

Thesis Title

Political Action in Vietnam: Between Toleration and Repression

Summary.

This study departs from the argument that political action cannot be taken at face value in the context of authoritarian rule. As exploratory research, the overall objective was to provide a wide-ranging account of people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action in the institutional setting of the Vietnamese single-party regime. In this respect, the overarching question posed in this study is, *'How and under what conditions are the Vietnamese people tolerated and/or repressed in taking various forms of political action under the Vietnamese single-party regime?'* This main research question was approached through five sub-questions as follows:

- What are the characteristics of the formal political system and institutions of Vietnam, and how do they shape people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action?
- What are the characteristics of Vietnam's informal political institutions, and how do they influence people's political action?
- When and how are political actions tolerated and/or repressed within Vietnam's formal political institutions, and why?
- Under what conditions do public protests incur a repressive response from state actors?
- How do Vietnamese and foreign actors engage in promoting greater political opportunities for and repertoires of political action?

Chapter 2 sets out the analytical framework guiding this study. Central to that framework are the 'three pillars of stability' of Gerschewski (2013): legitimation, repression and co-optation. These provide the analytical starting point for my analysis of the strategies employed by the Vietnamese single-party regime to maintain its stability. In investigating the institutional characteristics of the three pillars, this study examines not only formal political institutions but also informal political institutions. In terms of political action, I borrow the conceptual map of Theocharis and van Deth (2018a) to provide a concrete matrix. In addition, I relate various forms of popular political action to various levels of the substance of popular political action, referring to Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of citizen participation', in which participation is classified on an eight-rung scale according to people's power to influence decisions.

Chapter 3 introduces data collection techniques and the qualitative research methods employed in this research. Foremost among these, I conducted extensive document research, semi-structured expert interviews during the fieldwork, cross-case analysis of protest events in Vietnam and thematic analysis of the projects of foreign actors. In addition, I performed supplementary examinations of some of the quantitative survey data.

Chapter 4 explores the characteristics of the Vietnamese political system and key state actors. Without competitive elections and a multiparty system, Vietnam has no other political party or independent state agency available to hold the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in check. Moreover, state actors at both the central and the local level are geared towards preserving the single-party political regime. They make concerted efforts to achieve that goal, albeit with some notable deviations and discord among some state actors at the central and local level. By combining multiple strategies, including historical moralization, references to good socio-economic performance and propaganda, the CPV-led single-party regime has demonstrated itself to be well-equipped with an extensive infrastructure to secure the regime's survival.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus to the characteristics of Vietnam's informal political institutions. These include connections and corruption, routinized fear of repression and the hierarchical relationship between the state (leaders) and people. This chapter demonstrates that the Vietnamese people's perceptions and behaviours of political action are constrained by the informal political setting. In the name of normative values, people are discouraged from raising their voice to express political opinions.

Chapter 6 investigates several legal instruments governing political action in Vietnam, to identify how the party-state has institutionalized certain forms of political action. A closer examination of instruments, including the Law of Reception, Law on Complaints and the Penal Code, points to two main findings. First, Vietnam has used its nominally democratic institutions strategically, to channel and control popular political action. Also, the people's participation in decision-making is stratified under the so-called grassroots ordinance, in which the people are conceptualized as passive recipients who shall be informed and can speak when asked to comment. Second, the formal channels and regulations for political action rather serve as one of the regime's legitimation strategies. Via these, state actors tolerate people's political action to a nominal extent, while giving the impression that state actors do listen to people's opinions. By politicizing the norm of public order, the state justifies its repression of political action.

Chapter 7 presents a cross-case analysis of 60 protest events that occurred in Vietnam between 2010 and 2020. The cross-case analysis is theoretically built on insights from the literature on state perception of threat and on authoritarian regimes. The results demonstrate a notable lack of predictability in the relationship between protest characteristics and state repression responses, which have not always played out in the same manner or in expected directions. Though the investigated threat factors were found to influence state repression of public protest to some extent, there was neither a clear pattern nor any stand-alone threat factor that was sufficiently valid to explain, by itself, the relationship between public protest and state repression. As a result of the conceptual classification, I found that every threat factor was neither a necessary nor sufficient condition alone to explain the occurrence of state repression.

Chapter 8 explores the question of whether and how Vietnamese and foreign actors have played a role in creating a more inclusive political environment. The chapter analyses three groups of actors: mass organizations, social organizations and foreign actors (external development agencies and international non-governmental organizations). First, mass organizations were found to respond to people's opinions only insofar as these did not touch upon or oppose the present political regime. Second, as to social organizations, structural constraints were found to be a critical impediment limiting the scope of their activities. This illuminates the constrained dynamics and domain of civil society which are common across authoritarian regimes. Regarding foreign actors, the thematic analysis demonstrates that they attach particular importance to normative dissemination and provision of financial and technical support to raise awareness among state actors. In addition, they provide both formal and informal support to social organizations and activists in the expectation that these might contribute to the development of a more thriving Vietnamese civil society.

Chapter 9 revisits the findings from the chapters, synthesizing them into an analytical conclusion. The combination of legitimation, repression and co-optation was found to lead to varying ranges of toleration and repression in regard to the party-state's response to political action, and the three pillars of regime stability were determined to be mutually reinforcing. However, the boundary between what was tolerated and not tolerated, as well as the intensity of potential state responses to political action, seemed to derive from choices that were ambiguous in practice, as these seem to have hinged in large part on the discretion of state actors. Inconsistency and unpredictability emerged as key aspects embedded in the relationship between people's political action and the party-state's repressive responses. This renders people who take political action more vulnerable to the party-state's imposition of criminal charges.

Chapter 10 concludes the dissertation, highlighting main findings of this research that advance the existing literature and presenting implications for future study. Vietnam is found to be illustrative of typical paths of institutional arrangements and strategies of authoritarian regimes, as referenced in the existing literature. These types of regimes restrict popular political action in various forms and degrees to achieve the goal of regime survival. The conclusion chapter returns to the main research question, of how and under what conditions the Vietnamese people are tolerated and/or repressed in taking various forms of political action under the Vietnamese single-party regime. It finds, in particular, that in Vietnam, people's opportunities for and repertoires of individual and collective political action are limited and precarious, due to unpredictability in the party-state's discretionary responses between toleration and repression.