of the Vietnamese system where 'all the state power belongs to the people' (Tuyen Giao,

2020), and claims that individualism has accelerated to the state of moral decay, and crises and chaos are swamping Western liberal democracy. It praises the harmony of the political system where all state branches work together for the advancement of socialism and strive to improve the people's wellbeing. It ascertains that these institutional relationships maintain political stability and social harmony and ensure efficient policy making and implementation.

Civil society-led narratives

Apparently, the state used the counter-narratives to close down civic space and justify repression by delegitimising civic actors and their activism with defamatory labels such as hostile forces, foreign stooges, agitators, disrupters, pro-Western, or traitors. Amidst this adversity, what narratives did civil society actors in Vietnam advance to build and maintain their legitimacy? What stories did they choose to tell the publics? How could the stories they chose form their self-identity?

Countering damaging narratives from the pro-state camp reflects a struggle of power imbalance, where civil society are weakly resourced while the other camp is equipped with multiple-level mass organisations (i.e. party-controlled propagation organs), coupled with large-scale state-sponsored public opinion brigades such as Force 47 (a large cyberspace military unit tasked with combating 'wrong views' against the Communist Party line and state policy on the internet). Moreover, there are numerous pro-party writers, poets and journalists in state-managed bodies that constitute an integral part of this camp. It is also worth noting that there is a dearth of elaborate articles, writings, or posts by registered civil society groups on the internet in response to the state's counter-narratives. Nevertheless, there are certain narratives that civil society actors have advanced.

First, while state framing could have effects on general population and registered CSOs, this seems to have negligible impact on radical independent civil society groups and activists. In fact, these groups turn to ridicule these framings and persevere their critical activism. They become satirical of this framing as well as the way in which the state deals with the 'perceived' reactionary elements. Regardless of to whatever label they are ascribed, as they confess, they are simply those who care for the cause of their fatherland, and who cannot shut their eyes and ears to the sufferings of their country fellowmen. They call themselves as 'high-quality', or 'pure' and 'clean' reactionaries (*phản động chất lượng cao, phản động tinh khiết, phản động trong veo*). For example, a Facebook account of an activist writes 'One reactionary is arrested, three new reactionaries will emerge. Hey, guys (i.e. the state), you should speed it up'. This account even writes a poem to proudly convey his 10-year street activism that enables him to become 'a primary protagonist of reactionary forces'. The post was liked by 1222 people and received almost 50 comments, most of which endorse the activist's attitude. Echoing the spirit of the activist, other activists' Facebook accounts interacted positively with this post by stating that they themselves were 'genuinely reactionary' with anti-counterfeiting stamps of the public security ministry.

In an emotional post titled 'Ten years of reactionary activism', a Facebook account of a popular activist with high number of followers, who is widely known for her critical writings of the political regime, traced back her first-hand experience of being detained in the

police station ten years ago with vivid stories and real-life personal emotion. Her post instilled with personal stories and vivid experience received 2400 likes and hundreds of comments, many of which conveyed empathy to the activist. The historical transformation from being a politically naïve news reporter to becoming who she is now was told with convincing milestones and evidence that she herself experienced and encountered. She openly stated her desire to fight against injustice, the decay of dictatorial regime and her desire to fight for and stand side by side with the innocent and miserable average people. After being released from detainment, what she experienced made her become more determinant to pursue the cause that she thought had been bestowed upon her. Concluding her post, she wrote 'There is nothing for me to regret. If so, I have only one regret, i.e. a regret of not fighting sooner'.

Those labelled as 'reactionary' also conveyed their concern about the adverse effect that the state may encounter if they continue to arbitrarily label any Vietnamese who dares to speak out their patriotic views as reactionary and suppress them. In a detailed note titled 'When patriotism becomes a nation's wound', an activist artist writes:

> A few years ago, Vietnamese patriots took onto the streets to protest the Chinese oil rig move in waters claimed by our country, the protesters were labelled as reactionary, they were arrested, beaten, assaulted, and they were shamed and humiliated by public opinion mongers …

> Anyone who love the country, want to defend the soil of their fatherland but speak up to injustice and Chinese invasion are all framed as reactionary. In the past, the word "reactionary" was terrifying and dangerous, but nowadays it does not affect those who are framed as such because of their increased awareness and the internet. *Many people even find pride in the "reactionary' label ascribed to them.*

Second, civil society actors craft stories in which they are an integral part of the state-led national construction and development. In doing so, they assert that who they are and what they do is nothing alien from the state agenda and discourse. Indeed, their assertion of being an inseparable part of state-led nation-building project is toconstruct the meaning of, and to legitimate and expand the political space of, civil society. This rings well with Vu (2019) that showcases vividly how Vietnamese NGOs choose to orbit within the state discourse and utilise their structural links with the state institutions to search for political opportunities to work in favour of their organisational and development objectives.

They draw attention to the essence of what civil society really is by depoliticising the term and envisioning what a good society would look like and how civil society is working conducive to it. Whilst civil society exists as a natural phenomenon regardless of whether the state recognises it or not, it is incumbent on the state to recognise it for the cause of the national construction and development. Civil society groups, especially traditionally organised groups, bring forward the stories displaying how civic groups make attempts to contribute to the national development, in particular, how civic organising is conducive to the nation – building, alongside with the government and other sectors, e.g. community groups are waging mutual aid initiatives (*tương thân tương ái*), filling gaps left by the government to provide essential services for those in need, and protecting the marginalised groups, especially in the context of crisis such as the Covid-19 and natural hazards. As a Facebook account of an NGO leader reveals

An enabling environment and a genuine recognition by the state for civil society is needed since this is what civil society is. In varying ways, they are contributing to the nation building and development alongside with the government, mass organisations, and business community.

A social media account of a popular journalist, in a convincing way, appeals to historical comparative evidence to reiterate the need to recognise civil society and create an enabling environment for it to develop. Specifically, he brought back the critical moment of the past when the Vietnamese government was once scared of the market economy, but later, they decided to embrace it for the country's economic development. Echoing this, a local expert highlighted that what the state contemporarily perceives of civil society is the same as what they treated the market economy before 1986. The state's view of civil society as merely incubators of political confrontations is troubling, and he argues that misconception of civil society leads to inappropriate policy decisions. He writes:

> […] The rising middle class in the country have an increasing need to participate in social affairs. If the ruling Party puts in place sound policies to take advantage of this dynamics, the path to a developed and civilised society is widening. Otherwise, it will be very difficult for the Party to sustain its position

Offering grounded insights, an activist journalist reflects how civil society spirit is manifested through community support and voluntary actions for Danang, the largest city in the central region and a hotspot of the COVID-19 in 2020:

> […] At the hotspot of Da Nang, … swift actions from individuals and organisations, food items and other goods are quickly transported to hospitals, […] food boxes are prepared by voluntary groups and delivered to doctors, nurses and patients who are in quarantine. […] The press praises this as *good deeds* of *good souls*, but there is another way, albeit less polished, of naming this phenomenon. That is the concept that the press avoids using: *civil society*. It is *civil society* that has effectively supported the state to fight against the pandemic, otherwise no matter what how huge the counter-pandemic state machinery is, it would not be able to cope with this health crisis.

He continues to elaborate that civil society is as simple as such and he urges the state not to politicise it as something evil:

> Please don't put on that concept a "shirt" of politics. Civil society is simply the everyday practice of society, people from all walks of life feel that they can *contribute* to the state. This can include volunteering, charity, environmental protection, combating child abuse or corruption, etc. That's why although civil society is discriminated, even prohibited, the movement of civil society goes on silently to fill up necessary gaps.

Echoing this, another activist demonstrates:

> *A caring society is an effective safety net and reflects humanity*. This can be seen more clearly than ever in the fight against the pandemic. Civil society across the country mobilises their communities to participate in collective work, complementing the state, but *the relations of civil society and the state are not mutually exclusive*. In fact, no civil society group wants to take over the credit that is supposed to belong to the state. *Unleashing this social resource is therefore highly needed.*

Vietnamese civil society sought opportunities in the concrete crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic to tell a candid, vivid story about themselves, unleashing a compelling

narrative about a 'caring society', and nurturing 'humanity'. Providing a timely and illustrative account of the nature of who they are in the times of health crisis, civil society seeks to build its legitimate voice and position in the state-led nation building.

Third, appealing to 'civic nationalism' and 'civic patriotism', they craft stories of 'healthy leaves cover torn leaves' (*lá lành đùm lá rách*), 'people help people', hope and possibilities within civil society especially in the context of health crisis. In doing so, these narratives are well aligned with the state discourse that promotes civic nationalism. As previously discussed, drawing on Yuval Harari and Jonah Goldberg, nationalism embraces different forms, and civic nationalism that promotes civic patriotism and civic spirit, is a healthy and good one. The right kind of nationalism is not about hating foreigners, but it is about loving our compatriots. By demonstrating elements of nationalist ideologies expounded by custodians of the ruling regimes, Vietnamese civil society appeal to this nationalist discourse to construct the meaning of, and to legitimise and expand the political space of, civil society.

Vietnamese civil society focuses on promoting civic spirit and the compatriot-loving spirit deeply seated in Vietnamese traditional proverbs, e.g. 'The looking glass is covered by a red cloth, people in a country must love each other' (*Nhiễu điều phủ lấy giá gương, người trong một nước phải thương nhau cùng)*; or 'healthy leaves cover torn leaves'. In doing so, they craft a story of hopes, possibilities and 'love for our compatriots'. This is a compelling story as there is a real psychological and neurobiological evidence suggesting that one cannot envision future of which they have no memory, or they cannot make decisions and act on something with which they have no experience (Crabtree-Condor, 2020). If civil society expect people to support and promote civic spirit, it is critical to start to tell them what that looks like. Amplifying civic spirit and civic patriotism, civil society demonstrate a contrasting picture, i.e. they are not foreign-sponsored actors uprooted from the communities, they are an integral part of traditional community collective action, delivering essential services to those affected and filling gaps left by the government under the spirit of 'loving our compatriots'. In doing so, they can also expand their constituencies and social networks, and ultimately reinforce their legitimacy in the public eye.

Elevating civic patriotism appeals to the wider public on an emotional level, 'civil society is real, not a myth', 'people help people, it is real, and it is important', 'healthy leaves cover torn leaves', all these cultural values are ingrained in Vietnamese history, passing on from generation to generation. As a well-known journalist concluded his post, 'while civil society is not recognised, civic activism in supporting the affected communities in the flooded areas once again represent a truth – "the tree of life is forever green"'. He wisely refers to a famous saying by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe 'all theory is grey, my friend. But forever green is the tree of life'.

'Forever green is the tree of life', this message of hope counters negatives and illuminates an overarching compassionate and positive spirit, where 'people help people'. In response to the damaging frames and narratives, pro-civil society narratives trigger hope, create a climate of togetherness and empathy (no 'Us vs. Them' division), and sow the seeds of a good society underpinned by civic spirit and compatriot loving. This is what civil society is genuinely about, and whether the CPV inherently wants to acknowledge and mobilise these forces really matters to the success of its nation-building project.

Fourth, continuing to champion the civic spirit, Vietnamese civil society bring to the fore the message that **'**culture of mutual aid' and 'love for our country fellowmen' is not a privilege or imposition by a single individual or group**.** 'Love for our compatriots should not be monopolised or given', as the journalist stated on his Facebook. This rhetoric is particularly amplified in the context of emergency response, demonstrating that instead of stirring intimidating atmosphere, the government should create favourable conditions for those who want to help, be individual or group, so that they can help their country fellowmen who are in need. An activist conveyed a compelling message on his Facebook

> When a government sincerely wants to be close to its people, connected to them, understanding their needs, and live and die with its people, the people never give up on their government, the government of the people, for the people and by the people.

This activist revealed:

> 'It is needed to notice that from the depth of the people's hearts, they always want to help their compatriots, they want to bring relief to those affected in person with their true compassion, so that apart from the material support, they can also convey their emotional supports to their compatriots who suffer misery, pain and loss'.

Drawing on historical evidence of the national struggle, he continues to emphasise that in the context of crisis, constraining civil society does not do any help, championing national security by eliminating all civic resources is troubling. Notwithstanding, it will be beneficial for all, both the government and society, if the government genuinely seeks to bond with its people, understand their needs and enable them to exercise their civic spirit, the people will always stand side by side with their government in both high and low moments. In particular, he demonstrates:

> […] No laws can or will ever be able to control people's hearts once they have love for their compatriots. It is like the ordinary Vietnamese people who successfully nurtured and defended their national liberation revolutions despite being captivated, tortured, imprisoned or even the death, all of which failed to subdue them. […] The country's national liberation could not have been successful without the financial and material contributions of its people as well as the support from foreign countries. …

Reflections

When searching the keyword 'civil society' on Facebook, the results showed the higher number of posts aimed at attacking those 'perceived reactionary' activists and groups than those concerning the roles, functions, contributions of civil society groups. The posts directly targeting specific activist individuals and groups attract more viewers and interactions compared with those written about general civil society. There is a strong synergy between state-controlled mainstream media and social media in striking civil society. Essentially, in the civil society-counter narratives, there are detailed and elaborate articles by pro-state writers first published on mainstream media, for example, on some typical pro-party platforms such as Quan Doi Nhan Dan Online (People's Army Newspaper Online), Cong An Nhan Dan (People's Public Security Online), Tuyen Giao (Party Propagation), Mat Tran (The Front), subsequently these articles are circulated on a large scale on pro-state Facebook fanpages such as Yêu nước thời kỳ 4.0 (Patriotism

4.0), Vững Tin Theo Đảng (Loyal to the Communist Party), Cờ đỏ (Red Flag), or Hòa Bình (Peace). More rigorous research is needed to unpack precisely who followers of these Fan-pages are, however from the first glance, this study shows that most of comments on the posts striking civil society come from those who are affiliated with pro-party state camp, these accounts use defamatory languages to condemn target activists or civil society groups.

In a powerful way, the state advances the nationalist narratives to counter universalist standards, attack liberal civil society, praise the pre-eminence of the Vietnamese-style democracy under the single-party leadership, and promote nationalist values such as traditions, national pride in anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, harmonious and cooperative nature of the Vietnamese societal structures and political system where 'all the state power belongs to the people' and 'all state branches work together for the advancement of socialism and strive for improved people's wellbeing'. They emphasise that these Vietnamese social-political characteristics are crucial to maintain political stability, social harmony, unity and to ensure the socialist path.

While radical civil society agents continue to pursue their critical activism, registered groups continue non-adversary approach. Activisms of both groups can differ from one another, however both radical and traditional groups altogether advance civic spirit, civic nationalism and civic patriotism, where their compassion and aspiration to care for their compatriots and their country fellowmen will speak for itself and win out. This is 'the tree of life', the spirit of 'healthy leaves cover torn leaves', and this is the continuity of culture rooted in the Vietnamese society for thousands of years (Pham et al., 2021). In fact, a myriad of writings from within and outside the party system illuminate a noble lesson that draw on history of thousands of years of anti-colonisation, anti-foreign occupation and national liberation. That lesson, which was originally put nicely by a national hero, Nguyen Trai who rightly said, 'people who row the boat can flip the boat' (*Chở thuyền cũng là dân, chèo thuyền cũng là dân*), is now repeatedly mentioned in national addresses and speeches of many senior party leaders. Vietnamese civil society are telling a story that they are neither committed to nor advocating anything alien, above all they are aligning themselves in this continuity of culture and advancing this core value of Vietnamese culture: 'people help people' (*dân giúp dân*), 'healthy leaves cover torn leaves'.

Today, it is difficult to have a conversation about politics or public policy without mentioning the term 'civil society'. Both the concept and the reality of civil society seem to capture the fundamental aspect of human beings as social animals anchored in the ability to dream of a better life for themselves and their communities (Edwards, 2013). Edwards (2013) casts the term 'civil society ecosystem' with an aim to solve the conceptual conundrum of 'civil society'. He criticises the 'three-sector model of society' by arguing that civil society, the state and economic actors are inextricably interwoven, and that CSOs form a complex and fragile 'ecosystem', of which the health and strength depend on its achievement of internal institutional pluralism, that is on the capacity to represent multiple interests and perform multiple functions. The civil society ecosystem underlines the diversity and interconnectedness of various civil society entities, and emphasises the organic, self-developing, complex nature of a healthy civil society and the need to maintain balance: 'As in a real ecosystem, all parts need to be present and connected if the system is to operate effectively. Remove or weaken one part, or strengthen other artificially, and the system breaks down' (Edwards, 2013, p. 32).

Across the globe, 'shrinking spaces of civil society' becomes a chant. This is apparently evidenced in Vietnam. Vietnamese civil society was virtually crippled before Doi Moi and since Doi Moi it has continued to be constrained by political restrictions and unfavourable institutional settlements. Nevertheless, different parts of the Vietnamese civil society ecosystem, either organic grassroots civic groups, radical or registered ones, are fighting all odds. The diversity and interconnectedness of their capacities to represent multiple interests and perform multiple functions will decide the health and strength of the ecosystem of civil society. Amidst the powerful nationalist narratives of the CPV, how various entities of this ecosystem accept and learn to work with one another within this prevailing discourse becomes pivotal. Some crucial questions arise and have yet to be answered: How can donor-funded local organisations transform themselves to make good use of the political momentum of nationalism, and convert it into thriving opportunities? What challenges as well as opportunities that the nationalist agenda of the CPV bring to a diverse range of civil society entities? How can liberal and conservative civil society groups work together to create a healthy ecosystem? It should be noted that elsewhere conversative civil society organisations are showcasing that they have deeper and more authentic societal roots than their liberal counterparts which are heavily funded by international donors. Under these circumstances, donors cannot ignore this trend, while they need to broaden the range of groups they fund, they should also consider making some needed adjustments to situations where parts of civil society extend or even transform their work to the kinds of activities and schemes that might not be at the core of the funding practice of liberal tradition.

Conclusion

The article illustrated how the authoritarian state and its circle have mounted concerted attacks on liberal rationales for civil society. It offered a new analysis of state–society relations by illuminating the political discourses adopted and advanced by the state and civil society in the struggles of ideologies and legitimacy. To this end, the article highlighted elements of nationalist ideologies propelled by custodians of the status quo that were utilised strategically by civil society actors to construct the positivity, the meaning of, as well as to legitimise and expand the political space of, civil society.

'People help people', 'civic patriotism', or 'love for our compatriots', these narratives of hope and positivity are brought to the fore of the pro-civil society narratives. In doing so, civil society actors tell a different reality of themselves, they are not treasons, nor agitators, they are standing alongside with the government and private sector in the nation-building project by exercising civic spirit. These compelling narratives become more discernible in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic or environmental hazards. The article has captured timely the dynamics of the struggles of ideologies and positions between the state and civil society within the discursive space through analysing the depth and nuance of contrasting but mutually reinforcing narratives from both sides. It brought to the forefront a new analysis of the way in which civil society in authoritarian context of Vietnam has strategically converted the moment of crises such as the COVID-19 to the moment of opportunities to legitimate their role, position and space.

'Civic spirit as a route to a better future', 'the people will never give up on their government that works for them', 'doing good or helping other country fellow people is not the

privilege of any single individual or group', these narratives trigger hope and positivity for the future and move beyond the rigid structural approach (three spheres) and normative values of civil society. Underlying these narratives are stories and actions that bring civil society to real life and make the wider public relate to them.

Although adversity remains prevalent, there is another story, the story of civic organising in the love for other compatriots to effect real change. Vietnamese civil society bring to the fore narratives that are based on hope, humanity and empathy rooted in the nation's history and culture. As Coombes (2020) suggests if civil society is to shape the twenty-first century, it needs to talk less about 'shrinking civic space' or 'civil society under attack' and get better at telling its own story. Many of the debates focus on a shrinking space, rather than trying to counter the harmful narratives, it would be useful for civil society groups to start to focus their energy on creating new or alternative narratives that are genuinely attuned to socio-cultural specificities and reflect political dynamics of the local context. Coombes (2020) argues that focusing on shrinking space allows opponents of civil society to set the agenda. If people constantly hear about activists being arrested, monitored and regulated, they will eventually start to believe those activists must have done something wrong. If stories about attacks on civil society keep being pushed to the fore, this might lead to unexpected consequence, i.e. civil society might distance itself from the public. Until the public sees themselves in this notion, they will just keep moving on with their mundane daily lives. Psychological research shows that people rarely join a losing side. As a human instinct, it becomes even harder to mobilise people to embark on a desperate journey. Civil society needs to make itself a desirable space in which people want to invest their resources.

The analysis of prevalent narratives in this article raises a need for alternatives to liberal rhetoric to protect and advance the political space of civil society that is embedded within the continuity of local culture and situated in historical scrutiny. This should be considered by diverse agents including civil society itself and those who support it.

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Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Dr *Anh Ngoc Vu* is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle University (UK). She is an environmental social scientist bringing expertise in development studies, political science, anthropology, and geography. Her research centres on the connections between environmental change, risks, vulnerabilities, and human wellbeing, mainly in the

South and Southeast Asian contexts. She also has a wide-ranging practitioner background in policy relevant research and community building, with over 15 years of experience working with multilateral/bilateral donors, governments, and inter/national NGOs. She has advised, taught, won bids, led extensive consultancies, and commissioned research on environmental governance, urban sustainability, civil society, and state-society relations in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

Binh Quang Le is a Hanoi-based development practitioner with over 20 years of experience working in areas of gender equality, diversity and inclusion, civic space, community organizing and social movement. Binh is currently the director of ECUE – a social enterprise promoting responsible business with focus on gender equality, diversity, and inclusion. Binh is also the founder of iSEE – an NGO pioneering the LGBT movement in Vietnam since 2007. He is the chairperson of People's Participation Working Group (PPWG) that promotes civic space and good local governance. Binh achieved his Master's degree in Public Policy at Princeton University (the US) under the Fulbright scholarship in 2005.

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