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## **Vietnam's Great Debate Over Democracy**

**Dynamic political reform can resolve an internal ideological conflict – and help differentiate Vietnam from China.**

**By Trien Vinh Le**

Doi Moi, Vietnam's economic reforms since the late 1980s, created economic opportunity that has lifted millions of people out of poverty. However, fuelled by three decades of economic growth, Vietnam now faces the associated consequences of environmental degradation, inequality, and loss of state resources due to corruption. Furthermore, Vietnam's dependence on foreign investment capital without taking advantage of the spill-over effects of technology and management has failed to reduce the economy's reliance on cheap and unskilled labor. This dire situation is exacerbated by demographic change, mainly due to the aging population. Many fear that the middle-income trap will leave Vietnam behind as innovation spurs other advancing economies to compete globally in the information age.

Inspired by the development stories of East Asian countries that have experienced the benefits of embracing democratic principles, there are official and informal opinions that Vietnam needs a second Doi Moi centered around political reform. If new political institutions and practices are allowed to emerge and lead to new ways of governing and fresh policy ideas, the economy can pivot to more open and more innovative activities based on science and technology. It is appropriate to ask how the current government system can usher in a new era of economic transformation when so many at the top benefit from the old model based on exploitation of labor and natural resources.

Institutional reforms are underway but often only at the administrative level, driven by simplifying regulations and laws to avoid overlaps and duplication. Concepts such as the separation of powers (i.e., the three branches of government) or civil society are still considered taboo to the government. Although the concept of democracy has been officially mentioned as one of the country's strategic priorities – along with “justice” and “civilization” – “democratization” remains a politically sensitive term because it is assumed (and feared) that it will lead to political pluralism and thus threaten the stability of Vietnam's one-party system. The government firmly believes that the current regime of (apparent) political unity is preeminent and cannot be changed.

Democratic countries such as South Korea and Taiwan showed in the 1970s and 1980s how political pluralism can overcome economic bottlenecks. At the same time, models of social democracy found in Scandinavian countries exhibit how socialist values and democratic systems are compatible and even productive under certain circumstances. However, many Vietnamese authorities believe that Vietnam has a unique historical, political, and cultural context to which almost no outside model can be applied. Indeed, radical intellectuals speculate that the Vietnam's communist government has no model but the one exercised by the Chinese Communist Party.

This has led to an ideological divide. One side embraces the current model and always points toward the defects and failures of democratized countries. The other side advocates for pluralistic

political models that are dismissed by ideological opponents as unsuitable for Vietnam. What can be learned from this debate?

### **Static Versus Dynamic Views on Democratization**

It can be said that both sides of this ideological divide have limitations in their thinking. That is, both consider institutional changes to be a static rather than dynamic process. As Vietnam is a country in transition, the adaptive reform of political institutions is necessary to maintain movement toward a democratic system that facilitates economic growth – as observed in the historic path of so many of the world’s developed countries. At the same time, democratic models are not without flaws, as the election of leaders and parties at the ideological fringe has shown in countries around the world in recent years (examples are the United States, Brazil, and parts of Eastern Europe).

As such, Vietnam’s people must accept the shared responsibility to balance power and continually correct course. Democracy is a universal value accepted because, at its purest level, it is the best system to ensure a just and equitable society through “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” as Abraham Lincoln said.

In essence, a government is and should be reflective of the interests of the people in order to protect the right of any individual to participate in political and public life. In a fair and equal country, the state protects democratic values and institutions. To achieve this ideal, society must be determined and steadfast to overcome barriers on the path to democracy and to do so through peaceful, productive, and fair means.

Thus, a dynamic way of thinking about governance reform is to accept and facilitate the participation of citizens in the affairs of the country, whether directly or indirectly. On that path, every civilized nation progresses based on its historical, cultural, and economic circumstances. The fixation with the present system (including interests that currently benefit from it) and the rigid adoption of a certain model based on strict ideologies about the economy and state-society relations is a static, self-defeating, and undeveloped approach with no potential to generate the flexibility needed to modernize institutions and economic structures. In Vietnam, both the government and its resolute opponents fall on opposite extremes.

The practical way forward is a consensus-based understanding about progress that recognizes the plurality of interests and provides space for productive expression without negative consequence. Under such circumstances, the logjam of ideological thinking can be broken and all fresh ideas can be considered. This approach resolves the contradictions characteristic of ideology, steering the debate from whether to select one prescriptive model or the other to how a new system can be created that incorporates the aspects deemed useful and equitable. This type of productive conversation helps parties more honestly and productively speak to each other – a stabilizing force that focuses on shared interests rather than protected ideologies and self-serving interests. Issues concerning separation of powers, civil society, and the possibility of political pluralism should be discussed in an open and sympathetic way based on Vietnamese practices. Vietnamese intellectuals and state actors can share their visions globally about both the uncertainties and opportunities in democracies as well as the process of democratization in general.

### **Implications Regarding the China Case**

Despite the progressive trend of embracing democratic principles, the communist Chinese state increasingly consolidates its political power through the legitimacy conferred by economic

achievements (an approach also fraught with defects). China is also taking global advantage of its unique size, an option not available to Vietnam. In China's global positioning efforts, Chinese intellectuals are – whether involuntarily or intentionally – forced to comply with ideological directives in the name of patriotism. They often choose to support the government's efforts to consolidate state power and limit public participation in policy and political matters. Modest calls for democratization in the Chinese context are easily muffled through the control of information and restrictions on political organizing and related activity.

China's stability therefore depends on restricting people's participation in political life and the government's control of information over the people, with party legitimacy coming primarily from decades of economic growth and more recently through geopolitical saber-rattling (especially in the South China Sea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). This approach may currently stabilize the domestic political environment but only increases the potential for instability abroad. As such, the state must continually double-down on domestic social and political control to prevent any loss of power or perception of threat to power.

Vietnam cannot, nor does it need to, fall into such a precarious and tense situation.

On the contrary, with Vietnam having opened up and accepted the path toward democracy, intellectuals, authorities, and citizens can together embrace the virtues of civic participation as a governing principle in which the people's power is paramount. At that time, Vietnamese intellectuals and the government would regain their own unique advantages – the advantages of open and practical discussion that considers all viable opportunities. This would differentiate Vietnam from China. The two countries' approaches to state power are completely different, driven by their different foundations of history, politics, and culture, as stated by the government.

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