Political Action in Vietnam:

Between toleration and repression

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Politieke actie in Vietnam:
Tussen tolerantie en repressie

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Acronyms

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
BOT	Build-Operate-Transfer
CCCPV	Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam
CISB	Community Investment Supervision Board
COMINGO	Committee for Foreign NGO Affairs
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
CRS	Creditor Reporting System
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DFID	Department for International Development
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOPA	Good Governance and Public Administrative Reforms
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations
MIC	Ministry of Information and Communication
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
MPS	Ministry of Public Security
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PACCOM	People's Aid Coordinating Committee
PAPI	Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index
PARAFF	Public Participation and Accountability Facilitation Fund

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PIB	People's Inspection Board
SOEs	State-Owned Enterprises
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
VFF	Vietnam Fatherland Front
VUFO	Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations

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Minsung, we made this happen TOGETHER.

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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.

Samenvatting

Het uitgangspunt van dit onderzoek is dat er haken en ogen zitten aan politieke actie in een autoritair regime. Het algemene doel van dit exploratieve onderzoek was om een breed overzicht geven van de mogelijkheden en middelen voor politieke actie in de institutionele context van het Vietnamese eenpartijstelsel. De overkoepelende onderzoeksvraag van dit onderzoek is daarmee: *Hoe en onder welke voorwaarden krijgt de Vietnamese bevolking te maken met tolerantie en/of repressie bij deelname aan verschillende vormen van politieke actie onder het Vietnamese eenpartijstelsel?* De centrale onderzoeksvraag is onderverdeeld in vijf subvragen:

- Wat zijn de kenmerken van het formele politieke stelsel en de instellingen van Vietnam, en hoe bepalen die de mogelijkheden en middelen voor politieke actie?
- Wat zijn de kenmerken van de informele politieke instellingen van Vietnam, en hoe beïnvloeden die de politieke actie die wordt gevoerd?
- Wanneer en hoe wordt politieke actie binnen de formele politieke instellingen van Vietnam getolereerd en/of onderdrukt, en waarom?
- Onder welke omstandigheden leiden openbare protesten tot een repressieve reactie van de overheid?
- Hoe zorgen Vietnamese en buitenlandse actoren voor meer politieke mogelijkheden en middelen voor politieke actie?

Hoofdstuk 2 beschrijft het analytisch kader van dit onderzoek. Daarin staan de 'drie pijlers van stabiliteit' van Gerschewski (2013) centraal: legitimatie, repressie en co-optatie. Deze vormen het uitgangspunt voor het onderzoek naar de strategieën die het Vietnamese eenpartijstelsel hanteert om de stabiliteit te handhaven. Bij het onderzoeken van de institutionele kenmerken van de drie pijlers wordt niet alleen gekeken naar formele, maar ook naar informele politieke instellingen. De conceptuele kaart van Theocharis en van

Deth (2018a) biedt voor dit onderzoek een concrete matrix van politieke actie. Daarnaast worden verschillende vormen van politieke actie in verband gebracht met verschillende inhoudelijke niveaus van politieke actie. Hierbij wordt verwezen naar Arnsteins (1969) 'ladder van burgerparticipatie', waarin acht niveaus van participatie worden onderscheiden op basis van de macht van mensen om beslissingen te beïnvloeden.

Hoofdstuk 3 bespreekt technieken van dataverzameling en de kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden die in dit onderzoek zijn gebruikt. De belangrijkste methoden waren uitgebreid documentonderzoek, semigestructureerde interviews met deskundigen tijdens het veldwerk, vergelijkend casusonderzoek van protesten in Vietnam en thematische analyse van de projecten van buitenlandse actoren. Daarnaast zijn aanvullende analyses uitgevoerd op een deel van de kwantitatieve onderzoeksgegevens.

In Hoofdstuk 4 worden de kenmerken van het Vietnamese politieke stelsel en belangrijke overheidsactoren verkend. Zonder vrije verkiezingen en een meerpartijenstelsel is er in Vietnam geen andere politieke partij of onafhankelijke overheidsinstantie die een tegenwicht kan vormen voor de Communistische Partij van Vietnam (CPV). Bovendien is zowel de centrale als lokale overheid ingesteld op de instandhouding van het eenpartijstelsel. Die proberen eensgezind om dit doel te bereiken, al is er sprake van enkele opmerkelijke verschillen en onenigheid tussen sommige actoren op het niveau van de centrale en lokale overheid. Door diverse strategieën te combineren, waaronder het moraliseren van het verleden, verwijzingen naar goede sociaaleconomische prestaties, en propaganda, heeft het door de CPV geleide eenpartijregime laten zien dat het beschikt over een uitgebreide infrastructuur om het voortbestaan van het regime veilig te stellen.

In hoofdstuk 5 verschuift de aandacht naar de kenmerken van de informele politieke instellingen van Vietnam. Hieronder vallen connecties en corruptie, stelselmatige angst voor repressie en de hiërarchische verhouding tussen de overheid (leiders) en de bevolking. In dit hoofdstuk wordt aangetoond dat de wijze waarop de Vietnamese bevolking tegen politieke actie aankijkt en politieke actie voert, wordt bepaald door het informele politieke kader. Onder het mom van normatieve waarden worden mensen ontmoedigd om hun stem te verheffen en hun politieke mening te uiten.

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In hoofdstuk 6 wordt een aantal juridische instrumenten betreffende politieke actie besproken om aan te geven hoe de partijstaat bepaalde vormen van politieke actie heeft geïnstitutionaliseerd. Uit nader onderzoek van deze instrumenten, waaronder de Ontvangstwet, Klachtenwet en het Wetboek van Strafrecht, komen twee belangrijke resultaten naar voren. In de eerste plaats gebruikt Vietnam zijn formeel democratische instellingen strategisch, om politieke actie van de bevolking te kanaliseren en onder controle te houden. Daarnaast is deelname aan de besluitvorming georganiseerd onder de zogenaamde publieke verordening. Hierin wordt de bevolking beschouwd als een groep passieve ontvangers die geïnformeerd moeten worden en hun mening kunnen geven wanneer daarnaar wordt gevraagd. Ten tweede dienen de formele kanalen en regels voor politieke actie eerder als een van de legitimatiestrategieën van het regime. Hiermee is slechts formeel sprake van tolerantie voor politieke actie van de bevolking, maar wordt tegelijkertijd de indruk gewekt dat de overheid wel degelijk naar de mening van de bevolking luistert. Door de norm van de openbare orde te politiseren, rechtvaardigt de overheid de repressie van politieke actie.

Hoofdstuk 7 beschrijft een vergelijkend casusonderzoek van 60 protesten in Vietnam tussen 2010 en 2020. Het vergelijkend casusonderzoek is gebaseerd op theoretische inzichten uit de literatuur over door de overheid waargenomen dreiging en autoritaire regimes. Uit de resultaten blijkt dat het verband tussen protestkenmerken en repressie door de overheid opvallend slecht voorspelbaar is. De overheid reageert niet altijd hetzelfde of zoals je zou verwachten. Hoewel de onderzochte dreigingsfactoren tot op zekere hoogte van invloed bleken te zijn op repressie door de overheid, was er geen duidelijk patroon te onderscheiden en geen op zichzelf staande dreigingsfactor die een afdoende verklaring bood voor het verband tussen protestacties en repressie door de overheid. Uit de conceptuele indeling bleek dat geen enkele dreigingsfactor op zichzelf een noodzakelijke of voldoende voorwaarde was om repressie door de overheid te verklaren.

Hoofdstuk 8 gaat over de vraag of en hoe Vietnamese en buitenlandse actoren een rol hebben gespeeld bij het scheppen van een inclusiever politiek klimaat. In dit hoofdstuk worden drie groepen actoren onderzocht: massaor-

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ganisaties, sociale organisaties en buitenlandse actoren (externe ontwikkelingsorganisaties en internationale niet-gouvernementele organisaties). Ten eerste bleken massaorganisaties alleen te reageren op de meningen van mensen voor zover deze niets te maken hadden met het huidige politieke regime of daar niet tegen ingingen. Ten tweede bleken structurele beperkingen de reikwijdte van de activiteiten van sociale organisaties ernstig te belemmeren. Dit illustreert de beperkingen waarmee maatschappelijke organisaties te maken hebben onder autoritaire regimes. Uit de thematische analyse blijkt dat buitenlandse actoren bijzonder belang hechten aan de verspreiding van normen en het verlenen van financiële en technische steun om overheidsactoren bewuster te maken. Daarnaast verlenen zij zowel formele als informele steun aan sociale organisaties en activisten in de verwachting dat deze kunnen bijdragen aan de ontwikkeling van bloeiendere Vietnamese maatschappelijke organisaties.

Hoofdstuk 9 bevat een discussie van de resultaten uit de eerdere hoofdstukken, en wordt afgesloten met een conclusie. De combinatie van legitimatie, repressie en co-optatie leidde van de kant van de partijstaat tot verschillende gradaties van tolerantie voor en repressie van politieke actie, en de drie pijlers van stabiliteit van het regime bleken elkaar wederzijds te versterken. Zowel de grens tussen wat wel en niet werd getolereerd, als de intensiteit van mogelijke overheidsreacties op politieke actie, leken echter voort te vloeien uit keuzes die in de praktijk ambigu waren, omdat overheidsactoren grotendeels zelf konden bepalen welke keuzes ze maakten. Inconsistentie en onvoorspelbaarheid bleken een essentiële rol te spelen in het verband tussen politieke actie van de bevolking en repressieve reacties van de partijstaat. Dit maakt mensen die politieke actie voeren kwetsbaarder voor strafvervolging door de partijstaat.

In het afsluitende Hoofdstuk 10 worden de onderzoeksresultaten die een aanvulling vormen op de bestaande literatuur belicht en worden de implicaties voor toekomstig onderzoek besproken. De typerende trajecten van institutionele regelingen en strategieën van autoritaire regimes, zoals vermeld in de bestaande literatuur, zijn duidelijk zichtbaar in Vietnam. Dit soort regimes beperkt politieke actie van de bevolking in verschillende vormen en gradaties, zodat het regime in het zadel kan blijven. Het laatste hoofdstuk biedt een antwoord op de centrale onderzoeksvraag, hoe en onder welke voorwaarden de

Vietnamese bevolking te maken krijgt met tolerantie en/of repressie bij deelname aan verschillende vormen van politieke actie onder het Vietnamese eenpartijstelsel. Uit het onderzoek blijkt dat de mogelijkheden en middelen voor individuele en collectieve politieke actie in Vietnam beperkt en onzeker zijn gezien de onvoorspelbaarheid van de reactie van de partijstaat, die kan variëren tussen tolerantie en repressie.

1   **Introduction**

1.1 Research background

1.1.1 International assessment of political rights and freedoms

Democracy is widely considered a universal value (Sen 1999). Today, we have several international indices that measure the level of 'democracy' across countries. These indices score and oftentimes rank countries to indicate the extent that they advance various democratic elements. These mostly depict Vietnam as an authoritarian regime with a low level of democracy. In the 'Freedom in the World 2020' report, Vietnam had an aggregate score of 19 out of 100, with a 3 in 'political rights' and a 16 in 'civil liberties', earning it the label 'not free' (Freedom House 2021).[1] In the Polity V project, Vietnam scored minus 7, placing it in the 'autocracy' category (Center for Systemic Peace, n.d.).[2] The Worldwide Governance Indicators project placed Vietnam in the 9.36th percentile, close to the bottom, in 'voice and accountability'

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[1] The annual report demonstrates the conditions of political rights and civil liberties in more than 190 countries or territories. Political rights are assessed with a variety of sub-questions regarding electoral process, political pluralism and participation, and the functioning of government. Questions of civil liberties consist of freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, personal autonomy and individual rights. Total scores from each sector are aggregated and categorized into the freedom status. Further methodological details are available at Freedom House (n.d.).

[2] The Polity V dataset provides the democratic qualities through measuring with six indicators and categorizing a regime spectrum between 'autocracy' and 'democracy'. The combined polity (POLITY) score is the result of subtracting the institutionalized autocracy (AUTOC) score from the institutionalized democracy (DEMOC) score. The scores range from +10 (strongly democratic) to -10 (strongly autocratic). For further methodological details, see Marshall and Gurr (2020).

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(World Governance Indicators, n.d.).[3] In the Democracy Index 2020, Vietnam ranked 137th out of 167 states, and was categorized as an 'authoritarian regime' (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2021).[4] The CIVICUS Monitor (n.d.), which rates conditions for civil society, classified Vietnam as a 'closed' country.[5]

These international indices use different methodological criteria and indicators, but most of their attention is oriented to elements of liberal democracy: to name a few, competitive elections, a multiparty system, political and civil liberties, separation of power and the rule of law. Their structured indicators of democracy can help us to understand the overall political conditions within a country of interest. However, they do little in providing specific accounts of the opportunities for and repertoires of political action available in a country. Even in the single-party regime of Vietnam, people take individual or collective political action such as expressing opinions and participating in a protest. Therefore, for a more in-depth and contextualized understanding of the extent and scope of political action in such contexts, it is imperative to unpack the concepts of political action and authoritarian regimes. A working definition of political action in the present study is actions of citizens taken of their own will to affect decisions of state actors.

Authoritarian regimes are defined by Gasiorowski (1996: 471) as regimes "in which little or no meaningful political competition or freedom exists". Adopting this definition, this study focuses on institutional conditions for and

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[3] The Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) project assesses six dimensions of governance: voice and accountability; political stability and absence of violence; government effectiveness; regulatory quality; rule of law; and control of corruption. For further details, see Worldwide Governance Indicators (n.d.).

[4] The Democracy Index measures the state of democracy on a 0 to 10 scale in the following dimensions: electoral process and pluralism; functioning of government; political participation; political culture; and civil liberties. Based on the scores, the index categorizes each country into full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2021).

[5] Having been committed to greater citizen action and freedoms in civil society, CIVICUS, an international non-governmental organization (INGO), monitors the state of civil society in all countries. Each country is assigned one of the following labels: open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed and closed. The analysis is drawn from independent, qualitative and quantitative data collected by local civil society actors.

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restrictions on political action – specifically, the exercise of the political rights of expression, assembly and association – in the context of the authoritarian, single-party regime of Vietnam.

1.1.2 Zigzagging between toleration and repression

On paper, Vietnamese legal documents use the 'language of democracy', describing people's rights to expression, association, and assembly. Citizens' political rights are set out in the Constitution (*Hiến pháp*). In addition, the country has the Law on Reception of Citizens (the right to file complaints against the government), the Decree on the Organization, Operation and Management of Associations (the right to form an association) and the Ordinance on Democratic Implementation at Communes, Wards and Towns (the right to participate in policy decision-making at the grassroots level). On the other hand, the Law on Associations, which has been continuously redrafted and discussed for more than two decades, is still pending in the National Assembly due to controversy over the definition and scope of the rights to be prescribed for associations. That said, further investigation is needed to determine whether these legal instruments manifest in such a way that people can take various forms of political action, either individually or collectively.

Despite the political sensitivity, a considerable body of research provides a wealth of knowledge on conditions and practices of political action and responses of state actors at both the national and the local level in Vietnam (Duong 2004; Hai 2016a, 2016b, 2019; Kerkvliet 2001, 2010, 2014, 2019; Larsen 2011; Le Trong 2014; Thayer 2010, 2014; Vasavakul 2014, 2019; Zingerli 2004). The literature on Vietnamese politics points to increased opportunities for political action in Vietnam over the past few decades, with the party-state taking a combined approach of toleration and control instead of fully-fledged oppression.

Additionally, descriptions such as Kerkvliet's (2005) 'everyday politics' of peasants in resistance to the national collective farming policy, as well as Lam's (2019) 'extremely rightful resistance' strategy used by those affected by a land project, suggest that the Vietnamese people are themselves endeavouring to carve out ways to resist policy and get things done, even under the

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risk of party-state surveillance and control. Particularly since the comprehensive national reform (*Đổi Mới)* in 1986, the Vietnamese people have become more active in denouncing wrongdoings of state actors and expressing concerns about policies, which put the durability of the CPV in question (Hai 2016b; Vasavakul 2019; Vu 2014a). Fforde (2011) also argued that the people sometimes have 'political opportunity' in their everyday lives to make demands or oppose the local government. In addition, the increased use of the Internet and development of social media have served as a remarkable driving force in Vietnam, expanding the virtual space where people can exchange information, form networks and raise collective voices (Bui 2016; Vuving 2010).[6]

Recognizing increasing demand for greater political openness from both its own people and the international community, the Vietnamese party-state has shown some signs of accommodating popular political action (Kerkvliet 2019). Hai (2016b) argued that the Vietnamese regime's resilience in retaining its legitimacy (*tính hợp pháp*) has emanated from several sources, one of which is 'political flexibility' (*uyển chuyển về chính trị*), as the party-state has sought to respond to and mitigate public dissent for its legitimation (*hợp pháp hóa*). Hai's study is meaningful in that it investigates what has driven the party-state to take flexible and repressive approaches from the aspect of regime survival. Whereas his study focuses on the party-state's legitimation, I argue that this is not the only factor explaining the party-state's toleration and/or repression. Rather, the party-state combines several political strategies to sustain its single-party rule, affecting its overall response to popular political action.

Zigzagging between toleration and repressive control, the party-state's response to popular political action has varied in forms and degrees. In particular, one of the leading scholars, Kerkvliet (2010, 2014, 2019), provided extensive accounts of the party-state's mixed approaches of toleration and repression of

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[6] The percentage of Vietnamese individuals who use the Internet has surged over the last decade, from 30.65% in 2010 to 70.29% in 2020 (International Telecommunication Union, n.d.).

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people's political action. This recognizes that state actors do not take a repressive response to all forms of political action, and the extent of state control may vary. Thayer (2014), observed three main strategies through which the party-state has exercised its power (*quyền*) to control political dissidents: preparatory prevention (monitoring and surveillance), pressure (harassment and intimidation) and judicial process (arrest, detention, trial and imprisonment).

Given this background, there is a need for a more detailed and in-depth investigation of the relationship between people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action and the party-state's mixed approaches to them. Considering that regime type is a decisive factor to make sense of political opportunities and the costs of taking politically contentious action (Tilly 2008), the institutional conditions and characteristics of Vietnam's single-party regime need to be investigated as an overarching frame that formulates enabling and/or discouraging conditions for popular political action. Vietnamese legal documents adopt the rhetoric of political rights and freedom, but it is imperative to identify the way these are interpreted and practiced in reality.

1.2 Research questions

1.2.1 Research aims and objectives

This study departs from the argument that political action in the context of authoritarian rule should not be taken at face value. Simply labelling Vietnam as an authoritarian regime is not sufficient to understand various dynamics and interactions between the party-state and society. It is imperative to seek a contextualized understanding of how the party-state's political strategies for regime stability demarcate people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action.[7] The context here entails not only formal political institutions – those enforced through formal laws, procedures, and systems of the government – but also informal political institutions – those (re)produced over time in soci-

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[7] I use the term 'party-state' to refer to both the Party apparatus and the government agencies. When a distinction is necessary, I distinguish the Party and the government.

ety and influencing people's thinking and behaviours. The Vietnamese political regime is not simply featured by coercive oppression, but by a strategic use of a combination of toleration and repression of popular political action.

Several studies have delved into one or a few recent cases of political action that occurred in Vietnam (Chau 2019; Gillespie and Nguyen 2019; Hoang 2019; Kerkvliet 2019; Kwak 2019a; Morris-Jung 2015b; Nguyen 2017; Vu 2017). Nevertheless, there remains a knowledge gap on the overarching institutional conditions that cut across various forms of popular political action and the party-state's approaches to them. Despite a notable amount of research dedicated to unravelling Vietnamese political conditions and the properties of popular political action there, little research has looked deeper to identify people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action on various topics and in various manners and scopes. To my knowledge, little research has been carried out on two points in particular: (i) how popular political action is institutionalized under the single-party regime of Vietnam and (ii) how institutional arrangements in Vietnam work to allow, constrain or repress popular political action.

The overall objective of the research presented in this dissertation is to provide a wide-ranging account of people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action within the institutional context of the Vietnamese single-party regime. In this study, 'opportunities' refers to a set of conditions in which Vietnamese individuals or groups can take political action of their own free will (agency), and 'repertoires' refers to political skills and means that are available to Vietnamese individuals and groups and which they may choose in their action. Through this study, my aim is to contribute to a more contextualized, clearer account of the conditions of individual and collective political action in varying forms within the Vietnamese formal and informal political institutions and the party-state's responses in association with the long-standing single-party regime.

1.2.2 Scope of the study

As exploratory research, this study sets out to discover how various forms of political action have been shaped by authoritarian political institutions, and

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what roles domestic and foreign actors have played in promoting political rights and freedom. This study is not limited to anti-government or contentious action with a politically confrontational purpose. Rather, it includes a wide array of expressions of opinions and political action by Vietnamese individuals and groups driven by day-to-day concerns. While not being confined to a precise timeframe, this study's main focus is on existing Vietnamese political institutions and practices observable today, though attention is in some cases extended to include the trajectory of past developments, such as the national *Đổi Mới* reform of the late 1980s. In addition, this study does not concern one or a few specific cases, but in accordance with its objectives, investigates the overarching institutional conditions under which Vietnamese individuals and organizations are tolerated and/or repressed in taking political action.

I use the terms 'the party-state' and 'state actors' in a broad sense to indicate entities established (agencies) or employed (officials) to work for or act on behalf of the state at the national and local levels. I would stress here that I do not perceive the party-state as a single, almighty, invincible entity but as an entity that is vigilant in its oversight of domestic and foreign actors and which constantly pursues reinforcement of its legitimacy. Gainsborough (2010, 2017), similarly, emphasized the need to take a step away from perceptions of the state as a fixed entity and to look closer at the state actors working for a political regime. I therefore take into account the variety of state actors active within the Vietnamese single-party regime. State actors include the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), the National Assembly, the central government, the courts and security forces, and the People's Councils and the People's Committees established at three subnational levels of administration.

In this study, state actors also include both the ruling elite and working-level public officials employed by the Party or the government. When necessary, I use the term 'ruling elite' to refer specifically to a small group of officials holding high-ranking positions and exercising a considerable amount of power and influence over others, usually at the central level (e.g., the Prime Minister and the Central Committee of the CPV). Notwithstanding my awareness of the diversity in the composition of state actors, I use the term 'state actors' to indicate them at an aggregate level, since I assume them to have the shared goal of maintaining the existing single-party regime to a certain extent.

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On the other hand, since *Đoi Moi*, in 1986, the centralized political authority of the party-state has been eroded compared to the pre-reform era, driving factors of which range from diverging social and economic interests in association with economic development to growing public outcry against corruption (Fforde 2004). Sectoral politics have mushroomed in Vietnam, and divergence and even discord has been observed between rival interest groups within the party-state leadership (Gainsborough 2007a). Within the CPV, the political elite usually form factions of different political and economic views. Factions in Vietnamese politics are not fixed groups such as conservatives versus liberals. Rather, they are formed as temporary alliances regarding specific policy preferences (Vuving 2010; Trinh 2020). Depending on which faction takes power, the details of state management take different shape. For instance, since Nguyen Phu Trong, who is usually depicted as a hard-liner, both politically and economically, became Secretary-General of the CPV in 2011, the party-state has tightened its control over society by, for instance, the Law on Cybersecurity so as to silence political criticism (Brown 2021; Phuong 2021).[8] Sometimes disputes and conflicts arise between factions over certain controversial agendas or socio-economic issues.

Nevertheless, I do not categorize politicians by specific labels in this study, driven by my assumption that politicians have different views on specific issues but share the same political goal. One thing that was clear at the time of this writing is that, politically speaking, the fundamental position of the Party and its commitment to preserve the single-party regime have barely changed over time even though different factions have taken the lead. Although I am aware that intra-party dynamics and factional division are important concerns in authoritarian politics, I make no detailed classification of factions within the group of the ruling elite, as that is beyond the scope of the present research.

Apart from local to national political action by Vietnamese citizens, in the sphere of what may be called 'civil society', there are other actors aiming to support the Vietnamese people to achieve greater political freedom and rights. As to the terminology on organizations, I note that civil society organizations

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[8] Nguyen Phu Trong was unprecedentedly elected as the Secretary General of the CPV for the third five year terms of 2021-2026.

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(CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are not completely interchangeable terms. I understand the term CSOs as a wide collection of organizations that are established by citizens and work independently from the state and the market, which include labour unions, professional associations, faith-based organizations, and NGOs. I do not delve into a rigorous discussion of the definition of these terms since it is beyond the scope of this study.

My analysis also includes the role of other actors, observing their engagement in representing people and promoting a more inclusive political environment. Their status and limitations under the single-party political regime should be examined to assess to what extent they contribute to promoting greater political opportunities and repertoires within Vietnamese society. Vietnam has mass organizations (*các tổ chức quần chúng công*) under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). The Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF, *Mặt Trận Tổ Quốc Việt Na*m) is a Party umbrella political coalition of various socio-political and professional organizations. In addition, the main mass organizations are the Vietnam Women's Union (*Hội liên hiệp Phụ nữ Việt Nam*), the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union (*Đoàn Thanh niên Cộng sản Hồ Chí Minh*), the Vietnam Farmers' Union (*Hội Nông dân Việt Nam*), the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (*Tổng Liên đoàn Lao động Việt Nam*) and the Vietnam Veterans' Association (*Hội Cựu chiến binh Việt Nam*).

The terms 'mass organizations' and 'socio-political organizations' are often used interchangeably within Vietnamese and foreign publications, yet, it is more useful to distinguish them for greater clarity. In this study, (public) mass organizations refer to the VFF and five key abovementioned organizations that were founded by the CPV and have far-reaching influence on policymaking and policy implementation in Vietnam. With the objective of mobilizing the masses, representing members and contributing to state management, these are financed from the state budget and have a hierarchical structure with offices at all levels of administration.

'Socio-political organizations (*các tổ chức chính trị-xã hội*)' indicates organizations with more specific characters in a certain sector. The category of socio-political organizations is further divided into subgroups such as socio-professional organizations (*các tổ chức xã hội-nghề nghiệp*) that represent the

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people in the same category of profession; for example, the Vietnam Journalists Association and the Vietnam Lawyers' Association.[9]

Vietnamese society also constitutes other types of organizations. There are trade associations (*các hiệp hội ngành nghề*), among which the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) plays a leading role in representing employers and businesses. On the other hand, organizations formed voluntarily by like-minded people to represent members or to implement activities for the broader social good are usually referred as social organizations (*các tổ chức xã hội*). In Vietnam, the term 'social organizations' is widely used rather than 'non-governmental organizations (NGOs)' or 'civil society organizations (CSOs)'. In this sense, I mostly use the term 'social organization' throughout this dissertation, and a later chapter elaborates on social organizations further.

Bilateral and multilateral development agencies and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have been committed to the social and economic development of Vietnam for decades. One of their objectives is to promote people's political rights. Indeed, since Vietnam opened its doors to foreign actors along with other nationwide reforms (*Đổi Mới*) in the late 1980s, the country has faced a huge influx of foreign influence. External development agencies flocked to Vietnam to provide financial and technical support and promote adherence to democratic norms. To name a few, these norms include human rights, public participation, transparency in governance and accountability. The party-state has gradually increased its tolerance for people's political action, allegedly influenced by the eyes of foreign actors (Kerkvliet 2015: 364). However, as the single-party regime has remained unchanged, the role of foreign actors warrants further investigation.

1.2.3 Research question and structure of the dissertation

The overarching question of the study is, 'How and under what conditions are the Vietnamese people tolerated and/or repressed in taking various forms of

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[9] For much detailed information of various types of organizations in Vietnam, see Nørlund (2007) and Vietnam Institute for Economic and Policy Research (2015).

political action under the Vietnamese single-party regime?' This main research question gives rise to five sub-questions, presented in Table 1.1 along with their operationalization in the present research.

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Table 1.1. Research questions

Research questions	Operational questions
1. 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?	1.1 What are the characteristics of Vietnam's political structure that constitute the single-party political regime? What does the single-party regime do to secure regime stability? 1.2 What key state actors influence people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action, and what are their characteristics in the context of the single-party regime?
2. What are the characteristics of Vietnam's informal political institutions, and how do they influence people's political action?	2.1 What are the characteristics of the informal political institutions that are prevalent in the everyday lives of the Vietnamese people? 2.2 What informal political practices facilitate, prevent or discourage people's political action? How do these practices influence people's thinking and the political action they take?

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3. When and how are political actions tolerated and/or repressed within Vietnam's formal political institutions, and why?	3.1 Through what formal channels and processes are people tolerated to express their grievances or make demands to state actors? 3.2 How does the party-state use the formal channels and rules in dealing with people's political action, and why? 3.3 What forms of political action are framed as extra-institutional, and why? How does the party-state respond to action taken outside the given channels and rules? What are the characteristics of the people who take such extra-institutional political action?
4. Under what conditions do public protests incur a repressive response from state actors?	4.1 How do the different levels of threat embedded in public protests relate to the different levels of repression practiced by state actors? 4.2 What patterns are observed in the relationship between the characteristics of public protests and repression across specific protest cases?
5. How do Vietnamese and foreign actors engage in promoting greater political opportunities for and repertoires of political action?	5.1 What are the characteristics of Vietnam's mass organizations? Do they contribute to promoting greater political rights and freedom in Vietnamese society? If so, to what extent? 5.2 What are the characteristics of Vietnam's social organizations under the single-party regime? What approaches do they take in promoting greater political opportunities for and repertoires of political action, and why? 5.3 What are the roles of foreign actors in promoting greater political opportunities for political action in Vietnamese society? What patterns are observed across their activities?

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The first question regards the characteristics of the formal political system and institutions of Vietnam, and how they shape people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action. In addition to investigating the characteristics of the overall political structure and system that constitute the Vietnamese single-party political regime, I look into which state actors have authority and capacity to exercise influence over people's political action.

Given the significance of informal politics in Vietnam, the second question focuses on major aspects of the informal political institutions that influence people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action. Indeed, this study seeks to identify the characteristics that facilitate or discourage people from taking political action.

The third question considers the conditions under which certain forms of political action are tolerated and the boundaries between toleration and repression. First, I scrutinize how the party-state, using relevant legal instruments, shapes the set of rules governing different forms of individual and collective political action. Following a review of institutional toolkits used by the party-state, an examination is made of when and how people's political action is framed as illegitimate and what happens to the actors involved.

From there, I move on to a specific form of collective political action: public protest. Given that there are variations in the characteristics of public protests and the severity of repression, the fourth question concerns salient patterns of relationship between public protests and party-state repression. When it comes to the term 'people', I assume that there are no clear-cut characteristics that allow us to identify in a- single sentence all actors in specific forms of political action. Political opportunities and repertoires may be available to different groups of society to varying degrees, depending on their socio-economic characteristics, such as age, gender, and education level. While I examine the characteristics of those who undertake certain forms of political action, it is beyond the scope of this study to test which group has more opportunities or takes more action than others. This dissertation aims to explore the overall

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conditions for political action, which may cut across the different strata of Vietnamese society.

The last question investigates the role of actors other than the CPV or government, particularly, Vietnamese mass organizations, social organizations, and foreign actors. As discussed, mass organizations refer to the VFF and other key five organizations as discussed in the previous subsection. Social organizations refer to organizations that do not belong to the state or Party apparatus and are run by citizens. Foreign actors in this research refers to bilateral and multilateral external development agencies and INGOs. This study explores to what extent and how these engage in promoting normative values that might contribute to people's greater opportunities for political action.

The rest of this dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 2 presents the analytical framework of the study, which draws on the authoritarian regime literature and concepts of political action. Chapter 3 details the research and data collection methods and the data used. Chapters 4 and 5 provide a contextualized understanding of Vietnam's political institutions. Chapter 4 starts with an overview of Vietnam's historical and socio-economic context, followed by a detailed discussion of the political system and structure of the political regime and key actors of the party-state. Chapter 5 details key informal political institutions that contribute to facilitating, preventing, or discouraging the Vietnamese people from taking political action.

Chapters 6 and 7 offer an analysis and interpretation of institutionalized political action within given political structures. Chapter 6 extensively investigates specific legal instruments, channels, and processes of political action under Vietnam's formal political institutions. Chapter 6 also scrutinizes the boundaries set by the party-state between institutional and extra-institutional political action. In Chapter 7, the focus shifts to extra-institutional political action, more specifically, public protest. Presenting a cross-case analysis, the chapter analyses the relationships between collective political action, public protest, and repressive responses by the party-state.

Chapter 8 describes the role of non-state actors presumptively committed to representing people's voices or promoting political rights in Vietnamese society. Non-state actors in this study comprise three types of domestic and

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foreign actors: mass organizations, social organizations, and foreign actors, including external development agencies and INGOs.

Chapter 9 synthesizes the research findings in relation to the analytical framework and provides answers to the research questions. Chapter 10 concludes the dissertation, providing general reflections and insights gained from the study.

2 Analytical framework

This chapter presents the analytical framework that guides this research. Section 2.1 unpacks the concepts of political action and political institutions. Section 2.2 discusses the properties of authoritarian political regimes, with special focus on the strategies such regimes use to maintain stability. To understand how authoritarian political regimes control popular political action and sustain their existence, Gerschewski (2013) provided a model called 'three pillars of stability', the pillars being legitimation, repression and co-optation. Thus, rulers seek to earn support from the populace and justify their authority to the populace (legitimation), to exercise control to repress political opposition (repression) and to ensure intra-elite cohesion through formal and informal institutions (co-optation) (Gerschewski 2013).

I adopt this model as an analytical point of departure to investigate the strategies used by the Vietnamese single-party regime to maintain its stability. Section 2.3 discusses the concept of civil society. This serves further as a guide for investigating the degree and scope of freedom available to Vietnamese social organizations. This section also concerns the features of external democracy promotion by foreign actors to stimulate transitions towards greater democracy abroad. The conclusion, section 2.4, integrates and links the key conceptual and theoretical insights acquired from the existing literature to set the direction for the further analysis.

2.1 Conceptualizing political action

2.1.1 From political participation to political action[10]

A discussion of political action should begin by reviewing several classic definitions of political participation. Verba and Nie (1972: 2) defined political participation as "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take". Huntington and Nelson (1976: 4) provided a similar definition, viewing political action as an "activity by private citizens designed to influence governmental decision making". Conway (1991: 3-4) presented a definition similar to Huntington and Nelson's (1976), while specifying the objectives of people's participation as being to influence "the structure of the government, the selection of government authorities, or the policies of government".

Scholarly discussions have ventured into more diverse conceptual scopes of political participation. Barnes et al. (1979), in their edited volume, considered not only passive forms and interactions of political participation within the given institutions, but also unconventional, active and even sometimes confrontational forms of political participation, termed 'political action'. In that same volume, Kaase and Marsh (1979: 41) defined unconventional political behaviour as "behaviour that does not correspond to the norms of law and custom that regulate political participation under a particular regime". In addition, van Deth (1986) distinguished between 'conventional' and 'unconventional' (or 'non-conventional') forms of political action, and Sabucedo and Arce (1991) used the terms 'within-system' or 'out-of-system'. More recently, Theocharis and van Deth (2018a) expanded their analytic focus to new variants of repertoires of political participation that were not included in the past scholarly discussions, recognizing increasingly diversifying forms of political action. Political participation is thus said to take diverse shapes, varying by actors (individual or collective), processes (institutional or extra-institutional)

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[10] This section was modified and developed from Kwak (2019b: 258-259). Since its publication, this section has been extensively expanded for this dissertation.

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and approaches (methods or means of action). This discussion points to the need to explore multiple forms of political action.

In identifying forms of political action, I borrow the conceptual map of Theocharis and van Deth (2018a: 65), which presents a decision tree with eight yes-or-no questions (Figure 2.1). Answers to these result in the following five forms of political participation: (i) institutionalized forms of participation (e.g., voting) (Type I); (ii) participation targeting politics, the government or the state (Type II); (iii) participation not directly related to politics but targeting problems in people's lives or community (Type III); (iv) participation driven by some event or circumstance (Type IV); and (v) politically motivated participation to express a personal political aim or intention (Type V).

Figure 2.1. Conceptual map of political participation
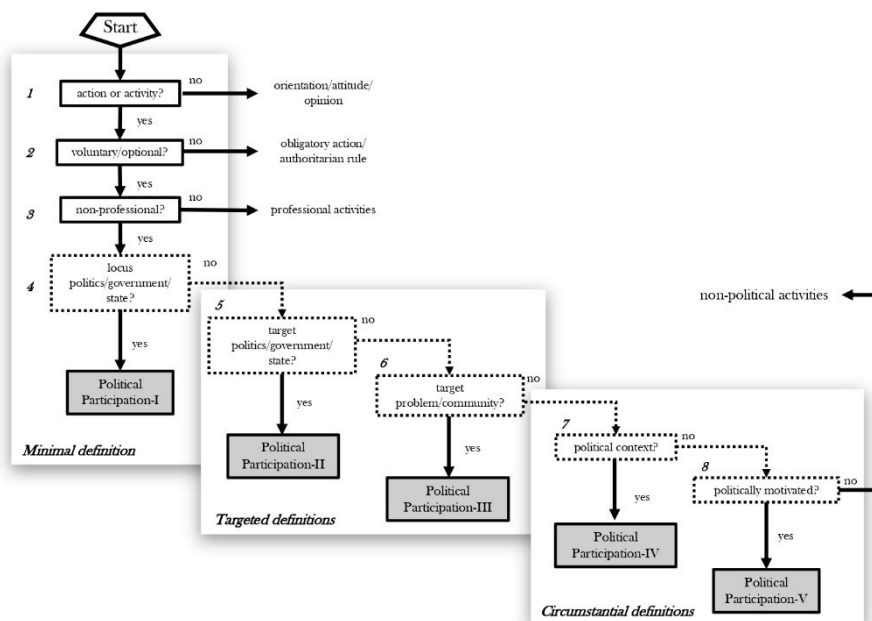
Source: Theocharis and van Deth (2018a: 65).

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In addition, the substance of people's political action is important. In this regard, I refer to the 'ladder of citizen participation' by Arnstein (1969) (Figure 2.2). This presents eight 'rungs' of participation according to how much power people have to influence decisions: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control. When people merely sign their names on a participant list with little or no say in a public hearing organized by the authorities, this form of participation is no more than void and manipulation, which is the bottom rung of the ladder. Arnstein's model also entails the distinction between passivity and activeness, which bears similarity to Conway (1991: 4), suggesting that the concept of political participation includes not only 'active' but also 'passive' participation forms. When citizens exercise control over decision-making processes, their action has power, standing on the high rungs of Arnstein's ladder. Political power is not just the influence to control others or resources, but also the capacity to make decisions, to act and to exercise the rights given in the existing institutions (Gaventa 2006: 24).

Figure 2.2. Ladder of citizen participation
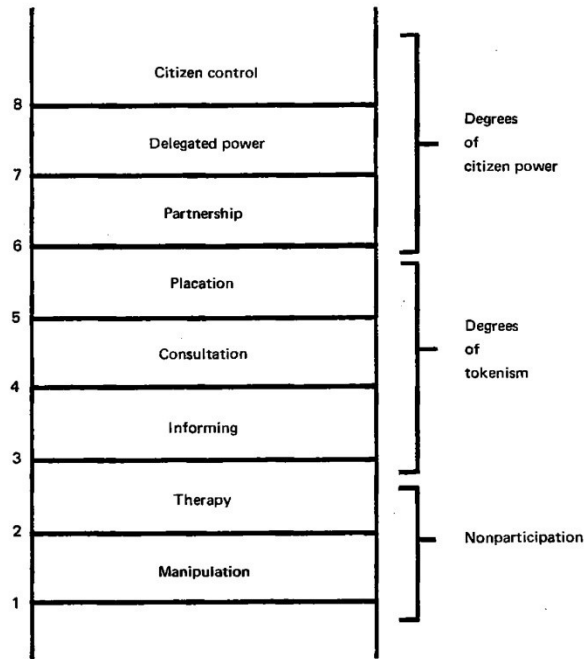
Source: Arnstein (1969: 217).

At this point, I clarify that I mainly use the term 'political action', rather than 'political participation', to more explicitly demonstrate the focus of the present study and the spectrum and substance of political action taken of people's own free will.[11] Political action in this study includes, but is not limited to, contacting government officials to file a complaint, sending a letter to the government, signing a petition, writing or sharing an online post on a policy and joining a public protest.

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[11] I limit this study to people's political action that is contentious due to their demands, criticism or opposition to decisions or activities of state actors. Political action that is pro-CPV or pro-government is not included in this study.

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2.1.2 Regimes and political institutions

Authoritarian regimes

As Lawson (1993: 187) observed, a political regime "determines not only the manner in which governments are formed and carry out their functions but also the basis of their legitimacy as well as the extent to which they are permitted to exercise authority" (Lawson 1993: 187). In other words, a political regime covers the set of rules and systems used in managing a society, making it more than a form of government. To be more specific, Tilly (2006) suggests two variables for localizing the interplay between a regime type and contentious political action: (i) governmental capacity to control the populace, activities and resources; and (ii) the degree of democracy, or in other words, the extent that the public has the right to affect the government and the freedom from oppression by the government.

Back in the 1990s and early 2000s, much research noted the nature of authoritarian regimes as not accepting competitive elections or opposition political parties and as circumscribing political rights and freedom in society by coercive means (Diamond 1999; Geddes 1999; Huntington 1991; Misztal and Jenkins 1995; Levitsky and Way 2010; Linz 2000). This trend was followed by a considerable body of research that gradually paid greater attention to the mixed presentations of democratic and authoritarian features in various regimes, in different degrees and forms (He and Warren 2011; Linz 2000; Levitsky and Way 2002; Ottaway 2003; Schedler 2002).

A more recent wave of literature, however, promulgates a critical interpretation of toleration and repression, focused on the channelling strategies regimes may use to encourage loyalty, to diffuse opposition and, ultimately, to sustain the regime (Chen and Xu 2017; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gershenson and Grossman 2001; He and Thøgersen 2010; Lorentzen 2013; Nathan 2003). These previous studies suggest that the underlying objective of approaches combining toleration and repression is the political goal of regime stability. Recent research has also shown that authoritarian regimes determine the boundary between what is tolerated and what is repressed, and make selective decisions on the intensity of

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repression (Albrecht 2010; Cai 2008; Chen et al. 2016; Gershenson and Grossman 2001; Göbel 2020; Yuen and Cheng 2017). In doing so, the choices of toleration and repression are, in large part, shaped by the discretion of actors who seek to sustain the existing regime.

Formal and informal political institutions

While no definition of institutions has been agreed upon in research, a conceptual definition of (political) institutions has been a topic of long-time interest among many scholars (Crawford and Ostrom 1995; Dahl 2005; North 1990, Helmke and Levitsky 2004, Holden 2008; Moe 2005; Shapiro et al. 2006). North (1990: 3) defined institutions broadly as "the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction", which are enforced by the state. By forming norms, regulating rules and recognizing or excluding values, institutions define shared perceptions and shape behaviours of state actors and the populace (Brownlee 2007; Crawford and Ostrom 1995; Holden 2008). Thus, institutions refer both to the established set of regulations and practices that govern the behaviour of actors in society and to the organizations that enforce the rules (North 1990; Offe 2006). In particular, a state sets out what values and behaviours are included and excluded in institutions; thereby, the state takes different responses in accordance with the established institutions (Holden 2008).

Institutions are not only made up of formal institutions prescribed and traceable in laws, policy and formalized procedures, but also include informal institutions which are not grounded in written mandates or legal instruments but penetrate society as norms of behaviours that are conceived as appropriate (North 1990; Gilley 2009; Helmke and Levitsky 2004). In the present research, I follow the definitions of Helmke and Levitsky (2004: 727); that is, formal institutions are taken as "rules and procedures that are created, communicated, and enforced through channels widely accepted as official", and informal institutions entail "socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are

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created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels". For example, informal political institutions include corruption, patronage and the Confucian ethos.

Repertoires of political action comprise not only a set of political skills and means available for actors to choose, but also the conceptions and challenges of actors within the given institutions (Alimi 2015). Members of society are expected to comply with the institutional arrangements that formalize both opportunities for and constraints on their behaviours (Crawford and Ostrom 1995). Furthermore, members of society choose political behaviours informed by normative conventions, such as expectations, duties and roles in society (March and Olsen 1984: 744). Thus, I note that both formal and informal political institutions should be analysed to identify enabling and discouraging conditions for popular political action.

2.1.3 Political action in an authoritarian context

In an authoritarian context, one of the main motives that drives people to take political action is grievances and opposition against a particular ruler or system, which is manifestly political. In the case of the authoritarian regimes of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, suppression of the people's political rights triggered public distrust and resistance to the ruling leader(s) or regime as a whole (Mishler and Rose 1997; Johnston 2005; Vladisavljević 2014). On the other hand, not every political action is anti-regime. Some instances of political action strategically involve subjects that hardly call for regime change but are instead related to issues in people's everyday lives. Recent research on environmental protests in China found that actors took topics that were less risky on the surface (i.e., environment) but integrated these into their struggle for changes in the existing decision-making or policy implementation system (Ho and Edmonds 2007; Huang and Sun 2020; Li et al. 2012; Steinhardt and Wu 2016; Zhong and Hwang 2016). Thus, people may not always take political action to directly demand regime change, but rather tread more nuanced paths with a political sublayer beneath. Given that driving factors of political action vary by case, an extensive account of political action in

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authoritarian regimes should be open to the diversity of subjects and to forms of political action other than only dissident activities.

Also, people living under authoritarian regimes may express their opinions through formal channels, while taking informal and furtive forms of political action to lower the cost of their action. Looking into the former Soviet country cases, Johnston (2005) elucidated a variety of political action that people took to express their grievances. These included but were not limited to, complaining, writing open letters, spreading information about the illegitimate activities of state authorities, holding protests and sending information to foreign media. In China, under constraining political conditions and formal political institutions, people have utilized more diffuse and informal means, such as personal networks (Ho and Edmond 2007; Ong and Han 2019).

In another case study of China, Steinhardt and Wu (2016) found variations in the approaches of Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in policy advocacy and collective political action. Some refrained from directly inciting people to join protests, while others stood on the frontline in setting public opinion and leading protests. Thus, individual or collective political action in an authoritarian context may take loyal forms of action, since these have a relatively lower risk of garnering a repressive response of the state, compared to more confrontational forms of action that are explicitly anti-regime.

Online political action has become more common in authoritarian regimes. An array of research has addressed this phenomenon, including the proposition that the online space creates a novel avenue for people living under authoritarian political regimes to conduct political debates and express their opinions (Bellin 2012; Breuer et al. 2015; Han 2018; Khondker 2011; Ruijgrok 2017; Tucker et al. 2017; Yang 2009). Under the Vietnamese regime, too, cyberspace has become a notable agora where people can find substantial freedom to express, interact, exchange information and develop more concerted forms of political action.

On the other hand, recent research urges a cautious view on the substance of online activism and its relations to the overall political system (Huang and Yip 2012; Lynch 2011; Wolfsfeld et al. 2013). In a case study of China, Huang

and Yip (2012) argued the limited contribution of the Internet in mobilizing collective political action at its early stage, due to state-perpetuated censorship and control. Therefore, Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) claimed that the political context is an important prerequisite before we give too much credit to the Internet or social media for the development of political action. This thread of discussion points to the mixed connotations of online political action in the context of authoritarian regimes.

2.2 Stability strategies of authoritarian regimes

2.2.1 Legitimation strategies

Political legitimacy refers to the justifiability and acceptability of a system or entities exercising power to govern society, to practice control and to enforce law and order (Buchanan 2002). Legitimacy connotes a perception among those who are ruled that the wielding of power is acceptable (Gilley 2006). In a later observation, Gilley (2009: 3-4) maintained, "[a] state is legitimate if it rightfully holds and exercises political power", in which 'rightful' is taken to mean compliance with the moral expectations of those who are subject to the power. Some scholarly works use political authority and legitimacy interchangeably, but in my view, these are not conceptually synonymous. Buchanan (2002: 692) explained this by saying that political authority includes "both the right to be obeyed and the justification for wielding political power". On the other hand, political legitimacy, in his view, does not hinge upon the obligation of citizens to obey but depends on how justified the making and implementation of a set of rules by the rulers are in the eyes of the citizenry (Buchanan 2002: 695).

Besides, legitimation, on which this study focuses, should be distinguished from legitimacy in that legitimation refers to processes and practices that regimes use to pursue legitimacy. According to Gerschewski (2013: 18), legitimation is a process that seeks to "guarantee active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population". Therefore, the regime's legitimation strategies do not necessarily guarantee that legitimacy is accepted and justified by those on whom it imposes the rules.

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In democracies, elections are one of the formal forms of political action through which people, as constituencies, can express their support of or opposition to leaders or the ruling group (Verba and Nie 1972). However, existing research on authoritarian political regimes suggests that elections are often institutionalized in favour of the existing political regime or orchestrated by the rulers for their political momentum. Elections may provide a convenient toolkit for reinforcing the regime's legitimacy (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Schelder 2002). For example, they may serve as a political camouflage to conceal authoritarian rule (Diamond 1999; Merkel 2004) or they may provide an institutional tool for removal of local leaders who have lost the trust of their constituencies due, for example, to concerns that their misbehaviour or poor performance may be detrimental to the regime's legitimacy, and in the long run, its survival (Geddes 2006).

In addition to electoral victories, much previous research suggests that legitimacy is a high priority of authoritarian regimes, as it helps them to stay in power. Such regimes are thus understood to employ diverse strategies to generate and maintain their legitimacy. Among these strategies are political ideology and convictions about the regime, hereditary or religious justifications, political openings to some extent and socio-economic performance meeting public needs (Burnell 2006; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gerschewski 2013; He and Warren 2011; Mayer 2001; Kailitz and Stockemer 2017; Schedler 2002; von Soest and Grauvogel 2017).

In authoritarian regimes, political legitimation strategies do not always lead to political legitimacy being given by the population at large. Based on a Chinese case study, Huang (2015) argued that the government consistently practiced propaganda in various forms as a means to signal to society its strength and its capacity to control the populace and maintain political order, regardless of its effectiveness in indoctrinating people or generating legitimacy. From the regime's perspective, achieving legitimacy, even to a limited degree, lowers the cost of controlling society by repression, as repressive measures may increase the risk of backlash or heightened popular resistance which authoritarian regimes prefer not to have to face. That being said, formal

political institutions are often geared to the regime's political interest of generating and maintaining legitimacy.

2.2.2 Repression of political action

State repression of public protest takes place across regime types. Earl (2011: 263) defined repression, in broad terms, as "state or private action meant to prevent, control, or constrain non-institutional, collective action (e.g., protest), including its initiation". While I refer to her definition, for this study I expand the object of repression to include not only extra-institutional, collective political action but also various forms of action taken within the given institutions. I also attend to toleration, a definition of which can be borrowed from Tilly (1978: 107): "the space between repression and facilitation". This covers a wide array of actions taken by state actors, for instance, overlooking, ignoring or taking a reserved attitude. Franklin (2009: 701) provided the similar but broader insight that toleration indicates "an absence of either repression or meaningful concessions". Toleration, therefore, entails not only an active approval or facilitated interaction but also the state of non-intervention and patience with people's political action.

State responses to individual and collective action are neither fixed nor random. By weighing the cost of either toleration or repression, the state is selective in choosing its behaviours of repression in varying forms and degrees (Davenport 2007b; Moore 2000; Tilly 1978). Tilly (1978) defined repression as a behaviour by an actor that raises the cost of another actor. His conceptualization of cost can be interpreted from both sides: that of state actors (the regime) and that of the people who take political action. In democratic regimes, repression is likely to be especially costly to leaders due to the risk of losing support. In contrast, authoritarian regimes strategically calculate the cost because both concessions and repression have costs and benefits for maintaining the regime (Franklin 2009: 704; Goldstone and Tilly 2001: 192). Svolik (2012) claimed that authoritarian regimes inherently hold moral hazard and therefore they choose force and violence as a way to rule society. From

the people's side, the cost of political action is higher in a high-risk environment wherein political action is more likely to result in repression (Ong and Han 2019).

One theoretical proposition in interpreting state repression is the threat hypothesis. According to Davenport (1995: 685), political action "directed against the state, its policies, and its practices is generally viewed as being a threat to those in authority". Thus, 'threat' involves the perception and interpretation by the government or other state actors regarding people's political action. In cases where the state perceives a heightened threat, repressive response is more likely (Ayoub 2010; Davenport 1995, 2000b, 2007a; Earl 2003; Earl et al. 2003; Earl and Soule 2006; Gartner and Regan 1996; McCarthy et al. 2007; Lee 2013). Regarding what is perceived as a threat, Earl and Soule (2006) observed that maintaining public order is the key objective of the police across regimes and the actual or high likelihood of loss of control is the main source of the perceived threat. Public order, in that study, did not simply refer to a condition of peace and safety without violence, unrest or any other troubling activities that may cause injury or damage to people or properties; it was conceptually expanded to state actors' subjective perception of public order.

Theoretical and empirical investigations have considered various sources of states' threat perception. One rough division is that between categorical and situational threats; the former including socio-demographic characteristics of actors, such as ethnic minority and involvement of radical groups, and the latter entailing the characteristics of the protest, such as scale and violent means (Davenport 2005; Davenport et al. 2011, Earl et al. 2003; Lee 2013). In the present study, I define a threat as an act that aims to, or is perceived by the party-state to, undermine the legitimacy of the regime and/or challenge the regime. In the present study, situational threats are singled out in order to focus on the features of political action rather than the composition of actors.

While perceived threat serves as a trigger of state repression, Davenport (2005) highlighted a multidimensional conception of the state's perception of threat in which the state reacts to a variety of factors rather than merely to the intensity of action. Also, state agencies that practice repression vary in terms

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of the targets and forms of repression (Earl 2003, 2011). As suggested by Davenport (2000: 3), governments develop legal and policy instruments at the institutional level which define 'a threat' and its consequences.

In authoritarian regimes, a tipping point of repression is drawn by the perceived degree of threat to state actors or the regime, the boundary of which is multidimensional. Among several forms of political action, protest may be perceived by regimes as high risk because it often involves a challenge to power (Vladisavljević 2014). Since authoritarian regimes characterize political criticism or opposition as a threat to unity and order within society, thereby justifying repression (Edel and Josua 2018), criticism and opposition are often framed as detrimental to society and subject to crackdowns. From the perspective of the authoritarian regime, repression may increase the cost of its measures to ensure regime stability, due to the potential for more severe backlash or resistance; but repression is also viewed an effective way to contain a threat to regime stability.

Under authoritarian politics, repression includes not only physical or high-intensity control but also formal and informal surveillance, intimidation, and curtailment of political rights (Levitsky and Way 2002). In particular, surveillance and preventive repression are routinized practices through which authoritarian regimes seek to maintain public order and prevent the development of political dissent (Slantchev and Matush 2020; Tilly 2006). Levitsky and Way (2010) conceptualized repressive strategies of authoritarian regimes more specifically into two types: 'low-intensity coercion' such as covert control, constraints and regulations that discourage political opposition; and 'high-intensity coercion' that exercises observable and high-profile repression over actors who oppose the incumbent or the regime itself. Thus, some forms of repression are subtle and nuanced, and in addition to the institutionalized mechanism of repression.

2.2.3 Co-optation

The other imperative element of the toolkit with which authoritarian regimes seek to secure regime stability is co-optation. Through co-optation, a regime

can minimize political opposition within the group of state actors, especially the ruling elite, and within society (Gandhi 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Kailitz and Stockemer 2017; Svolik 2012). The co-optation mechanism manifests not only in formal political institutions, such as elections, but also in informal politics by patronage in exchange for loyalty and cohesion (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). Party institutions and electoral processes serve as the institutional setting for co-optation. The powerful presence of ruling parties is significant in consolidating elite cohesion and marginalizing the opposition (Brownlee 2007), and elections are a power-sharing mechanism between the ruling elite and state actors in rank-and-file positions to distribute privileges and positions in exchange for commitments (Magaloni 2008).

Intra-group legitimation is intertwined with the co-optation mechanism enabling the ruling elite to share the value and benefits of regime maintenance with entities having little autonomy from one another (Kailitz and Stockemer 2017). Thus, co-optation in the context of authoritarian regimes is not a simple process of electing or appointing someone to a certain position at the discretion of the ruling elite, but a strategic means to solidify cohesion and contain potential opposition that may act as a destabilizing force. In a single-party regime, party cadres cooperate within their Party circle. Although they might well divide into factions favouring different policy orientations or in competition over leadership, they regard cooperation the better choice to stay in office (Geddes 1999: 129-130).

While co-optation in Gerschewski (2013) mainly centres on the ruling group, it is as imperative to look at co-optation from the aspect of the dynamics between state actors and society. In this respect, while I adopt Gerschewski's three pillars in this study, I sharpen the focus of co-optation by distinguishing two dimensions: (i) co-optation of *state actors* by power-sharing and (ii) co-optation of *the populace* by channelling public dissent into the formal political institutions.

Several studies have investigated authoritarian regimes accommodating moderate public demands and dissent. Some examples include citizen reception offices, complaint channels, consultative hearings, public policy debates

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and online participatory platforms (Chen and Xu 2017; Chen et al. 2016; Dimitrov 2013; He and Thøgersen 2010; He and Warren 2011; Henry 2012; Nathan 2003; Truex 2017). As observed by Svolik (2012), democratic political institutions, albeit nominal, are established to prevent or reduce problems of conflict within a regime's inner circle and between the rulers and the ruled.

Institutional channels may have the appearance of an inclusive and responsive mechanism, but the political connotations behind them nonetheless merit evaluation. As discussed in the previous section, the formal institutions of authoritarian political regimes may be used as a framework for generating legitimacy and sustaining the current regime by mitigating possibility for more extreme forms of contentious action. In a political environment where people have few channels to express their political opinions, public dissatisfaction with their authoritarian leaders may mount and escalate into political action that is harder to control (Vladisavljević 2014). Being aware of such risk, authoritarian regimes might offer opportunities for popular engagement in the legislature, so as to effectively "absorb" voices and activities of different groups of society into the established institutions of the regime, boiling these down to "domesticated opposition" (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007: 1,283).

Through multiple strategic institutions of vertical accountability and inclusiveness, authoritarian regimes can make people feel that the government is responsive to popular demands (Dimitrov 2013) and even that they are engaged in making policy decisions (Nathan 2003). In a case study of China, Truex (2017) found a high satisfaction level of people with the government, albeit being authoritarian, for its online participatory portals which gave an impression of government responsiveness. In the context of China, which has a single-party regime similar to Vietnam, He and Warren (2011) found that deliberative channels contributed to the stability of the authoritarian regime. At the same time, through such channels, authoritarian regimes can collect information on public opinions on government performance and respond to public dissent at an early stage to foster regime stability (Dimitrov 2013; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Henry 2012).

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2.3 Civil society and external engagement in authoritarian regimes

2.3.1 The limited domain of civil society

People's opportunities for political action can be gauged against the backdrop of the concept of civil society; that is, the domain wherein people can act and interact with each other separate from state and market. Among diverse definitions of civil society, I apply a definition by Schmitter (1993: 4), which is "a set or system of self-organized intermediary groups" with four conditions: (i) dual autonomy from both public actors (e.g., the government) and private actors (e.g., firms), (ii) capacity to take collective action, (iii) no illegal overthrow of power and (iv) activities within the established rules. In a democratic society, the values of pluralism and freedom of diverse types of associations are sufficiently manifest (Warren 2001), and individuals and organizations are guaranteed independence in their activities. However, further careful consideration is required for authoritarian regimes wherein the concept of a free and independent civil society does not fully embody these values.

In understanding variations in the level of independence available for civil society activities, Hadenius and Uggla (1996) conceptualized five stages of the state's treatment of civil society activities (Table 2.1). At the lowest degree of autonomy, stage 1, civil society activities are not tolerated in practice, the state being hostile to them. At stages 2, 3 and 4, citizens can form an organization and implement activities to a certain extent, but they still face limitations emanating from existing institutional constraints. The highest stage, stage 5, indicates a favourable environment in which civil society activities are promoted and supported by the state. Given that this model is not designed exclusively to explain civil society under authoritarian regimes, I find this conceptualization useful to better identify to what extent Vietnamese social organizations can implement activities promoting greater political rights in Vietnamese society free from the state's intervention.

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Table 2.1. State's different treatment of civil society activities

Stage 1. The state does not tolerate an independent civil society	Hostile state
Threshold: *De facto* right to form autonomous organizations	
Stage 2. The state accepts autonomous organizations but does not provide a space for them	
Threshold: State withdrawal opening up a space for independent activity	
Stage 3. A space for independent activity exists, but the practice of governance does not promote autonomous organizations	
Threshold: Favourable institutional structures	
Stage 4: The state provides favourable structures but no active support	
Threshold: Active state programmes in support of civil society	
Stage 5: The state actively promotes autonomous organizations	Benevolent state

Source: Hadenius and Uggla (1996: 1629).

In authoritarian regimes, not every self-organized group is completely oppressed, but authoritarian regimes perceive those that try to produce and develop counter-discourses critical of the regime as a threat to stability (Lewis 2013: 326). Furthermore, authoritarian regimes often strategically use civil society for their own legitimation, while allowing limited associational freedom (Froissart 2014; Lewis 2013; Lorch and Bunk 2017). Independence is, therefore, seldom guaranteed and what is legal and illegal activity is often determined by the discretionary interpretation of state actors.

Lorch and Bunk (2017) identified five patterns in which authoritarian regimes use civil society for the purpose of regime legitimation: civil society (i) as a façade of a pluralistic democracy, (ii) as an actor playing under limited given rules of the game, (iii) as co-opted participants, (iv) as actors contributing to socio-economic achievements and (v) as a supporter reinforcing the

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regime's historical or ideological legitimacy. I found these useful for elucidating the domain of civil society in Vietnam's case. The categorization led me to question how either cooperative or contested relationships are formed between the party-state and Vietnamese civil society actors. From the perspective of civil society organizations (CSOs), not every CSO under the authoritarian regime opposes the existing regime; some settle for or even contribute to the regime. In a study on Algeria, Mozambique and Vietnam, Wischermann et al. (2016) found that most civic associations did not openly oppose the state or stand against state interference in their operation. Thus, any such presumptions should be avoided. It is imperative to examine what approaches civil society actors take in their actions under the influence of Vietnamese authoritarian politics.

In Vietnam's context, the concept of civil society remains elusive since an independent civil society is not institutionalized and indistinct boundaries exist between the state and civil society (Abuza 2015; Bui 2013; Hannah 2007; Kleinen 2015; Le et al. 2018; Le Trong 2014; Wischermann 2013). From the perspective of the party-state, 'civil society' sounds irrational, since it conceptually requires a clear separation between the state and the people, based on independence and freedom, though this is not aligned with the Vietnamese political regime (Nguyen 2017). In particular, the adjective in the term NGOs, 'non-governmental', is usually translated as '*phi chính phủ*', which leaves substantial room for an anti-governmental connotation, '*vô chính phủ*' meaning 'anarchy' (Salemink 2006: 106).

In Vietnam, 'social organization' (*tổ chức xã hội*) and 'association' (*hội*) are more widely used in formal discussions and official documents instead of 'NGO' (*chức phi chính phủ*) and 'CSO' (*xã hội dân sự*). As noted in Chapter 1, I avoid using either 'NGO' or 'CSO', in favour of the more contextualized term 'social organizations' to indicate organizations established by like-minded Vietnamese citizens to pursue their members' or public interests. Considering this context, the focus of the present study is on the activities and roles of different Vietnamese social organizations rather than on a simple test of whether or not free and independent CSOs exist.

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2.3.2 External democracy promotion

While there is no universal definition of 'democracy promotion' adopted across all external development agencies. The working definition adopted in this study follows Grimm and Leininger (2012: 396), who defined democracy promotion as support by foreign actors "to enable internal actors to establish and develop democratic institutions that play according to democratic rules". Foreign actors, usually the established democratic states or multilateral agencies, have long been involved in promoting democracy and democratic values, such as the political rights of expression, association and assembly, in less or non-democratic regimes. Indeed, the practice of democracy promotion has become an international norm since the inception of financial and technical support for less and non-democratic regimes spanning the 1980s and the 1990s (McFaul 2004). From a materialist perspective, democracy promotion can be cynically regarded as rhetoric in foreign policies without any real substance, or it can be seen from a normative theory perspective as a constitutive norm pursued for non-democratic target countries (Wolff and Wurm 2011).

Nonetheless, democracy promotion should not be regarded as a universal package that applies to any authoritarian recipient country. External democracy promotion takes a variety of modalities, including diplomatic pressure, aid with conditionality, project implementation, grants to home-grown organizations and even military intervention. While direct democracy promotion explicitly supports changes towards or development of democratic institutions, indirect democracy promotion centres on nurturing a more inclusive and democratic political environment (Grimm and Leininger 2012: 396). To be more specific, synthesizing earlier literature, Schraeder (2002: 219-220) categorized democracy promotion into seven forms, from least to most interventionist, as follows: (i) diffusion of democracy through state-to-state diplomacy channels, (ii) financial assistance for democracy-related activities, (iii) political conditionality attached to diplomatic relations, (iv) economic sanctions as punishment, (v) covert intervention such as propaganda, (vi) support for subversive activities of a proxy and (vii) direct military intervention. While this categorization is meaningful in that it recognizes multiple strategies that for-

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eign actors may choose, it covers a vast range of democracy promotion modalities, while providing little explanation of what approaches are implemented, how they are implemented and the constraints they may face in the real-world context of target countries.

A recent wave of research on the past trajectory of external democracy promotion identifies several problems in external democracy promotion, such as conflicting interests among foreign actors, overlapping projects and insufficient contextualization (Bader and Faust 2014; Burnell 2004; Carothers 2016; Easterly 2006; Kurki 2010, 2013; Santiso 2001; Striebinger 2016; van Hüllen 2019; Williams 2004; Youngs 2015). Regarding substantive impact, Burnell (2006), Easterly (2006) and Williams (2004) emphasized that the effect of democracy promotion by foreign actors is reliant on their use of strategic approaches tailored to a country's political context and targeting points of vulnerability. Some target countries express discomfort with projects packed with democratic values and discourses, leading them to erect barriers or take a hostile stance on these (Carothers 2016; Youngs 2015).

Besides, foreign actors' commitments have not always led to institutional change in authoritarian regimes. Some studies find positive relationships (Goldsmith 2001; Kersting and Kilby 2014; Scott and Steele 2011), while others find weak or even opposite effects, suggesting that democracy promotion does not always have the intended impact, and may even undermine the democratic development of a recipient country (Dutta et al. 2013; Kalyvitis and Vlachaki 2012). Still others find more nuanced arguments or mixed results (Brown 2005; Burnell 2007; Cornell 2013; Tan 2016). Moreover, foreign actors are often driven not just by the good cause of promoting democratic norms; rather, their political, diplomatic and socio-economic interests in a recipient country may be varied.

As one of the more widely used forms of democracy promotion, foreign actors have supported local organizations in the expectation that these may effectively serve as prospective agents of democratic change (Seckinelgin 2002). Local organizations – CSOs or NGOs in the foreign actors' own terms – have been regarded as drivers of change to empower people for greater po-

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litical participation or to induce a regime to advance democratic values in society (Alagappa 2004; Brouwer 2000; Burnell 2006; Ottaway and Carothers 2000; Thomas 2008; Veltmeyer 2005). However, what we cannot overlook is the importance of power and dynamics between state actors and local organizations within a country's political context.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the analytical framework for this research, which connects insights from the literature on several key themes. My investigation starts with the presupposition that Vietnam exhibits the characteristics of an authoritarian regime. The literature on authoritarian regimes provides a theoretical foundation for further analysis of people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action in Vietnam. A key finding from the reviewed literature is that people do take political action in authoritarian regimes, but the form, extent and scope of this action is constrained by the regime's perceived political interest in regime stability. To further our knowledge of political action in authoritarian regimes, I argue that the boundaries between tolerated and repressed political action are not universal but context-specific and influenced by how a political regime shapes them. In other words, people's opportunities and repertoires for political action hinge in large part on the boundaries demarcated by the political regime.

Central to the concerns of the present study, therefore, is the institutional conditions of the Vietnamese single-party system, in which are embedded people's political action and the party-state's response to that action. This study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature on Vietnamese politics; namely, a lack of examination of (i) the rationales and strategies of the party-state for maintaining the single-party regime and (ii) the conditions under which Vietnamese individuals and organizations – not just dissidents but more in general – can take political action with little or no risk of repression. In identifying how the Vietnamese party-state allows or controls popular political action while seeking to sustain the existing regime, I adopt the 'three pillars of stability' proposed by Gerschewski (2013): legitimation, repression, and

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co-optation. This model serves as an analytical tool to investigate the strategies utilized by the Vietnamese single-party regime to ensure its stability. In analysing the institutional characteristics associated with the three pillars, I look into not only the formal political institutions but also informal political institutions.

As an exploratory study, the present research considers a wide spectrum of different topics and forms of political action to identify the overall dynamics between state actors and people who take political action, instead of focusing on a few cases of political action. As explained in this chapter, I opt for the term 'political action' rather than 'political participation', to more explicitly denote the focus of this study, which is the spectrum and substance of political action taken of people's own free will. In identifying tolerated and controlled zones of various forms of political action, I borrow the conceptual map of Theocharis and van Deth (2018a: 65) as a concrete matrix. In addition, I relate various forms of popular political action to various levels of the substance of popular political action, by referring to Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of citizen participation', which classifies eight levels of participation according to how much power people have to influence decisions.

This study takes the concept of civil society proposed by Lewis (2013: 331): "a mediating set of institutions that 'distils' concerns from the private sphere and transmits them to a public sphere in an institutionalized form". I use the concept of civil society as an analytical lens through which to investigate the enabling or constraining institutions within which mass organizations and social organizations make claims and implement activities. This research conducts an examination of what roles these organizations perform in promoting political rights and freedom under the identified conditions. The concept of civil society is also linked with an analysis of the role of foreign actors in that civil society support is integral in external democracy promotion. In investigating whether foreign actors operate within the existing regime structures or strive to carve out opportunities for the Vietnamese individuals or organizations, I delve into their support to Vietnamese social organizations.

As exploratory research, this study aims to identify how authoritarian political institutions have shaped various forms of political action, and what roles

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Vietnamese and foreign actors have played in promoting political rights and freedom. Through these components of the analytical framework, this study seeks to explicate whether, 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. This analytical framework guides the study to logically connect the party-state's strategies and practices for regime stability with the nexus between popular political action and the party-state's response.

3 Research methodology and methods

This chapter describes the data collection process, methodological perspectives and means employed in this research to analyse political action and state response in Vietnam. Section 3.1 sets out the overall research methodology underlying the research design. Section 3.2 elaborates on the triangulation of the research data and methods, including document research, individual expert interviews and cross-case analysis. Section 3.3 concludes the chapter by presenting limitations and challenges.

3.1 Research design

3.1.1 Overall research perspective and design

This study takes an interpretive approach to better understand the context-specific complexities embedded in the realities of political action. Table 3.1 presents the units of analysis and observation pertaining to each research question.

Table 3.1. Research question keywords, units of analysis and units of observation

Research question keyword	Unit of analysis	Unit of observation
Formal political system and institutions	- The political structure and institutions - State actors (the CPV, the legislature, the judiciary and law-enforcing agencies, and the government including both national and local levels)	

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Informal political institutions	- Prevalent practices in politics (personal connections and corruption) - Conventional norms and practices in Vietnamese society	
Institutionalized forms of political action and the party-state's response	- Legal arrangements - Experiences of political action	- Legal documents - Vietnamese individuals
Extra-institutional forms of political action and the party-state's response	- Public protest - State repression	- Protest cases (2010-2020)
Domestic and foreign actors	- Mass organizations - Social organizations - External development agencies and INGOs	- Experts - Projects and pro-grammes of foreign actors

For the first research question, regarding Vietnam's formal political system, the units of analysis and observation are the Vietnamese political structure, formal institutions and state actors. For the second research question, there are two units of analysis and observation: the conventional norms and practices prevalent across Vietnamese society, and the perceptions and behaviours of Vietnamese individuals. For the third question, on institutionalized forms of political action, the units of analysis are legal arrangements and experiences in institutionalized political action. The units of observation are legal documents and individuals who take political action. As to the fourth research question, the unit of analysis is public protest, while the unit of observation is public protest events that took place in Vietnam. For the last question, on domestic and foreign actors, the units of analysis are their discourses and activities. The units of observation are the reflections of individual experts working in mass organizations, social organizations and external development agencies, or INGOs. In addition, their projects and programmes are a unit of observation.

To achieve the goal of this study, several qualitative research techniques were employed alongside analyses of selected quantitative survey data. The different data collection methods used are explained in section 3.2.

3.1.2 Researcher's positionality and self-reflection

In research that delves into contextual aspects of a society, the researcher's own identity plays an evident role in shaping perceptions and interpretations of the acquired knowledge. Furthermore, the social position and characteristics of a researcher affect their understanding of the subject under study. These include not only demographic factors (e.g., the researcher's age, gender and nationality) but also personal experiences and viewpoints (Berger 2015). Once a researcher becomes aware of their own position, they must also recognize the effect of that position and their own perspectives on the way the data is collected and analysed.

My identity is that of a foreigner who was not born and raised in Vietnamese society. According to the categorical continuum of the researcher's positionality, described by Herr and Anderson (2005), my position in the current study is that of 'outsider studies insider'. In other words, I am a researcher from the outside, investigating the inside of Vietnam. I have not been exposed to the ideological propaganda or indoctrination of the Vietnamese single-party regime. Nevertheless, the political interpretations of my research topic can be influenced by my own intellectual assumptions, built on the democratic model (Dixon 2004: 16). When I conducted data collection and analysis, I therefore tried to avoid prejudgments of the Vietnamese regime with no or insufficient reasoning. Especially during the interviews, I sought to use impartial expressions, and not to convey any personal political opinions.

That being said, my identity contributed to the richness of the data during the fieldwork. It led many interviewees to be less doubtful about their security in speaking, as in Vietnam, it is still highly sensitive to openly discuss political rights or politics-related topics. Plenty of the interviewees said that they felt more comfortable talking with me about their opinions on political rights and the Vietnamese political system because I was a foreigner. According to them,

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they would have been reluctant to discuss politics if I had been Vietnamese, due to concerns about the possibility of being reported to state authorities.

Since empirical data are "*the results of interpretation*", it is essential to pay attention to theoretical assumptions, pre-understanding and the importance of language chosen in the research (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009: 9, emphasis in original). Using several studies on reflexivity in qualitative research as a guiding reference (Berger 2015; Day 2012; Mauthner and Doucet 2003), I posed self-reflexive questions to myself, self-monitoring as I performed the analyses and interpreted the findings. These questions included, but were not limited to, 'How have my research approaches shaped the way I look at the research subject?', 'What attitude did I take in interacting with the literature, interviewees, and the data?', 'How have my identity and personal experience affected how the data has been analysed?' and 'How has the term 'authoritarianism' used influenced the way I observe and analyse?'. Such self-reflection, overall, advanced this study and promoted better research quality.

3.2 Triangulation in data collection

3.2.1 Data collection

Documents

One of my main research methods was extensive document research. The collected documents include those published by the Vietnamese government, foreign publishing companies, local organizations, external development agencies, INGOs and even web-based outputs of Vietnamese groups working abroad. During my fieldwork, I also collected materials not publicly accessible. Official English translations of some of the legal documents were available on the government website. However, some legal documents were not officially translated or not available in the public domain. In such cases, I chose the alternative of referring to other sources which were not governmental, such as Vietnamese law firms and international organizations. Citations and inter-

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pretations of legal documents were later cross-checked by my Vietnamese research assistant who reviewed them line by line, comparing them with the original versions released in Vietnamese to avoid reliability being undermined.

In addition, I employed data on persecuted activists in Vietnam from The 88 Project. This is a US-based non-profit organization that promotes political freedoms and rights in Vietnam by collecting and providing up-to-date information in great detail about the Vietnamese people who are at risk of repression, detention or imprisonment. I used its profile data when exploring the characteristics and status of people who had been arrested and persecuted due to their political action.

Survey data

I employed survey data to advance the evidentiary value of this work. First, I relied on the Asian Barometer Survey, a cross-national survey that covers social, economic, cultural and political experiences and opinions in many countries and territories in East and Southeast Asia.[12] I acquired the original dataset from the National Taiwan University, which conducts the survey project and manages the data. In the case of Vietnam, the survey was conducted three times: Wave 2 (2005), Wave 3 (2010) and Wave 4 (2015). The sample totalled 1,200 Vietnamese persons in 2005, 1,191 persons in 2010 and 1,200 persons in 2015. Respondents were aged 18 and older, one from each sampled household. The sampling distribution was centred around population parameters such as gender and age. The respondents were not the same persons in each survey round. Since the survey covered a vast range of topics, having over 170 questions (Wave 4), I reviewed the questions and selected those directly related to this study. I used this survey data to draw a statistical portrait of some of the topics covered in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

The Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI) was another source that I used. PAPI is an annual survey

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[12] In Wave 4, 14 countries and territories were surveyed.

of Vietnamese citizens (e.g., 14,138 respondents in the 2019 survey) across all 63 provinces to measure citizen participation and the quality of local government. The most recent PAPI consisted of more than 120 indicators and 550 substantive questions regarding participation at the local level, transparency, vertical accountability, control of corruption, public administrative procedures, public service delivery, environmental governance and e-governance (PAPI, n.d.). Thanks to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Vietnam, I acquired access to the 2010-2019 core datasets, which are only available upon request.

While these constituted useful data sources, I must stress here that I used these survey data with caution due to concerns about data reliability. Many people in Vietnam are reluctant to express critical opinions about the party-state to anyone, as they fear being reported to and facing repercussions from the state. Arguably, related to the climate of fear, people may respond to survey questions dishonestly to avoid any potential negative consequence. Though this is speculative, respondents might have answered sensitive questions in a way that they considered socially or politically acceptable rather than providing sincere responses. According to the Asian Barometer Survey technical report, some politically sensitive questions were not allowed and thus excluded from the survey.[13] For those questions, therefore, every response was formally coded as missing; for instance, on the questions 'Have you attended a demonstration or protest march?' and 'Have you used force or violence for a political cause?'.

As to the Vietnamese perception of corruption practices, I employed the Vietnam Corruption Barometer, as reported by Towards Transparency (2019), a Vietnamese non-profit organization that conducts corruption status surveys and research in Vietnam. I chose this survey data because Towards Transparency has expertise in Vietnamese corruption issues and provides a very comprehensive account of corruption in Vietnamese society. For the Vietnam Corruption Barometer, the organization surveyed 1,085 Vietnamese people in 19

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[13] The technical report is only accessible to those who submit an official request to its secretariat.

provinces and cities using the personal interview method in July and August 2019.

Expert interview

I conducted fieldwork in Vietnam for five months, from October 2017 to February 2018. The main objective of the fieldwork was to conduct individual semi-structured expert interviews. The individual in-depth interview is an appropriate method when the interview topic is complex, because such interviews provide the researcher chances to explore complexities more intensively with interviewees (Lewis 2003: 58). Specifically, I sought out experts who could share their professional experiences and insights regarding the role of Vietnamese non-state actors and foreign actors in promoting political rights and freedoms in Vietnam. In other words, the interviews focused on activities, challenges and realities in Vietnam. The interview data were used for the analysis in Chapter 8.

Considering that this research had clear target groups, the snowball sampling method was employed. Building a diverse network was crucial in the sampling chain. In this, an existing cooperation relationship between ISS and Vietnamese academic institutions was helpful. The University of Social Sciences and Humanities-Vietnam National University (*Trường Đại học Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội,* USSH-VNU) invited me to implement my fieldwork as a guest researcher. Also, my network from a previous experience working for a government-affiliated research institute helped.

I conducted interviews with people from a variety of categories to obtain diverse perspectives and experiences related to the research subject. The sample size for the interviews was 50, and 49 out of the 50 interviews were conducted in Hanoi, where most Vietnamese social organizations and foreign agencies are based. That being said, it should be noted that their projects and activities were wide-ranging and spanned the entire country. Interviewees were categorized into four groups. The first was Vietnamese state agencies and included officials working at central ministries and mass organizations.

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The second category was social organizations established by Vietnamese citizens. Academics working for non-governmental think tanks and research-oriented organizations were also included in this category. The third category was bilateral and multilateral development agencies, and the last category was INGOs.

Table 3.2 summarizes the composition of the interview subjects, categorized by affiliation. Appendix 2 presents the interview list in full. Since maintaining confidentiality was essential in the interviews, personal information on interviewees has been anonymized. To prevent their identification, I use both gender adjectives or pronouns simultaneously throughout the dissertation (e.g., 'his/her' or simply 'them/their'). The interviewees were coded by numbers.

Table 3.2. Composition of the interviewees

Category	Domestic actors		Foreign actors	
	State agencies and mass organizations	Social organizations	Bilateral and multilateral development agencies	INGOs
High-level or decision-making level (e.g., representative)	2	6	7	3
Manager or operations level (e.g., programme officer)	5	7	12	8
Subtotal	7	13	19	11
Total	50			

As the interviews were semi-structured, plenty of different follow-up questions could be raised depending on the flow of the conversation. The interview

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questions were designed to be descriptive and explorative, based on the research questions posed earlier. Even though the interviews were not limited to people who spoke English, most of the interviewees were proficient in English, and 47 out of the 50 interviews were conducted in English. For the Vietnamese interviewees who did not speak English, my Vietnamese research assistant accompanied me to interpret their remarks.

Interestingly, some interviewees preferred to meet with me alone, without the Vietnamese assistant, due to the sensitivity of the topic under discussion. Moreover, due to this sensitivity, most interviewees preferred or requested the interview to be 'off the record'. I took note of what interviewees said and documented it more fully as soon as possible after the interview, to prevent memory loss over time. Most of the interviews spanned 1-1.5 hours. Interviews were carried out at the place the interviewee preferred. Some invited me to their office, whereas others wanted to meet at a quiet café away from the eyes of others. Interview notes and transcripts were typed and saved in a digital folder, which could be constantly revisited throughout the rest of the research period.

3.2.2 Cross-case analysis of protest cases

Whereas a case study is oriented towards intensive investigation of a single case or exploration of variation among a few cases, cross-case analysis is marked by a focus on similarities or differences across a population of cases (Gerring 2013). Thus, cases are compared and the elements found in some are related to those found in others. In this respect, cross-case analysis is a useful research method when a study aims to "explore whether the cases being studied had replicated or contrasted with each other" (Yin 2014: 167). My approach to cross-case analysis focused on the relations between variables, to identify generalizable patterns across the cases (della Porta 2008). In a variable-oriented approach, the concepts under study are defined and operationalized into variables at the outset, the cases being treated as anonymous and deconstructed to their variables (della Porta 2008).

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The cross-case analysis performed in this study is presented in Chapter 7. I collected data on public protests that occurred in Vietnam over a decade, from 2010 to 2020. Medium-*N* cross-case analysis enables a researcher to review a wider set of cases that present the variables and outcome of interest. I would argue that this facilitates a more systematic classification, while enabling within-group and across-group comparisons of cases to identify multiple regular or irregular patterns. Qualitative research with small- or medium-*N* cases may seek "to identify combinations of variable values that are sufficient for outcomes of interest", assuming possibly different, multiple combinations of causal paths leading to the same outcome (Mahoney and Goertz 2006: 232). Noting the inevitable trade-offs, I chose medium-*N* (N=60), cross-case analysis due to its comparative advantages over the single case study. Even though the cross-case analysis has limitations in terms of identifying a more systematic statistical causality, I adopted this analysis method in order to obtain a descriptive comparison of the collected cases based on the three selected characteristics of protests and protesters (scale, topic and means). Chapter 7 elaborates further on the choice of these three factors in particular.

Media reports as a source of data on protest cases

To make the subject 'public protest' more manageable for the analysis, I collected protest events that met the following criteria: (i) it was observable; (ii) it was held by a group of people; and (iii) it aimed to affect, make demands or express opposition to decisions made by central or local state actors. I found it worth reviewing a decade rather than just a few recent years. Given that it is not feasible to collect every incidence of public protest that took place over the ten years in Vietnam, my sample includes only public protests that were covered by domestic and foreign media outlets.

Newspaper reports have been extensively used as data for research on protests and social movements (Beers 2016; Cress and Snow 1996; Earl et al. 2004; Huang et al. 2016; Kriesi et al. 1995; McAdam 1982; Yang 2016). For protest studies, news reports are a feasible source of data in that it is impossible to return to the past to observe the scene or conduct interviews with participants of protests that already took place (Rucht and Ohlemacher 1992: 77).

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My claim about the value of media reports as data concurs with the assertion by Earl et al. (2004: 77) that newspaper reports do not negate the quality of research on protest events as long as researchers remain aware of and try to minimize the possibility of news bias and selectivity in data collection. While cognizant of these and other drawbacks of news reports (e.g., their brevity), I chose media reports as a source of data, while carefully reviewing the content of each report, one by one, before inclusion in the data. When sources had different information on a protest, for instance, the number of protesters, I applied alternative strategies suggested by Rucht and Ohlemacher (1992: 94): taking the average figure as a compromise, choosing the more reliable source or fact-checking with other sources. In general, I looked to alternate sources to check the accuracy of my information and chose the sources which covered a protest most precisely.

Purposive sampling

I used purposive sampling to collect protest event cases that led to different levels of repressive response by the state. Since my analysis required cases that were not only similar but also comparable with respect to the sets of conditions specified in the study, I took into account case distribution. Purposive sampling enabled this research to collect cases while keeping them moderately distributed on each condition. Due to data availability issues, however, it was not possible to achieve an even distribution of cases in each category.

At an initial stage of data collection, I referred to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), which collects and releases data from a wide range of international and domestic media sources on contentious

political action and violence by country (Raleigh et al. 2010).[14] Among several categories of contentious action and conflict classified by the ACLED dataset, the categories 'riots' and 'protests' best fit the scope of this study. I reviewed more than three hundred media reports, one by one, collected in the ACLED database on riots or protests in Vietnam from 2010 to 2020. As a data cleaning exercise, I retrieved the sources, removed irrelevant or inaccessible reports, and grouped overlapping protest events. I excluded media reports without sufficient information on the protest events for the cross-case analysis. At minimum, I needed an estimated number of participants, the topic of the protest, the means of the participants and the response of state authorities. If any of these data were missing or insufficient, I did not include the protest event case in the final list. In addition, I conducted additional searches for protest cases. As a result, I had 60 protest event cases for the analysis.

3.2.3 Thematic analysis of foreign actors

In answering the research question regarding the roles of foreign actors in promoting political rights and freedoms, I employed thematic analysis to examine these actors' narratives and practices at an aggregate level. Thematic analysis can be defined as "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 6). In a more comprehensive spectrum, Boyatzis (1998: 4) stated that thematic analysis is "'a process' of handling qualitative data with codes rather than 'a method'", and defines a theme as "a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon".

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[14] Since some aggregated datasets that rely on a limited number of sources undermine sufficiency and validity of the analysis (Nam 2006), caution should be used in selection of the aggregate database. The ACLED is a disaggregated dataset that collects a wide range of international and domestic media reports on occurrences of contentious action and violence by country (Raleigh et al. 2010). The ACLED data are publicly available at https://www.acleddata.com/data.

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A code refers to "a label attached to a section of text to index it as relating to a theme or issue in the data which the researcher has identified as important to his or her interpretation" (King 2004: 257). Thus, coding refers to a series of processes in which a researcher creates, collects and analyses categories embedded within research questions. The present analysis aims to answer the question of what foreign actors have done to promote better conditions for political action in Vietnam. In addition, this analysis identifies the characteristics of their activities and similarities and differences between them.

After an initial series of reviews and modifications, I grouped the codes and collated them into themes. Such a coding process is inevitably subjective, but I tried to ensure a sufficient level of transparency and validity by publicly providing the final codebook and information on the collected projects alongside the thematic map with a detailed elaboration of each theme and its codes.

The data source for this part of the research consisted of the expert interviews conducted during the fieldwork and the materials collected on projects of foreign actors. Regarding this latter, I collected calls for proposals, brief project overviews and evaluation reports on projects in Vietnam. The projects covered a wide spectrum of categories related to democracy promotion. They included civil society support, awareness raising of democratic norms and technical assistance in developing policies related to democratic norms. I covered projects from 2000 to 2020, and a total of 20 projects were reviewed. Appendix 4 presents the full list of projects. For the thematic analysis, I used the software Atlas.ti (ver. 8), which is specialized in qualitative data analysis. Atlas.ti is a methodologically helpful tool for managing a large amount of descriptive data with the assistance of its code manager function.

3.3 Limitations and challenges

The most notable methodological challenge in this research was the political sensitivity of the research topic. Political rights and activities are not completely taboo in Vietnam, but many people had reservations in talking about these topics frankly. Thus, the interviews were difficult to conduct, and I often had to explain that the study did not aim to incite people to take political action.

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Political sensitivity required me to exercise caution, to avoid raising suspicion or alarm among the interviewees, both Vietnamese and foreign actors. Nevertheless, most of the people who rejected interviews stated that they considered the topic too politically sensitive.

Besides, researchers wishing to carry out a survey or local-level interviews in Vietnam must complete bureaucratized paperwork. Several documents have to be submitted to gain approval from the competent local authorities. Due to the political sensitivity of my topic, I was advised that it would take a long time, or perhaps would not be possible, to conduct interviews with local people asking them about their experiences in political action. Considering the timeframe available for my work, I decided to concentrate on Vietnamese and foreign actors in Hanoi who were committed to promoting people's opportunities and capacities.

Despite these limitations, the collected data were sufficiently rich and provided the answers sought in this research. Extant literature, legal documents, secondary data and the people I interviewed substantially helped me in my search for answers to the research questions. With the writing of this dissertation, it is my aim to generate more in-depth knowledge about individual and collective political action under the decades-long Vietnamese single-party regime.

4 The structure of the single-party regime in Vietnam

My underlying argument in this study is that popular political action is not just a simple episodic event, but the outcome of a dynamic between state actors and the populace in the context of a political regime. This chapter identifies the characteristics of the Vietnamese political system, constituted by the Vietnamese single-party political regime, affecting the political environment in which people take political action. The political system in this study includes the set of structures and mechanisms through which enforcing organizations and actors perform functions of societal control.

Section 4.1 examines how the party-state has generated legitimacy, particularly its contributions to modern-day political history and national socio-economic performance. Section 4.2 shifts the focus to the CPV-led political system and its hegemonic influence over the state apparatus. Here, my focus is on legitimation as a regime strategy and the regime's practices in seeking legitimacy, rather than an assessment of whether the regime is morally justifiable or has succeeded in gaining legitimacy among the masses. I also investigate the party-state's various approaches to surveillance and control over society. Section 4.3 considers the separation of powers, exploring various state actors to understand their workings and their characteristics in the context of the single-party regime. In particular, I examine whether and how these state actors contribute to a consolidated effort to preserve the single-party regime.

Subsequent to this overall investigation of the Vietnamese political system and key state actors, the chapter concludes, in section 4.4, by summarizing the characteristics of the formal political system and institutions that influence the political conditions for people's political action.

4.1 Performance-based legitimation

4.1.1 Contemporary historical context

After 1858, when the French conquest took place, the French gradually expanded their territorial control over Vietnam. The French established the Indochinese Union (French Indochina), which comprised Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam and was divided into three parts: the north (Tonkin), the centre (Annam) and the south (Cochinchina). In 1940, France and Japan signed an agreement that allowed Japanese troops to be stationed in Tonkin, and later in other parts of Indochina. This move was driven by the events of World War II, in which France was occupied by Germany and control of its overseas colonies waned (Namba 2019). The Vietnamese people fought for revolution and independence, and one of the leading forces was the Communist Party. In 1925, Ho Chi Minh established the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League (*Việt Nam Thanh niên cách mạng đồng chí hội*), which is a communist organization to fight for independence. In the 1930s, three communist parties were active in French Indochina, but following suggestions made by Communist International (Comintern), merged to form the Ho Chi Minh party, which was renamed the Indochinese Communist Party (*Đảng Cộng sản Đông Dương*). Backed by wide public support, the Communist Party actively fought for independence despite the severe repression exercised by the colonial government (Singh 2009).

As Japan surrendered to the Allies in August 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared independence and the creation of the communist-led state, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). However, the country's independence was not complete. French forces invaded the northern part of Vietnam, resulting in the outbreak of the First Indochina War in December 1946. After the dissolution of the Indochinese Communist Party, Ho Chi Minh established the Vietnam Workers' Party (*Đảng lao động Việt Nam*) in 1951, during the fight for independence. This became the leading force within the DRV.

In 1954, the French forces were defeated at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, and this led to the withdrawal of France from Vietnam. It was followed by the

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1954 Accord at the Geneva Conference, which announced the temporary division of Vietnam into two regimes, pending a unified election scheduled for 1956. However, in 1956, the election of a unified government failed to be held, and a communist regime was created in the North backed by China and the Soviet Union, with an anti-communist, democratic regime established in the South backed by the United States. Ho Chi Minh, by combining nationalism with the communist ideology, adhered to the political commitment to communist-led Vietnam (Singh 2009).

The Second Indochina War, also known as the Vietnam War, broke out the very next year, in 1955, between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. It escalated as one of the proxy wars in the Cold War era, as North Vietnam was supported by the Soviet Union, China and other communist allies, and the United States and other anti-communist allies supported South Vietnam. This war lasted almost two decades, until North Vietnam occupied South Vietnam in 1975. The nationwide general election after reunification was held in April 1976, with both the Vietnam Workers' Party in North Vietnam and the People's Revolutionary Party of South Vietnam nominating candidates and occupying seats at the National Assembly. At the fourth Party Congress in December 1976, they merged to form the CPV (*Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam*) of today. Also, the two parts of the country were officially reunified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in July 1976. All things considered, contemporary Vietnamese history reflects the turbulent times in which the CPV developed. Since the reunification in 1976, Vietnam has maintained a single-party political regime, and it has never collapsed.

The Party's leading role in fighting for independence and unification of the country has served as the foundation of the legitimacy of Communist Party rule (Abuza 2001; Le 2012; London 2009; Thayer 2010). For the CPV, its indigenous development and contribution in the country's modern history have been a key source of political legitimacy to sustain the single-party regime (Dimitrov 2013). The Vietnamese government formally claims that the present single-party political regime "was chosen by the Vietnamese people" grounded on the historical context of the people's fights for independence and

national construction (United Nations Human Rights Committee 2018). In addition to the Party's contribution to independence and unification, the CPV's continued legitimacy is also attributed to its considerable achievements in poverty reduction and economic development through national reform (*Đổi Mới*) (Hai 2016b; Le 2012; McCarty 2001). Whereas the CPV sought its political legitimacy in its achievements in the country's history, its legitimacy was severely challenged between 1975 and 1986, as the CPV adopted a fully-fledged move towards socialism that accelerated economic recession and put political repression into effect in the previously liberated South (Vasavakul 2019).

4.1.2 Socio-economic achievements

After the two-decade war, Vietnam achieved reunification but suffered an economic crisis that brought high poverty rates, food shortages and inflation. The situation was exacerbated by the Cambodian–Vietnamese War. In 1978, Vietnam launched a military invasion of Cambodia as a result of escalating political and diplomatic tensions between the two countries. The war lasted until October 1991, when both countries signed the Paris Peace Agreement. Socio-economic conditions were aggravated during the war. Moreover, Vietnam endured economic sanctions imposed by the United States, and was thus unable to integrate into the global economy.

Vietnam was one of the world's lowest income countries in the past but has transformed dramatically over the last three decades. To address continued food shortages, economic hardship and poverty, the party-state launched a national reform programme (*Đổi Mới*) in 1986, to transform itself into a so-called socialist-oriented market economy. A wide array of economic reforms was implemented, including abolition of state price controls in the market, acceptance of private ownership and promotion of foreign direct investment. Along with the nationwide reform, the country's centrally-planned economy was transformed into a more market-friendly economy.

In 2011, Vietnam attained the status of lower-middle-income country.[15] Economic development has strongly influenced urbanization in the country, with considerable population growth and concentration in major cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Fan et al. 2019). In an effort to further economic development, the government implemented the ten-year Socio-Economic Development Strategy (SEDS) from 2011 through 2020 and, subsequently, the Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) with an objective of industrialization and modernization of the country. Today, the Vietnamese GDP per capita is 62.6 million Vietnamese Dong ($2,715) (General Statistics Office 2020b: 191). The services sector is largest, employing some 19.4 million persons, accounting for 35.5% of the total employed population aged 15 and older (General Statistical Office 2020b: 31). Other important economic sectors are agriculture, forestry, and fishing (34.5%), and industry and construction (30.2%) (General Statistical Office 2020b: 31).

Whereas socio-economic crisis swept the Soviet Union, its allies and Vietnam in the 1980s, and in some countries the communist party lost its dominance, the CPV has maintained its leading role in state management and spearheaded the national reform process (Thanh et al. 2020: 499). The nationwide economic reform programme generated positive outcomes, including an increase in exports and an average annual economic growth rate of 6.5% (Hong 2009: 38). Along with the national reforms, the CPV garnered trust and legitimacy among the public through improvements in material living conditions (Hai 2016b; Vasavakul 2019), which suggests that economic development has been a major source of the Vietnamese regime's resilience (Dimitrov 2013).

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[15] According to the World Bank, as of the 2021 fiscal year, countries were classified into four categories as follows: (i) low-income economies are those with a gross national income (GNI) per capita of $1,035 or less; (ii) lower middle-income economies are those between $1,036 and $4,045; (iii) upper middle-income economies are those between $4,046 and $12,535; and (iv) high-income economies are those with a GNI per capita of $12,536 or more (World Bank, n.d.).

Since the Law on Enterprises (*Luật số 13/1999/QH10 Doanh nghiệp*) took effect in 2000, officially recognizing private enterprises and freedom in business, the private sector has expanded rapidly, contributing to Vietnam's further economic development such as an increase in GDP and employment (Vo and Chu 2020). However, caution is warranted in understanding the private sector in the Vietnamese context, as in Vietnam, some large firms are state-owned enterprises (SOEs).[16] The party-state still exercises its influence on SOEs, often driven more by political interests than corporate effectiveness. Despite some reforms among SOEs, they are not completely free from the hands of the party-state, and demonstrate problems such as low levels of transparency and accountability and lack of effective monitoring systems (Nguyen et al. 2020). Moreover, private ownership of land is still not possible in Vietnam. Stipulated by the Constitution and the Land Law (*Luật số 45/2013/QH13 Đất đai*), the state manages the land on behalf of the people. Individuals and companies may use, transfer and inherit land, however, they exchange so-called land-use rights, in principle, leasing land from the state.

In addition to various reforms within the country, since 1990 Vietnam has opened its diplomatic doors to other countries, taking a pragmatic approach and being less ideology-driven (Hong 2009: 38-39). Vietnam has also joined regional and international institutions, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Foreign direct investment (FDI) into Vietnam, and Vietnamese exports have increased, and Vietnam has received an enormous amount of foreign aid. The amount of official development assistance (ODA) that Vietnam received from bilateral and multilateral development agencies and other types of foreign organizations amounted to $177 million in the year 2018 and $188 million in 2019

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[16] According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (n.d.), there were 2,260 SOEs and 42,069 private enterprises as of 2018. The data was retrieved in March 2021. More specific types of enterprise can be searched on its website.

(OECD Statistics, n.d.).[17] Since the late 1980s, multilateral development agencies have taken a lead in supporting the legal system and institutional building for economic development and poverty eradication, though not dealing directly with the rights of the poor or of those marginalized in the economic growth (Sidel 2008: 204-205). Since the late 1990s, foreign agencies' focus has gradually shifted towards 'access to justice', entailing people's legal rights and justice agendas (Sidel 2008: 209-211).

As the national reform proceeded, the party's dominance over society was somewhat undermined, with increasing protest from the bottom up and breaches of unity within the ruling elite: this has led the party-state to loosen the catchall control over society (Vu 2014a). However, it should nonetheless be noted that economic and political reforms did not go hand in hand in Vietnam, as the country's political institutions rarely changed. While Vietnam switched from collectivized production to individual household-based production in the early 1980s (Kerkvliet 2001), the party-state did not completely transform the economic system. It implemented reforms in some regards but retained features of the previous system in the name of the socialist-oriented market economy (MacLean 2012). Moreover, though the CPV has strived to liberalize through economic and administrative reforms in order to adapt to changing domestic and global circumstances, it has consistently refused to change the socialist, single-party regime (Thayer 2010). Thus, the party-state's national reforms would appear selective, being limited to certain economic sectors with no change being made in the underlying political regime.

4.2 The long-standing single-party regime

4.2.1 Hegemonic power of the Communist Party of Vietnam

Vietnam's Constitution stipulates the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) as the lead party to govern society. The CPV thus derives legitimacy from the

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[17] The figures were retrieved in March 2021 from the OECD Creditor Reporting System (CRS) Code 1000 (Total All Sectors) in 2018 US dollars, constant prices and gross disbursements.

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Constitution to exercise power over state management and societal affairs as a single-party regime. According to Abuza (2001: 34), the Constitution allows the Party to stand "above the law". The Constitution legitimizes the dominance of the CPV and its consideration of any opposition or challenge to the single-party regime as illegitimate. The provision authorizing such status of the CPV has remained unaltered throughout several constitutional revisions.

Ideologically, the Vietnamese party-state is grounded on Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Thought. Ho Chi Minh's ideology prescribes that a democratic state is run by the people and the people have the right to get involved in state management, putting the people at the foundation of the state (Nguyen 2019). The party-state uses the 'language of democracy' across its laws; yet, the way democracy is realized in Vietnam is founded on Marxism-Leninist ideology which asserts the CPV as the vanguard fighting for liberation and ruling the working class. In this regard, Perlmutter (1981: 5) depicted a communist party as "the reservoir of political power, personnel, and other resources" in authoritarian regimes. In this vein, the CPV plays a central role in the management of the Vietnamese regime.

The CPV convenes the National Congress every five years. Congress delegates are chosen via election to represent the over 5 million CPV members across the country.[18] The Party's National Congress, reviews past policies and establishes future directions for the country. It is therefore an important event for the Party, the state and society. Besides, the members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CCCPV, *Ban chấp hành trung ương đảng cộng sản Việt Nam*) are elected at the National Congress. The current CCCPV consists of 180 official members and 20 alternates. The CCCPV has remained mostly dominated by central ruling elites, while in the *Đoi Moi* era the CPV gradually incorporated diverse sectoral groups and local leaders into its Central Committee, which resulted in weaker intra-party cohesion after the reform compared to the situation before it (Vu 2014a).

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[18] The number of the delegates has changed over time, and 1,587 delegates were selected in the most recent congress held in January 2021.

The CCCPV appoints the members of the most supreme organ of the CPV, the Politburo (*Bộ Chính trị Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam*). Looking at the composition of the 13th tenure Politburo, many of the elected 18 members hold key positions not only within the CPV but also in various state bodies. The members include the Prime Minister, the Chairperson of the National Assembly, the Minister of Public Security and the Chief Justice of the Supreme People's Court, and the General Staff of the Vietnam People's Army. Thus, a wide range of political elites across sectors are given a seat in this collective decision-making body. The Politburo makes key decisions not only on Party affairs, but also on important policies and leadership of the country, such as nominating the cabinet. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that political power is not skewed solely to the Politburo at all times. The CCCPV has and exercises veto powers on policy directions of the Politburo, demonstrating that in the Vietnamese decision-making mechanism, checks and balances exist within the CPV and inner-party consensus is required if leaders want to stay in position (Abrami et al. 2013).

When it comes to political power, it should be noted that Vietnam does not have a single leader who holds a sole grip on power. Vietnam adopts the collective leadership system, whereby the highest level of political power is distributed. Therefore, no single individual rules the country, but power is shared by a troika of the General Secretary of the CPV, the President and the Prime Minister, alongside other collective decision-making bodies in the Party. In addition, nearly every key position in state agencies is filled by those who hold a senior position in the CPV, and decision-making power is thus bestowed in their hands. Considering that high-ranking positions in major state agencies are filled by the Party members, independence is hardly feasible in the three branches of state power.

4.2.2 Propaganda for legitimation

To ensure regime stability, the party-state has long been committed to propaganda through multiple methods so as to shape the opinions and behaviours of the Vietnamese people. Marxist-Leninist and Ho Chi Minh's ideological

values have been formally adopted and widely disseminated in state management. By contrast, Vietnamese state actors have argued that Western-originated values of human rights are incompatible with the country's own ideological pillars of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Thought (Huong et al. 2018: 307). Through propaganda government has sought to solidify popular loyalty to the CPV, and the party-state has adhered to socialist ideology and CPV rule for the survival of the country (Vu 2014b: 34).

Under the Party, the Central Committee for Propaganda and Education manages the delivery of the Party's guidelines and decisions to the far corners of the country and monitors anti-government sentiment and activities. In single-party regimes such as those in China and Vietnam, the Party endeavours to consolidate its ideology and norms at every level of society. In this respect, the Party's department on ideology and cultural education is very powerful and may even sometimes "override" a ministry (Bui 2013: 83).

Propaganda messages are delivered in many forms that can penetrate the people's day-to-day lives: state-owned media, loudspeakers, posters and billboards on the streets. On state-run broadcasting stations, the police even televise forced confessions of those who have been arrested for political action calling for democracy or human rights (Pham et al. 2019: *Radio Free Asia* 2020b). For example, when the party-state released the draft of the Constitution when it was in the process of amendment, from 2011 to 2013, the party-state implemented nation-wide propaganda campaigns via the Vietnam Television (VTV) and other state-owned media outlets in order to discredit the opinions that did not comply with the existing constitutional values and norms, while soliciting public opinions through formalized meetings at local level and written forms of comments (Bui 2014). The state-run media, therefore, is often used as a megaphone to deliver the party-state's forewarning message to the public and thus discourage people from taking political action on topics that are politically sensitive or unfavoured by the party-state.

Censorship, ideological campaigns and school curricula are other vehicles used to achieve the intended goal of regime stability. The CPV runs its own newspaper, *Nhân Dân*, which means 'The People' in Vietnamese. Only media

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and publications permitted by the party-state are recognized as legitimate entities to (re)produce political discourses and norms. Non-sanctioned, independently run media outlets are subject to repressive sanctions. Besides, high school students learn Marxist-Leninist principles, which are included in so-called citizenship education, and undergraduate and postgraduate curricula have compulsory courses dedicated to the teaching of the Marxist-Leninist ideology and Ho Chi Minh Thought, to develop Vietnamese students into socialist citizens (Dung 2005). Universities are supposed to promote the party-state's ideology, and politics-related curricula are confined to Communism and Marxism – though it is becoming harder to indoctrinate people due to their increased exposure to the Western democracies (Sicurelli 2017: 743).

Under the single-party political system, people have no option to vote for another party in elections, even if they are dissatisfied with the CPV's performance. Hence, the Party's legitimacy is hardly grounded on political support earned through the mechanism of competitive elections. Nevertheless, the CPV has sought to secure its legitimacy from elections. Election outcomes are announced by the National Election Commission, which is organized within the National Assembly. In press conferences on election outcomes, the high voter turnout rate of nearly 100% is cited as evidence of the public's consent to the existing regime, the collective power of the people and their patriotic unity (*Vietnam Plus* 2021). However, the substance of political legitimacy generated through the electoral system and its outcome warrants critical examination, which is dealt with in section 4.3.1.

4.2.3 Surveillance and repression

While the CPV has garnered legitimacy from multiple sources, the single-party regime is vulnerable to pressures, both internal and external, relating to people's greater political opportunities and government's responsiveness to the public. The leadership faces a dilemma; that is, it cannot estimate "how much support it can expect or whom it can trust" but it has to claim its legitimacy and power to rule society (Pike 2000: 287). The CPV has not given up

the existing single-party system, despite questions of and challenges to its legitimacy. Indeed, its primary response to critical political action has been control and repression.

Among many state agencies, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS, *Bộ Công an*) and the Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC, *Bộ Thông tin và Truyền thông*) function as the main agents that enforce order and intervene in popular political action. The Vietnam People's Public Security Organization, a predecessor of MPS, was founded by the CPV and then-President Ho Chi Minh in 1945. Part of the mission of the security organization was to protect not only the state and the public but also the CPV itself (Ministry of Public Security of Vietnam 2018a). Under the MPS, the Vietnam People's Public Security Forces (*Công an nhân dân Việt Nam*) are formed at each of the country's three levels of administration: provincial, district and commune.[19] The People's Public Security Forces are a key state actor, functioning as a law enforcement agency collecting information, detecting law violations and exercising authority.

According to the Law on the People's Public Security Forces (*Luật số 37/2018/QH14 Công an nhân dân*), one of the major duties of the security forces is to protect the socialist regime and ensure political security (Ministry of Public Security of Vietnam 2018b). Thus, the People's Public Security Forces are given authority to take measures to control activities perceived as posing a challenge to the existing political regime. The Law on the People's Public Security Forces clearly stipulates that the People's Public Security Forces shall function in a centralized and uniform manner in accordance with the organizational hierarchy. The chain of command includes the MPS, police departments at the provincial level, police stations of districts and provincial capitals, and police posts at the commune level. The security forces have authority to monitor and exercise power over the people in the name of public

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[19] The Vietnam People's Public Security Forces also have the Vietnam People's Police Force (*Cảnh sát nhân dân*) usually known as the traffic police. In this study, however, I do not make a further categorization but refer to the Vietnam People's Public Security Forces (*Công an*) as a whole, using the term 'the security forces' or 'the police'.

order and national security. Its surveillance and control operations cover not only the public space but also the online space.

Another apparatus, the MIC is mainly responsible for the overall flow of information in Vietnamese society. It monitors publications, television and radio broadcasts, and all other forms of media. The MIC and its subnational departments exercise oversight of national and local broadcast and radio stations in addition to Vietnam Television (VTV), which is the state-run national broadcasting station. Under the Press Law (*Luật số 103/2016/QH13 Báo chí*), journalists and press agencies must obtain a permit to perform press activities in Vietnam, with such permits managed, issued and revoked by the MIC. According to the Press Law, the press and journalists are obliged to propagandize and protect the voices of the party-state; and the government, primarily the MIC, exercises uniform management over the press operating in Vietnam. The MIC is given authority to control the flow of political views that are considered to be "at odds with party policy" (Thayer 2014: 139).

Despite tight surveillance, the party-state cannot screen all content produced every day. As a result, Vietnamese media agencies and journalists have carved out opportunities to report stories that may go against the interests of the ruling elite, such as corruption allegations and political scandals (Cain 2014). However, media content and publication are still censored in Vietnam, and the state and Party apparatus often intervene. Thus, little independence is afforded to Vietnamese media agencies to disseminate impartial information and facilitate the exchange of voices between the state and society. For example, when the independent publishing agency The Liberal Publishing House was established and published books on policies and political perspectives, the police in several cities confiscated the publications and interrogated, and even physically harassed, individuals who had bought or were linked to the 'banned' books (Human Rights Watch 2019). According to Reporters Without Borders (n.d.), 18 Vietnamese journalists and 21 citizen journalists (bloggers)

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were imprisoned as of July 2021. These included freelance reporters and a member reporter of the Independent Journalists' Association of Vietnam.[20]

State actors practice particular surveillance to detect individuals or groups that are vocal in criticizing the regime or take action in public spaces, framing these actions as outside the given formal institutions; in other words, as 'extra-institutional' (Hayton 2010; Kerkvliet 2019; Thayer 2014). Linked with legitimacy, the endurance of the CPV-led single-party regime has been the main concern of the party-state. In this respect, expressions and activities that call for regime change, as Kerkvliet (2014: 113) also observed, are perceived as a threat to the Vietnamese party-state. In this regard, the party-state generally frames such actors as dissidents (*người bất đồng chính kiến*) and individuals and groups that oppose the current political system are perceived as posing a threat to the party-state. In the Vietnamese context, the term 'dissidents' is used to refer to actors "who publicly criticize and often oppose their country's system of government, the Communist Party's domination of the state, and that party's efforts to control society" (Kerkvliet 2014: 103). Surveillance often takes very indirect forms, but the warning signal it emanates is strong enough to intimidate. The security forces often practice covert surveillance, for example, harassing a target's family without the targeted person being aware of it (Pham et al. 2019). Also, public security officers fulfil the duties of monitoring local communities using informal networks of "local informants", reporting politically sensitive activities to higher-ups (Thayer 2014: 146).

Political prisoners, "those who have been jailed or had their freedom restricted because of their political or religious beliefs or activities", suffer psychological and physical torture, inhumane treatment and unfair judicial processes (The 88 Project 2020: 5). They are often taken to detention without warrants, held even for years without a trial, compelled to make forced confessions, and denied meetings with lawyers and family members (Pham et al.

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[20] According to Reporters Without Borders, the figures "cover only journalists for whom [Reporters Without Borders] was able to clearly establish that they were killed or imprisoned in connection with their journalistic work".

2019). However, the position of the party-state is that there are no 'political prisoners' but only 'criminals' guilty of violating domestic laws (Abuza 2001; Human Rights Watch 2009; Kerkvliet 2014). Driven by its concerns over political legitimacy, the party-state treats any political opposition as intolerable (Pike 2000: 287). A more detailed examination of the consequence of political action, more specifically, criticizing the government's policy or the political system, is presented in Chapters 6 and 7.

4.3 State actors: Questioning the separation of powers

4.3.1 The National Assembly

The National Assembly (*Quốc hội*), as the highest legislative organization of the state, reviews and approves the state budget, politics, and bills. Not every deputy of the National Assembly is a full-time member; many are part-time deputies and also hold other jobs. All deputies gather at the National Assembly twice a year when the plenary sessions convene. Within the National Assembly, the Standing Committee functions as its permanent body, the full-time deputies filling the seats take charge of coordinating sessions and reviewing drafts and proposals. At the organizational level, the National Assembly has a checks-and-balances role in regard to other state agencies and high-ranking leaders. It performs its legislative duties with a degree of independence from the CPV, rejecting some decisions by the CPV and executive government and holding query sessions on government agencies (Abrami et al. 2013).

The National Assembly has become more responsive and open to the public of late, with its query sessions being live-streamed and press conferences becoming more frequent (Malesky and Schuler 2010: 483; Salomon 2007: 209). Furthermore, people may send letters or talk to the deputies at National Assembly meetings. According to *Vietnam Plus* (2018), more than three thousand petitions and opinions were collected, summarized into a report and discussed at a National Assembly session in 2018. Some 1,993 petitions were reportedly sent to competent state agencies, 1,474 of which were said to have been answered by providing information to the petition submitters (*Vietnam Plus* 2018). In a study of the behaviour of the Vietnamese deputies in the

2007-2011 National Assembly, Malesky and Schuler (2010) found that some deputies were active in expressing criticism or local concerns of their constituencies at query sessions, which suggests some evidence of responsiveness of the National Assembly to a certain degree. On the other hand, notable variations were observed that appeared to be linked to the characteristics of the deputies; criticism has tended to be raised more by non-party members and deputies from southern provinces and provinces not dependent on finance from the central level (Malesky and Schuler 2010).

On the other hand, Malesky and Schuler (2010) found that in Vietnam's National Assembly deputies who tended to be silent outnumbered the deputies who were vocal in raising criticisms to government performances. In other words, critical voices hardly comprise the major stream of the legislative body. Despite the presence it has gained in politics in recent years, the National Assembly still has little power in its performance of checks and balances on the government (Vu-Thanh 2016: 190). It is questionable whether deputies can undertake activities that deviate from or oppose the interests of the CPV, successfully represent people's opinions or develop policies for their constituencies in the ongoing environment of impaired independence.

At the sub-national level, a legislative body called the People's Council (*Hội Đồng Nhân Dân*) makes decisions on local issues and supervises the performance of local administrations on behalf of residents. People's Council members are elected by voters in the jurisdiction. One of their main duties is to represent local interests and voices and to perform full and fair checks and balances on the People's Committee, which is the local level executive branch of government, with its members selected by the People's Council. However, the supervision and monitoring carried out by the People's Council is usually limited to checking whether plans and policies have been adequately implemented rather than critically investigating their logical basis or validity (Vasavakul 2014: 56). Moreover, the fact that the Chairperson of the People's Council or the People's Committee often holds the position of Deputy Secretary or Secretary of the Party Committee of the region obscures the line between the local legislative or administrative sphere and the party's sphere.

In the election process, the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF, *Mặt trận Tổ quốc Việt Nam*), which is the supreme socio-political organization affiliated with the CPV and often described as working on behalf of the people, has dominant power in filtering out and determining the candidates. Article 4 of the Law on the Election of Deputies to the National Assembly and the People's Councils (*Luật số 85/2015/QH13: Bầu cử đại biểu Quốc hội và đại biểu Hội đồng nhân dân*) guarantees the VFF the role of holding consultations and selecting candidates. Although the government officially claims that the law does not require a candidate to be a Party member or to get approval from the Party (United Nations Human Rights Committee 2018), in practice, the CPV, operating through the VFF, controls the names appearing on the candidate list. The VFF, in cooperation with local Party units and the People's Committees, reviews and selects the candidates deemed favourable. This demonstrates the Vietnamese tradition of "democracy within a decided framework" (Wells-Dang et al. 2015: 27). The deputies of the National Assembly and the People's Councils are elected by citizens, but the candidates on the ballot have already been screened and selected by the party-state formal institutions. The National Election Commission, formed by the National Assembly, is the agency with overall responsibility for organizing the general election.

According to the Constitution, self-nominated candidates or those who are not members of CPV can run for election, but they must pass through multiple rounds of consultations (*hiệp thương*). According to the Law on Election of Deputies to the National Assembly and the People's Councils (*Luật số 85/2015/QH13*), every candidate – either nominated by an organization or self-nominated – should submit the required documents, such as applications and curriculum vitae to the Election Commission. After the consultations, the VFF decides and nominates the list of qualified candidates, and the National Election Commission publicly announces the finalized list of candidates. These form the candidate-vetting process and are led by the VFF with the CPV operating in the background. Moreover, the party-state uses "ex ante mechanisms" in elections, by which it manipulatively allocates preferred candidates to compete with easier candidates (e.g., less known figures) or in districts with a lower candidate-to-seat ratio (Malesky and Schuler 2011). In this way, high-

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ranking officials or candidates nominated by the central party or governmental agencies have more winning seats than locally-nominated or self-nominated candidates (Malesky and Schuler 2011).

Within the National Assembly, almost all deputies are members of the CPV who were recommended and nominated by the Party or other state agencies at the national or regional level. Among 75 self-nominated candidates out of the 866 candidates for the general election 2021-2026, only nine were listed on the ballot after the vetting processes, and only four were finally elected – and these were all CPV members ('Vietnam Briefing' 2021). The very small percentage of self-nominated deputies is not a new phenomenon; it has been repetitively observed over the past general elections.

In reality, very few deputies to the National Assembly are non-Party members. In the latest election, for the 2021-2026 term, only 14 out of the 499 elected deputies to the National Assembly were not CPV members, and among 3,721 elected members of the Provincial People's Council, 206 were not CPV members (Quynh 2021). Even though these 14 elected deputies to the National Assembly were non-party members, they were candidates nominated by CPV organizations ('Vietnam Briefing' 2021). This indicates that even non-party candidates had been accepted or favoured by the CPV, which makes it hard to tell whether non-party members stand on the CPV side or not. According to Amnesty International (2021), two independent election candidates who had posted critical commentary on politics via social media were arrested ahead of elections. Local authorities charged them with infringing Article 117 of the Penal Code, that is, making and spreading information that is distorted or may cause distress among the people in order to oppose the state (Amnesty International 2021).

Thus, the election system is designed so that the party-state can check on and co-opt its members into the legislature to tie them to the existing CPV-led regime rather than to assess popular confidence in incumbents. In a case study of Vietnam, Malesky and Schuler (2011) put forward the additional possible scenario that the ruling party, the CPV, selectively admits information to secure regime durability while avoiding opposition information or opinion.

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There is no Vietnamese legal instrument that recognizes the rights of independent candidates to run for election without the approval of the CPV or other state actors.

4.3.2 The executive branch of government

The central government's executive branch (*Chính phủ*) consists of 22 ministries (*bộ*) and ministry-level agencies and eight government-affiliated agencies including Vietnam Television (VTV) and Vietnam News Agency (VNA). Figure 4.1 presents the overall structure of the National Assembly and government, including the hierarchy of organizations and their span of control.

Figure 4.1. Structure of the Vietnamese National Assembly and government
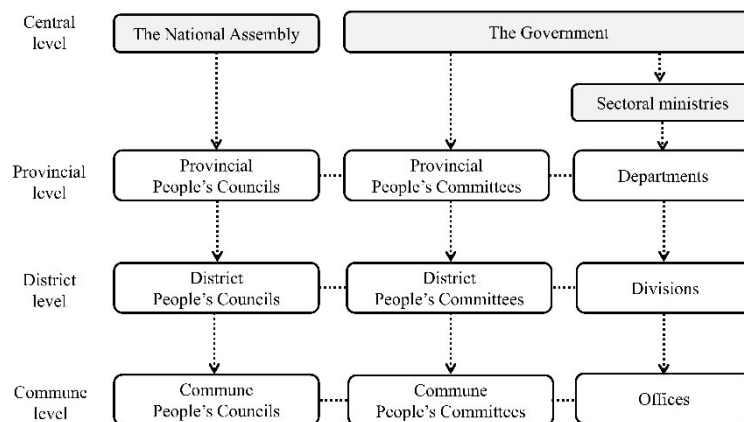
Vietnam has four formal tiers of administration; the central level, 63 provincial-level administrative units (58 provinces and 5 centrally run cities), 713 district-level units (73 cities under provinces, 49 urban districts, 48 towns and

543 rural districts), and 11,055 commune-level units (1,645 wards, 609 town districts and 8,801 communes) (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2020b). The People's Committee (*Ủy Ban Nhân Dân*) is the executive body for local government, implementing the budget and policies and performing administrative duties. Provincial departments are administratively established under the provincial People's Committees, but these may be held accountable both to the People's Committees as well as to their superior ministries.

In parallel, the CPV has its own local branches at each level of administration, through which it makes the most of its chain of hierarchy to monitor public opinions and activities. As CPV mandates and members dominate the environment in which leaders and working-level officials carry out their duties, no clear-cut distinction can be made between Party cadres and the government officials in Vietnam's bureaucracies (Fforde and Homutova 2017: 97). In Vietnamese politics, "the party embodies the state or government, and vice versa [,] the state/government means the party" (Hai 2019: 529). Besides, the People's Committees and the People's Councils are linked to the CPV, since the leaders and senior officials of state agencies hold key positions in local-level Party committees (Kerkvliet 2004; Vasavakul 2014). Hence, the state management system is intimately associated with and has a strong presence of the CPV.

Even the army is obliged to submit to the Party. The Constitution stipulates that the People's Armed Forces must be 'absolutely loyal' to the CPV.[21] Within the army, the Central Military Commission (CMC) and its General Political Department monitor army performance and implement political propaganda and ideological discipline within its ranks (Tran 2020). Through this legal and institutional setting, the CPV leaders exercise control over the People's Armed Forces, so as to prevent the army from becoming too competent and independent and thus posing a threat to the CPV (Tran 2020).

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[21] The Vietnam People's Armed Forces comprises the Vietnam People's Army, Vietnam People's Public Security, and People's Self-Defence Force.

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4.3.3 The judiciary

The judicial system of Vietnam mainly consists of the People's Court (*Tòa án nhân dân)*, the Military Tribunal (*Tòa án quân sự việt nam*) and the People's Procuracy (*Viện kiểm sát nhân dân*). Under the Supreme People's Court, High People's Courts are established in three regions: Hanoi, Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City, which are responsible for the northern, central and southern regions of the country, respectively. Under the High People's Courts, there are provincial-level people's courts in each of Vietnam's 63 provinces, with district-level courts being the lowest-level judiciary body. The People's Procuracy exercises authority to prosecute law offenders, supervise compliance with the law and conduct judicial investigations of law infringements. Its structure at the national and subnational levels is the same as the structure of the court.

Individuals and groups can file a lawsuit against the government (or its officials) to the court. However, judicial integrity and rule of law are questionable, due to the influence of the CPV in personnel appointments, dismissals, and high-profile case handling. Most chief justices and judges, if not all, are CPV members. In response to public demands for judicial fairness, the party-state implemented judicial reforms from the early 2000s until 2020, towards greater efficiency and fairness of the judicial system. The reform strategy included improvement of criminal policy and judicial procedures, court restructuring, developing capacities of judicial professionals and promoting people's supervision in judicial procedures ('Strategy for Judicial Reform' 2006). However, at the same time, the strategy aimed to ensure that "the Party shall exercise leadership over judicial activities and bodies in political, organizational and personnel aspects". It includes, for example, training and appointment of judicial personnel and coordination between the CPV and judicial agencies ('Strategy for Judicial Reform' 2006).

Regardless of the institutional initiatives pursuing greater judicial transparency and capacity, the judicial commitment to preservation of the single-party regime has remained untouched. The Vietnamese Constitution, in Article 102, stipulates one of the responsibilities of the People's Courts as the preservation of the socialist regime. Therefore, the People's Courts are obliged to exercise

'appropriate' judiciary measures in cases that pose a challenge or threat to the CPV-led regime. When people are prosecuted and put on trial for critical political action, it is hard to expect an impartial and fair verdict, since the judges and jurors are CPV members (Pham et al. 2019: 122). Under this legal framework, judicial personnel serve to defend the existing political regime, which leaves room for the principles of the rule of law and people's political rights to be severely undermined.

4.3.4 Hierarchical structure and fragmented decentralization

Decentralization has taken place in Vietnam since the nationwide socio-economic and political reforms (*Đổi Mới)* introduced in the late 1980s, but it has been limited to the fragmented distribution of fiscal and administrative authority, while decision-making power remains centralized (Fritzen 2006; Vu-Thanh 2016). The 2013 Constitution stipulates decentralization of power to give local administrations greater autonomy in their activities. The Law on Organization of Local Government (*Luật số.77/2015/QH13 Tổ chức chính quyền địa phương*) prescribes the autonomy of local governments in the provinces, districts and communes. The law specifies a decentralized system of administrative management at the provincial, district and commune levels.

In this respect, the guiding documents or instructions issued by the central level often become less authoritative when they reach the local level. This arouses mistrust of local cadres and citizens, who may be viewed as selectively following, modifying or even neglecting instructions (MacLean 2013; Waibel and Benedikter 2014). Some powerful local governments – in the bigger and more prosperous provinces – have exhibited selectivity in complying with guidelines issued from the central level, though they listen to the central government when seeking financial support from Hanoi (Zingerli 2004; Vu 2017). It has been observed that provincial officials escape the control from the central level for their provincial economic interest (Malesky and Schuler 2010; Vu 2014a). Besides, as discussed earlier, deputies to the National Assembly from less prosperous provinces which are financially dependent on

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central transfers are less likely to raise criticisms of government performance at query sessions (Malesky and Schuler 2010: 496).

Thus, the dynamics between the central and the local state apparatuses are characterized by a mix of alignment and deviation, and intermittent incompliance is nowadays a likely reality. Besides, municipalities with more resources, such as Ho Chi Minh City, have had more leverage in resource management and administrative interactions with the central level (Gainsborough 2010: 55-56). Speaking at the provincial level, political power to adjust or implement policies at the discretion of the local leadership is not evenly manifest but asymmetrical across provinces. The secretaries of the Party Committee in some provinces or centrally-run cities are the elected members of the Party's Central Committee (See *Nhan Dan* 2021), which implies that they have more power than those who do not hold positions in and connections to the Central Party's Committee.

While on paper, the law guarantees the autonomy of local governments in managing their localities, it also limits their autonomy by setting out the hierarchical structure and responsibilities of lower levels vis-à-vis higher levels. Moreover, the Vietnamese political system operates on the principle of democratic centralism, which allows participation and discussion among Party members but obliges them to comply with decisions once they are adopted by the Party. While laws and legal documents are promulgated by the National Assembly, the government and the court, the CPV issues its own resolutions, directives and decisions, which exert an influence on policy directions and on Vietnamese society as a whole.[22] The resolutions adopted at the National Congress of the Party are politically powerful and implemented nationally alongside the legislation passed by the National Assembly, and lower-level agencies are bound to the upper and central leadership. In this regard, administrative decentralization and political devolution, or the delegation of political power, should be considered separately.

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[22] The Vietnamese system of legal documents issued by different state agencies is summarized in Appendix 1.

The fragmented decentralization rather has enhanced patronage practices, as provinces bypass the institutionalized procedures and directly ask for support or favours from the central level, which can be described as "asking-giving (*xin–cho*)" relationships between provinces and the central state apparatus (Vasavakul 2019). Moreover, the fragmented exercise of decentralization may cause "moral hazard and ambiguous accountability" in that local governments have little ownership and remain passive, rarely responding to citizens, as they need not be accountable to the public under the current chain of hierarchy (Vu-Thanh 2016: 194). Nevertheless, lower-level officials are results-oriented in regard to their own interests, such as achieving career promotion or greater budget allocations from Hanoi. This may lead them to, often deliberately, withhold or exaggerate information reported to upper tiers (MacLean 2013: 18). In a case study of China, Chen et al. (2016) found that lower-level officials tended to respond to local people's concerns in order to prevent people from directly contacting upper-level agencies, since local officials did not want to lose face, or even to lose rewards obtained from misconduct such as corruption. Vietnamese local officials similarly care about the eyes and ears of their higher-ups. This motivates them, albeit sometimes reluctantly, to respond to local people's demands. Low-ranking officials sometimes even seek to arrest those who take politically critical action to demonstrate their commitment to the CPV "just to get merit promotion" (Pham et al. 2019: 104).

Vietnamese decentralization has mainly been oriented towards the more effective transfer of administrative authority to subnational levels. Yet, the delegation of power, devolution, has been weakly realized, as central-level state actors have maintained their grip on decision-making (Gainsborough 2010; Vasavakul 2014; Vu-Thanh 2016). Local governments have been given much autonomy in fiscal management, yet ambiguity and limitations remain since the central government still holds the authority to set the regulations and responsibilities that local governments must follow (Morgan and Trinh 2016). The central state apparatus holds fiscal power in revenues management, such as in transferring the collected revenue to less affluent provinces, which is another source of political support for provinces (Vasavakul 2019: 63). Besides, politically sensitive agendas, such as the arrest of regime critics, usually

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hinge upon decisions "made at high levels, particularly in the Ministry of Public Security and even sometimes the Prime Minister" rather than ordinary, local rank-and-file security officials, though taking into account several factors, for instance, backlash from within the country or abroad (Kerkvliet 2019: 130).

Moreover, state actors in Hanoi have the capacity to exert influence and control over the conduct of local state actors. According to the Constitution, the Prime Minister can dismiss leaders of People's Councils or People's Committees of provinces, and centrally run cities or suspend or reject their decisions if perceived necessary. Moreover, state agencies and actors are legally bound to demonstrate loyalty to the CPV, and by extension, to the single-party regime. According to the Law on Cadres and Public Servants (*Luật số 22/2008/QH12 Cán bộ, công chức*), party cadres and government officials are obliged to be loyal to the CPV and the state (Article 8).[23] Thus, loyalty and solidarity are institutionalized as a duty among public officials under the CPV-led regime. According to the law, both party cadres and public servants are evaluated each year, not only on their overall performance but also on their political qualities and observance of the instructions of the CPV and the laws of the state. Those who fail to meet the requirements of the evaluation system for two consecutive years are subject to career disadvantages or dismissal from office.

Therefore, the political objective of sustaining the existing regime applies to both the central and local levels under the single-party regime. Along with the chain of hierarchy firmly established across all levels of the administration, political power remains concentrated in Hanoi, and the central-level Party and state retain capacity to influence the beliefs and conducts of local state actors. Under the existing formal political institutions, political opposition activities against the single-party system are subject to control, whether at the local or the national level. Even though the central-level agencies sometimes fail to

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[23] The law was amended and supplemented (No. 52/2019/QH14), but mainly pertains to employment and discipline regulations. Article 8 was not affected by the amendment.

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exert control over local agencies and resources as completely as they desire, the political power of the CPV and state apparatuses over lower levels remains intact (MacLean 2013). That is to say, the national-level Party and government apparatus have sufficient top-down power to sustain the cohesion of state actors at different levels with the firm objective of regime stability.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter sought to answer the research question of what characteristics of the Vietnamese political system and institutions have shaped people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action. Particularly, it reviewed the Vietnamese political structure and key state actors. Delineating several subtypes and characteristics of authoritarian regimes, Geddes (1999: 121) characterized single-party regimes as those where "access to political office and control over policy is dominated by one party, though other parties may legally exist and compete in elections". In agreement with this definition, the Vietnamese single-party regime demonstrates institutional arrangements centred on state management with a strong influence of the CPV.

The most salient and decisive feature of the Vietnamese single-party regime is the hegemony of the CPV, which is institutionalized as an integral part of the formal political system. The playing field of politics is uneven, being heavily skewed in favour of the CPV. Without competitive elections and a multiparty system, there is no other political party or independent state agency to hold the CPV in check. In addition, the CPV has its own structure of command, parallel to that of government, and Party members are ubiquitous throughout state agencies. The Party makes key decisions for the country, and virtually every leader in the central or local government is a member of the CPV. Backed by its organized structure of command, the CPV exercises strong influence over state actors at every level and over all strata of society. Vietnam can therefore be characterised as a 'party-state' in which Party actors and state actors are hardly separable in the political sphere.

Thayer (2009) argued that the CPV and the government are so closely intertwined that it is hard to distinguish their boundaries, making the Vietnamese governance system 'mono-organizational'. Up to today, this has not changed. State agencies and state management remain under the control of the CPV. A likely scenario suggested by Thayer (2009) is that Vietnam's mono-organizational socialism will remain unchanged in the short term, as the dominance of the CPV over the state and society continues to provide a solid foundation for the Vietnamese political system. Within the CPV, diverse interest groups and sectoral politics have emerged over several Party Congresses, and party leadership has been staffed by people with different political orientations in regard to tolerating or repressing popular political action. However, despite some ups and downs in the degree of leniency, little change has been made in the overall institutional arrangements that self-legitimize the single-party regime and monitor the public.

Despite certain degrees of autonomy among local administrations and local administrations' deliberate negligence of instructions from Hanoi, local state agencies are held accountable to superior-level agencies and serve to maintain the existing CPV-led regime. Administrative decentralization and political devolution have not occurred in sync in Vietnam. This has led to a situation in which decentralization must be distinguished from devolution, or the downward delegation of political power. State actors at both the central and local levels serve to preserve the status quo, and make concerted efforts towards the goal of sustaining the single-party regime. The existing political system reinforces the power of state actors, particularly the CPV, and state actors serve as guardians of the single-party regime.

All things considered, the features of the Vietnamese political system are hardly favourable for people to express views and opinions critical of the CPV or the government. While the CPV has secured its position on the basis of the constitution, the party-state has constantly endeavoured to garner lasting political legitimacy from the wider public. By combining multiple strategies, including historical moralization, socio-economic performance and propaganda, the CPV-led single-party regime is well-equipped with an extensive infra-

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structure to secure the regime's survival. Under this political system, the Vietnamese people are exposed to propaganda, surveillance and repression, which increases the risk of popular political action.

5 Informal political institutions in Vietnamese society

In this chapter, I shift my focus to how the pillars of stability have been reinforced in informal political institutions that are reproduced and practiced across Vietnamese society. I argue that informal politics plays a significant role in affecting people's perceptions and behaviours of political action in Vietnam. Given the wide array of social, cultural and political norms of behaviour in real life, I investigate a selected set of informal practices: personal connections, corruption, surveillance and cultivation of fear, alongside a general passivity among the Vietnamese people, influenced by social norms of hierarchy and communal interest.

Section 5.1 discusses the informal ways of addressing problems that prevail in Vietnamese society. These include the significance of personal relations and corruption. Section 5.2 examines social norms and practices that have long been deeply rooted in Vietnamese society. With an assumption that these aspects of informal political institutions affect people's thoughts and behaviours, I investigate how they play out to encourage or discourage political action. Section 5.3 draws conclusions from this comprehensive examination of informal political institutions, in order to characterize Vietnam's informal political institutions and to understand how they influence people's political action.

5.1 Informal politics

5.1.1 Connections and informal ways of working

Personal connections or relationships (*quan hệ*) are influential in people's lives in Vietnamese society. Holding a position in public office, in the Vietnamese context, in other words, serving as a public official, usually has the consequence that people ask favours or make requests (Gainsborough 2007a:

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13). Those with ties to a person or people in the Party or state agencies contact those they know, using their connections to solve problems (Kerkvliet 2001: 248). Thus, personal relationships work so powerfully that they often stand above formalized rules, and Vietnamese day-to-day lives may deviate quite markedly from the formal political institutions (Koh 2007).

Another instance of the influence of personal connections is that Party or state officials informally offer benefits to their relatives in resource distribution (Markussen and Tarp 2014). It is widespread in Vietnam for public officials to provide preferential treatment to their family members, relatives and those to whom they are close (Tran 2004; Vu 2017). In this respect, families with a relative who is a local government official tend to increase land-related investment, enjoy greater land property rights and have more access to credit and transfers (Markussen and Tarp 2014). The Vietnamese people are tied to certain personal networks formed by who they are, the family they belong to, the region they come from, where they have worked or are working, and many other traits. They make the most of personal relationships in all personal, (un)official and business-related matters (Gainsborough 2010).

Not just anyone can join the Party. To ensure its solidarity, the CPV seeks to screen prospective members, vetting them by their personal history, commitment to the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, education and political background (Markussen and Ngo 2019). However, once a person succeeds in becoming a CPV member, they can expect stronger and wider networks, which can be of help for career advancement, as well as for personal problem solving. In particular, Party membership has a positive impact on not only economic well-being, such as in the form of higher income and preferential access to credit, but also subjective social well-being, such as a higher social prestige (Markussen and Ngo 2019). Having a tie with the Party or state agencies can have different consequences that are far from just. For example, even though people may be sent to trial over the same political protest, those with connections to senior persons in the Party or state agencies can be sentenced to different terms in prison (Kerkvliet 2014: 126-127). Also, the perceptions

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and responses of state actors on the same opinion differ by who raises it, depending on the person's position in society and their relationship with the CPV or state actors (Pham and Kaleja 2019: 11-12).

Kerkvliet (2001) pointed out that one of the most effective ways to influence state decisions in Vietnam is to utilize personal connections to state officials. Since that writing, little has changed in Vietnamese society. Even though transparency and accountability within Vietnam's administration have improved over the last decades, informal styles of interaction and problem solving between public officials and the people remain prevalent (Salomon and Ket 2010: 149-150). When the Vietnamese people have concerns or want to express their opinion, they rarely consider taking their concerns to the formal institutions first. Rather, they make the most of their personal relations to get access to public officials, and this tendency gets stronger when their demands grow more complicated (Salomon and Ket 2010: 147). People's reluctance to use formalized channels or meetings to raise concerns or complaints is attributable to (i) their fear of retaliation by state actors and (ii) their reliance on personal connections as an informal way of getting things resolved (United Nations Development Programme 2006: 20-21). Built on personal connections, Vietnamese groups and networks also have carved out 'path-breaking' informal mechanisms to give greater substance to their advocacy activities (Wells-Dang 2012).

Also, "a code of clandestinism in politics" has become deeply ingrained in the everyday lives of the Vietnamese people over hundreds of years, particularly in villages, often outweighing formal political institutions (Pike 2000: 274). Clandestine practices include undocumented rules, influential village leaders and conventional behaviours that have been generated on the grounds of personal relationships and used in managing a community (Pike 2000: 274). Moreover, at the local level, village leaders remain powerful, along with long-exercised local customs and practices. The power of local leaders is reflected in the metaphorical saying, "*Phép vua thua lệ làng*" ("The king's order stops at the village gate") (Bach 2014: 42; Vu 2017: 11; Wells-Dang 2014; 162). Village leaders have customary power. Their word, in practice, is sometimes even more powerful than the formal commands delivered from the central

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government.[24] The village (*làng, thôn, bản*) is not a formally recognized unit of administration, but is a customary residential unit. In general, village heads act as intermediaries between local residents and ward or commune-level officials, receiving some allowances from the government and some contributions from local residents.

Considering that contacting village heads with whom people usually have close and intimate contact is one of the available options for problem solving at the community level, I reviewed how often the Vietnamese people got in touch with village heads or visited public officials. Findings from the PAPI survey indicate that people often choose to contact community leaders rather than officials in the local state authorities. The percentage of people who contacted community leaders was higher than those referring to any other officials to solve problems related to themselves, their family or their neighbourhood. Table 5.1 demonstrates that at least 25% of respondents had contacted community leaders in the past three years: 26.2% in 2017, 26.3% in 2018 and 25.0% in 2019. A high percentage of survey respondents had also contacted local People's Committee officials, followed by socio-political organization officials. The percentage of people who had contacted local People's Council members was lowest in all three survey periods, around 5%.

Table 5.1. People who had contacted community leaders/public officials

Question: In the past 12 months, have you done the following because of personal, family, neighbourhood problems, or problems with government officials and policies?	Frequency (%, valid percentage)[1]		
	2017	2018	2019
Contacted village leader/residential group head	3,690 (26.2%)	3,757 (26.3%)	3,572 (25.0%)

[24] Village (*làng, thôn, bản*) is not a formally recognized unit of administration, but is a customary unit. Historically, villages were the self-governing administrative unit under the feudal regime. Each village consists of several hamlets (*xóm, ấp*). In general, a small village consists of around 100 households, while a big village may consist of around 500 family households or more. For further details, see Pham (2011).

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Contacted commune/ward People's Committee official	2,431 (17.2%)	2,501 (17.5%)	2,335 (16.3%)
Contacted a representative of mass organizations	1,592 (11.3%)	1,689 (11.8%)	1,555 (10.9%)
Contacted any member of local People's Councils (any local level)	743 (5.3%)	750 (5.2%)	694 (4.8%)

Source: the PAPI core dataset (Permission for access was obtained).

[1.] A separate yes-no question was asked for the entities in each row. The percentages in parentheses indicate the valid percentage of the respondents who said yes to the given question.

A village leader or community group head is not a formally recognized local administration position. Yet, people tended to approach these informal heads to solve problems more than those holding an official position in a local state agency or socio-political organization. Setting aside the possibly stronger intimacy ties with village leaders than with public officials, this tendency can be also considered in light of the widespread assumption that many Vietnamese fear interacting with local public officials, as such formal channels of expressing opinions may be considered insufficiently independent from the party-state and therefore apt to provoke retaliation (Tran 2004: 146).

5.2.2 Patronage and corruption

In Vietnamese society, holding a position in public office means holding access to patronage benefits, which include opportunities and abilities to make decisions and exercise authority (Gainsborough 2010: 146-147). Patronage practices are common both within the circle of state actors and between state actors and private actors, including businesses and ordinary citizens. When someone supports and cooperates with another, he/she can expect favours such as career advancement and financial or non-material resources. Patronage practices are so influential in Vietnamese political life that they affect not only individuals' lives but also key policy outcomes (Gainsborough 2007a).

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Corruption (*tham nhũng*) is a predominant driving factor that leads the Vietnamese people to denounce public officials and complain about authorities, and even at times to stage a protest (Kerkvliet 2014). I understand corruption in this study as exchanges of financial and other tangible and intangible forms of resources and/or the abuse of positions and authority for personal gain. In Vietnamese society, corruption is so deeply entrenched that it has yielded multiple rampant problems such as bribery, illicitly preferential treatments and clientelism. Forms of corruption vary, but include the reception of gifts or money in exchange for a favour, embezzlement of public funds or local tax revenues and favouritism to family members or friends. Public officials can treat a firm either favourably, for example, by executing rules in a slack manner, or unfavourably, by exercising "discretionary power" such as to harass or undermine the firm's business (Rand and Tarp 2012: 576). Driven by their own profit, regardless of the national interest, rent-seeking individuals or groups use financial resources to manipulate political decisions or even to buy political power (Vuving 2010).

It remains common in Vietnam for public officials to give preferential favours, such as resources, to those who provide bribes. For example, leaders or senior officials sometimes allocate state funds or resources to business leaders behind closed doors, and the business leaders provide a financial token of appreciation. Also, firms and regional financial capital are often controlled by those with connections to the Party or government officials, resulting in patronage relationships between the political and private sectors (Gainsborough 2007b). As such, collusive links are formed between politicians and businesses, facilitating financial or non-material exchanges in favour of one another (Gainsborough 2010).

Crony networks involving central or local government and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and the exchange of favours and informal payments also warrant attention.[25] Vietnamese SOEs are expected to comply with orders from

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[25] This study discusses Vietnamese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in light of possible sources of corruption, yet it does not delve into details of financial and political relationships between state actors and private sectors.

the party-state. In exchange for their compliance, they enjoy privileges and favoured access to information, land and other resources (Vuving 2010: 374). In an analysis of panel survey data covering 1,659 small and medium-sized enterprises in Vietnam, Rand and Tarp (2012) found that the incidence and scale of bribery were greater when businesses sought tax benefits or the award of government contracts, though magnitudes varied by business size and type. Also, analysing a sample of 7,138 domestic private firms and 1,124 foreign firms, Gueorguiev and Malesky (2012) found that in general 22.9% of firms operating in Vietnam paid bribes during the registration process, and 34.6% paid bribes during government procurement processes to win contracts, with no statistically significant differences between foreign and domestic firms.

In particular, land-related corruption has been a constant flashpoint between the government and the people. In Hanoi, it has become common to see land users protesting in front of the central office of the CPV, calling for justice in land compensation or resettlement (Le 2020). As explained in the previous chapter, the Constitution and the Land Law (*Luật số 45/2013/QH13 Đất đai*) guarantee the state's right to manage the land on behalf of the people, and thereby local and central governments can (re)take lands from users when necessary or justifiable. Whereas the Land Law prescribes the set of rules and processes for land management, its implementation is inconsistent or arbitrary, as local state actors do not always comply with the law and manipulate land acquisition or compensation processes to their personal advantage. This is a common trigger for people filing petitions or staging a protest (Vasavakul 2019: 39).[26] In addressing this problem, Vasavakul (2019: 40) reiterates that using a formal channel, filing a petition, is not a productive way for the people to get the desired outcome because state agencies usually shield each other rather than stand on petitioners' side. Nevertheless, a large portion of petitions and complaints submitted to the authorities are related to land to this date (Dinh 2021). It should be noted that such disputes are expressive of a complex

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[26] Vasavakul (2019) provides an example of the Thu Hiem Urban Development Project that demonstrates the loopholes in the land management framework. Since this chapter focuses on the overarching prevalence of patronage and corrupt practices, for a reference to the case, refer to (Vasavakul 2019: 38-40).

dynamic between land users and the government involving not just losses of land but also unfair and unclear compensation processes and unjust pricing for losses (Nguyen 2017).

In a case study of 20 low-income residents in peri-urban Ho Chi Minh City, Nguyen (2020) found that the residents regarded the formal rules and practices of state actors as unfair to the low-income residents and corrupt. In contestation, locals dodged the official line by building houses on agricultural lands and living there illegally, though this is in principle not allowed. Patronage and corruption are intertwined in the land allocation regime, with state actors imposing legal sanctions and implementing policies such as forced evictions and demolitions in the name of law enforcement and restoring order (Nguyen 2020).

State officials and SOE representatives obtain financial benefits from several illicit land management practices. For instance, they may buy land at an undervalued price and sell it for a much inflated rate or sell land without an open and fair bidding process, giving informal payments to the public officials in charge; or, they might maximize their profit by compensating land users less than they deserve (Le 2019; National Economics University and United Nations Development Programme 2017). Land use is "one of the most corruption-prone areas in Vietnam", since SOEs often enjoy privileges in acquiring lands, and SOEs and land developers may illegally share the financial profits from a deal, for instance, splitting the difference between the undervalued price and the market value (Dang et al. 2020: 12). Regardless of the continued SOE reforms initiated by the central government, illegal practices and lack of transparency have continued to prevail during the SOE privatisation process, and corruption within local governments remains a pressing problem (Dang et al. 2020).

According to the Vietnam Corruption Barometer (Towards Transparency 2019), 73% of the 1,085 respondents perceived corruption in the public sector as a "problem" (52%) or "a serious problem" (21%), and 62% perceived corruption in the private sector as either a "problem" (47%) or "a serious problem" (15%). While these percentages regarding perceptions of state agencies as corrupt have significantly decreased compared to the surveys conducted in

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2013 and 2016 (Towards Transparency 2019), they nonetheless demonstrate that corruption in the public and private sectors is still perceived by many Vietnamese as a problem. The agency perceived as most corrupt was the traffic police (30%), followed by police (20%), tax officials (17%), business owners (15%) and government officials (13%).

Nevertheless, the Vietnamese people still resort to paying bribes to solve their problems. The Vietnam Corruption Barometer (Towards Transparency 2019) found that the Vietnamese people either voluntarily or involuntarily paid bribes to public officials to achieve something they were not eligible for or which was not feasible using formal channels. According to Towards Transparency (2019: 22), 66% of survey respondents had contact with major public services (e.g., police, administrative agencies) in the past 12 months, and an average of 18% of respondents said that at least once they had given bribes to the public officials they contacted. Taking a closer look, no considerable differences were observed between urban (19%) and rural (17%), and between the Kinh (18%), which is the major ethnic group, and other ethnic groups (19%) (Towards Transparency 2019: 22-23).

Classified by other variables, those who had at some point paid a bribe can be summarized as follows: men (21%) and women (15%); people with no religious affiliation (20%) and those with a religious affiliation (13%); people with an education above high school (23%) and those with a high school education or less (16%); and people with income above average (27%) and those with income below average (12%) (Towards Transparency 2019: 22-23). Among these socio-demographic variables, it is notable that income level was the most significant in explaining whether a respondent had paid a bribe to a public official. Furthermore, comparing Vietnam's two major cities, respondents in Hanoi (39%) were three times more likely to have paid a bribe than those in Ho Chi Minh City (12%) (Towards Transparency 2019: 25).

The Law on Anti-Corruption (*Luật số 36/2018/QH14 Phòng, chống tham nhũng*) establishes a formal framework for tackling corruption. According to the law, state agencies should publicize information, be transparent in their performance and be open to public reporting. State actors are to be committed

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to detecting corrupt practices, prosecuting offenders and reforming the institutions to achieve higher integrity and transparency. The party-state has taken rigorous anti-corruption initiatives and judicial measures to combat corruption practices, as corruption among public officials has become a predominant driver of public discontent under the authoritarian regime. In Vietnam, anti-corruption drives apply a two-track approach. One track is state-centred and mandated by the legislation that prescribes rigid responses to corruption and implementation of prevention measures across state agencies. The second track is Party-centred, and targets wrongdoings within the Party apparatus, leadership and membership (Vasavakul 2020).

Corruption has been, on the other hand, a source of concern for the party-state. Its legitimacy has been undermined in that corrupt practices committed by central and local state actors have triggered popular grievances and even protests (Abuza 2001; Vu 2014a). Therefore, the party-state has taken measures to combat corruption since the national reform in the late 1980s. Even today, the Secretary General, Nguyen Phu Trong, has spearheaded anti-corruption campaigns since he took leadership in 2016, and the party-state has disciplined and prosecuted many officials in senior positions (Phuong 2021). Through a series of investigations, many public officials, including CPV leaders and SOE cadres, have been prosecuted and sent to trial. In parallel, many Vietnamese media agencies and reporters have become more committed to reporting on political corruption scandals and critical issues to facilitate public awareness of them (Cain 2014). The party-state's anti-corruption commitments have gained some positive recognition from the public as well. In the 2019 Vietnam Corruption Barometer, 49% of respondents said that the national anti-corruption fight had been implemented either "well" or "very well", which is a sharp increase from the 21% reported in 2016 (Towards Transparency 2019).

However, the nationwide anti-corruption initiatives have not been successful in effectively preventing public officials from abusing their power for personal gain, and corruption remains prevalent (MacLean 2012: 596). The Vietnamese party-state's fight against corruption faces multiple challenges, some of which are selectivity, as some corrupt practices are punished while others

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are overlooked, insufficient independence of inspectorate agencies and the absence of a coherent and standardized approach (Vasavakul 2020). In particular, the increasingly publicized big corruption scandals are not solely attributable to a genuine endeavour by the party-state to establish transparency in state management. Rather, anti-corruption practices have been often driven by political interests, such as a particular group of leaders' pursuit of intraparty power or a bid to retain control over lower-level administrations (Gainsborough 2010; Freedom House 2021). Besides, Abuza (2001) pointed out that the party-state holds an exclusive grip on anti-corruption measures and allows no other domestically or internationally independent entity to get involved. It is worth emphasizing that little has changed.

5.2 Entrenched conventions and norms

5.2.1 Climate of fear

The eyes and ears of the CPV are in nearly every corner of Vietnamese society. Its surveillance is practiced not only through propaganda and mass organizations, but also through informal networks of local party members. Surveillance is a pervasive element in the Vietnamese political culture, generating a climate of fear within society. From group interviews with activists, Starr et al. (2008) found that state surveillance had resulted in a 'security culture', as a result of which political activists were concerned about their safety and accordingly became cautious about their activities and network building. Fforde and Homutova (2017), similarly, concluded from interviews with Vietnamese citizens that the dominance of the CPV over society was in large part built on fear and force.

Beyond the formal institutional frameworks, state authorities take various informal measures to deter individual and collective political activities. Moreover, state authorities mobilize plain-clothed security officers, veterans and even neighbours to engage in physical and psychological pressure tactics, such as intimidation or threats, in order to discourage a person from taking political action (Thayer 2014: 148-149). While the Vietnamese government formally states that there are no plain-clothed police officers (United Nations Human

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Rights Committee 2018), observations of victims and witnesses attest to the presence of plain-clothed security agents at work behind the formal institutions. According to the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (2019), which is a Paris-based NGO, Vietnamese human rights advocates have been physically attacked by government-backed thugs, and peaceful demonstrations have often been disturbed by harassment or suppressed by plain-clothed officers.

Through the atmosphere of fear of retribution, political action has been substantially silenced; especially that which is critical of the Party or the government. As the climate of fear is well established, warning signals are conveyed to the public that relieve state authorities of the need to spend resources to repress every single political action every day. Within such a fear-generating environment, people who engage in political action must consider the risks of retaliation, losing face and reputational damage. Persons who do go on to become politically vocal are likely to encounter their neighbours, allegedly orchestrated by state authorities, crowding to their home, denouncing them and throwing things at them (Thayer 2014). Despite the increasing interest in and access to information about social injustice, ordinary Vietnamese citizens still tend to avoid speaking out because they are scared (Le et al. 2018: 52-53). As referred to in Chapter 4, citing Huang (2015), people refrain from resisting the present regime as state actors have powerful capacity to maintain their control of society.

Another key feature of Vietnamese society is passivity and pessimism about taking political action. Due to the widespread perception of a lack of transparency in the judiciary agencies and among judges, the Vietnamese people have little trust in the court system (Nicholson and Nguyen 2005: 26). Thus, people tend to be pessimistic about the potential impact of their actions and have little faith in a fair and just response from state agencies. In the 2019 Vietnam Corruption Barometer, Towards Transparency (2019) found the top two reasons why people did not report corrupt behaviours to state authorities were "afraid of the consequences" (49%) and "it won't make a difference"

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(49%).[27] Moreover, almost half of the Vietnamese respondents stated they were reluctant to take action to report corruption due to feelings of fear or powerlessness. In other words, a large proportion of the Vietnamese people feel insecure about what might come after their political action and are concerned about defamation of themselves or their family.

According to the 2015 Asian Barometer Survey, perceptions of own efficacy to participate in politics were quite divided (Table 5.2). Some 13.2% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that they could participate in politics, while 34.0% somewhat agreed, 32.4% somewhat disagreed and 18.4% strongly disagreed. Despite some fluctuations in responses over the three survey periods, the overall response trends indicate that perceptions of own capacity to take political action remain divided, with some half of the respondents expressing pessimism about their ability to do so.

Table 5.2. Vietnamese perceptions of own efficacy to participate in politics

Agreement with statement, 'I have the ability to participate in politics'	Frequency (%)		
	Wave 2 (2005)	Wave 3 (2010)	Wave 4 (2015)
Strongly agree	146 (12.2%)	202 (17.0%)	159 (13.2%)
Somewhat agree	306 (25.5%)	295 (24.8%)	408 (34.0%)
Somewhat disagree	302 (25.2%)	177 (14.9%)	389 (32.4%)
Strongly disagree	255 (21.3%)	180 (15.1%)	220 (18.4%)
Do not understand the question	22 (1.8%)	37 (3.1%)	2 (0.2%)
Can't choose	124 (10.3%)	172 (14.4%)	10 (0.8%)

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[27] The response rates are not cumulative. The respondents were asked to choose the top three reasons from a set of reasons presented.

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Decline to answer	45 (3.8%)	128 (10.7%)	12 (1.0%)
Total	1,200	1,191	1,200

Source: Asian Barometer Survey core dataset (Permission for access was obtained).

5.2.2 Uniformity, harmony and hierarchy

The Vietnamese party-state adheres to democratic centralism, which is the Marxist-Leninist principle that diverse opinions are discussed, but once a decision is made by decision-making groups within the state or Party apparatus, it shall be followed once and for all, and opposing views are no longer accepted (McCarty 2001; Zingerli 2004: 55). The party-state perceives itself as the leader and citizens as the recipients of its decisions and orders. The party-state expects citizens to exhibit commitment to its mandates; it does not see citizens as interlocutors in decision-making. Therefore, it is perceived as undesirable to raise opposing views and criticisms once a policy is determined and enters into implementation. In line with this conventional perspective, state actors have substantial power to use the normative rule of consent as a legitimate means of forcing people to refrain from disagreement and abide by its decisions.

Besides, Confucian norms and values have become firmly entrenched in the socio-cultural fabric of Vietnam (Taylor 2013). As Confucian philosophy emphasizes social harmony, the party-state governs society "like an extended family", which obscures the boundaries between state and society or the public and private spheres (Vu 2017: 11). As Huntington (1991: 24) observed, Confucianism-based societies value authority, hierarchy, responsibility and harmony in the name of the community or, sometimes in a broader sense, the society over individual rights. Though it remains debatable, some Confucian norms may conflict with those of liberal democracy, which emphasizes individual liberties. In other words, values underlying the liberal democratic model may be at odds with a country influenced by Confucian ethics (Kurki 2010: 374). Culturally, Confucianism permeated Vietnam over the thousand

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years of its conquest by China, resulting in high esteem for norms such as filial piety, respect for elders, harmony and social hierarchy.

Vietnam has neither an official religion nor a predominant religion in society. Therefore, there is no institutionalized control of political rights or freedom in the name of religion. According to the Vietnam General Statistics Office (2020a: 21), 86.3% of the total population of the country, or 83 million persons, stated that they did not have a religious affiliation. Among those who did indicate having a religious affiliation, Catholics were the largest group, numbering over 5.8 million, followed by Buddhists, numbering 4.6 million followers. The Vietnamese Constitution guarantees the freedom of religion, but in reality, that freedom is curtailed. Vietnam promulgated the Law on Belief and Religion in 2016 (*Luật số. 02/2016/QH14 Tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo*), which stipulates that religious groups are obliged to register and, even after the acquisition of a so-called religious activity registration certificate, they must obtain approval from state authorities for their establishment and operation. Whereas the law prescribes the freedom of belief and religion, it imposes many restrictions on such activities. Religious organizations or groups outside the management of the government face surveillance and harassment, and their followers are often targets of interrogation, arrest and even imprisonment without any illegal conduct (Human Rights Watch 2021).

Hierarchical relationships – between the ruler and the follower, the senior and the junior, and the old and the young – are another important Confucian value. This is reflected in Vietnamese state-society relations too, in that the party-state (superior) stands on the higher echelon while people (subordinates) are expected to respect and follow the party-state line (Pham and Kaleja 2019: 12). The voices of ruling elites are given disproportionate weight over those of ordinary people (Reis 2014). Besides, the Vietnamese people tend to accept strong leadership, for unity and order in society (Fforde and Homutova 2017: 112). This paternalistic perception has become deeply rooted. Socialist paternalism, according to Verdery (1996: 63), is marked by "a quasi-familial dependency", which makes people dependent on the state and distances them from being politically active in exercising their rights. In Vietnam, under the

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influence of Confucian ethics, the Vietnamese people still value order and hierarchy; thereby, the legitimacy of paternalistic rulers and people's dependency on them are sustained (Pike 2000: 279).

According to the 2015 Asian Barometer Survey, 19.5% of respondents strongly agreed and 43.8% somewhat agreed with the statement that government leaders are like the head of a family and therefore all people should follow their decisions (Table 5.3). Similarly, high rates of agreement with this statement were observed in 2005 and 2010. From this, we can conclude that a considerable proportion of the Vietnamese people regard government leaders as superiors whom they should follow.

Table 5.3. Vietnamese perceptions that people should follow the decisions of government leaders

Agreement with the statement, "government leaders are like the head of a family and therefore people should follow their decisions"	Frequency (%)		
	Wave 2 (2005)	Wave 3 (2010)	Wave 4 (2015)
Strongly agree	437 (36.4%)	284 (23.8%)	234 (19.5%)
Somewhat agree	447 (37.3%)	416 (34.9%)	525 (43.8%)
Somewhat disagree	197 (16.4%)	237 (19.9%)	299 (24.9%)
Strongly disagree	31 (2.6%)	99 (8.3%)	97 (8.1%)
Do not understand the question	25 (2.1%)	44 (3.7%)	6 (0.5%)
Can't choose	55 (4.6%)	111 (9.3%)	17 (1.4%)
Decline to answer	8 (7%)	-[1]	22 (1.8%)
Total	1,200	1,191	1,200

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Note: The Asian Barometer Survey core dataset (Permission for access was obtained).
[1.] This response was not an option for the respondents in Wave 3.

Due to the influence of Confucian ethics, it is common practice for the Vietnamese people to prioritize community and society over themselves (Duong 2004; Huong et al. 2018). Besides, belonging to a harmonious community is important for their day-to-day lives. In this regard, the Vietnamese people value acceptance by those around them. In a land protest case study in the village of Lua, Nguyen (2017: 110) found that villagers who continued a protest against local officials fell out with villagers who disagreed with the protest. Ultimately, the protesting villagers were alienated from communal activities, such as meetings organized by local government. Social exclusion did not force the villagers to terminate their protest in this case, but it is worth noting that they became hesitant to attend communal activities and had to seek support from other land protesters outside their region.

Table 5.4 concerns the Vietnamese people's prioritization of the country's interest over their own personal interest. According to the Asian Barometer Survey, the percentage of respondents who strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that individual interests should be sacrificed for the national interest remained extremely high over three survey waves: 88.3% (2005), 87.9% (2010) and 92.1% (2015). Influenced by the norms of harmony and hierarchy, many Vietnamese perceive ideological or political differences as undesirable in society. This helps to explain why the support base for ordinary Vietnamese citizens to undertake political activities or to join social organizations remains weak (Le et al. 2018: 48-49). A set of notions from Confucian-based values, including collective interests over individual interests, harmony and stability of society, hierarchy and obligations, so-called 'Asian Values', have been cited by Asian authoritarian regimes as "ideological doctrine" to justify their curtailment of individual political rights (Huong et al. 2018: 306-307).

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Table 5.4. Vietnamese perceptions of individual interest and the national interest

Agreement with the statement, "individual interest should be sacrificed for the national interest"	Frequency (%)		
	Wave 2 (2005)	Wave 3 (2010)	Wave 4 (2015)
Strongly agree	575 (47.9%)	682 (57.3%)	625 (52.1%)
Somewhat agree	485 (40.4%)	364 (30.6%)	480 (40.0%)
Somewhat disagree	63 (5.3%)	30 (2.5%)	66 (5.5%)
Strongly disagree	14 (1.2%)	6 (0.5%)	8 (0.7%)
Do not understand the question	18 (1.5%)	15 (1.3%)	3 (0.2%)
Can't choose	39 (3.3%)	50 (4.2%)	10 (0.9%)
Decline to answer	6 (0.5%)	44 (3.7%)	7 (0.6%)
Total	1,200	1,191	1,200

Note: The Asian Barometer Survey core dataset (Permission for access was obtained).

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter investigated several features of informal politics that may be linked to the Vietnamese people's perceptions of and behaviours in political action. The chapter found political action to be constrained by various informal political institutions, including the primacy of personal connections and corruption, routinized fear of repression and social conventions of hierarchy between the state (leaders) and the people.

In answer to the research question regarding the characteristics of Vietnamese informal political institutions, and how these influence people's political action, I conclude that informal political institutions contribute to discourage the Vietnamese people from taking institutional forms of political action. The party-state does not officially manipulate all elements of informal politics.

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Yet, I found that the party-state, through these informal political institutions, does play a notable role in constraining popular political action in non-coercive ways. Personal networks hold particular primacy among the Vietnamese people, in both public and personal life. Many Vietnamese rely on personalized strategies of problem solving, rather than resorting to formal contact with public officials. Preferential treatment and exchanges based on personal ties often develop into corruption, which then may serve as a trigger for public grievances with the government, especially regarding land disputes.

At the same time, people refrain from taking an action to demand punishment of corrupt state actors or improve transparency. Corruption is so deeply entrenched that, as demonstrated in the Vietnam Corruption Barometer, many Vietnamese people fear the consequences of reporting corruption to authorities and consider it pointless to take a concrete action since they assume their action would not lead to meaningful change. In this respect, the prevalence of corruption is not just a driving factor of public grievances or protest; it contributes to a sense among the people that it is pointless to resort to any formal, institutionalized form of political action. Rather, they choose more informal ways to resolve problems.

On the flip side, corruption is an aspect of informal politics that is often accepted and used by the Vietnamese people. It is worth noting here that the Vietnamese people participate in the system, voluntarily or involuntarily, by paying bribes to solve their own problems. The prevalence of informal means of problem solving stimulates people to pay bribes to public officials and to deviate from formal channels and processes. This discussion of informal practices aligns with the findings of Beinin and Vairel (2013) and Shi and Cai (2006), that people take political action not only through official channels but also, as demonstrated, via informal networks, in the understanding that freedom of association is not sufficiently protected and there is a high risk of reprisals for the expression of political views and political action.

Attention to the culture of fear is also warranted. Cultivated by the party-state's monitoring and surveillance of society, Vietnamese citizens are aware of the risks of political action, such as house searches, intimidation and sudden

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arrest. The awareness of such risks functions as an effective forewarning signal, serving to hold people back from political action. Notwithstanding the government's denial, various coercive measures have been reported and witnessed by citizens, non-governmental actors and the media, for example, action by plain-clothed security officers and thug groups orchestrated by the authorities. Surveillance and other coercive measures of discouraging people from expression have created an atmosphere of physical and psychological fear.

Concerns about retaliation, on themselves or on family members, hinders people from expressing criticisms of the party-state's practices or the overall political regime. Thus, the climate of fear and consequently learned powerlessness limit the extent and scope of people's opportunities for political action. Vietnam exhibits the characteristics of an authoritarian regime in that it uses informal means of controlling political action, as suggested by Levitsky and Way (2010: 27-28). This aspect, moreover, sheds light on the claim by Geddes et al. (2014: 314) that many authoritarian regimes manipulatively use informal practices and rules "that shape and constrain political choices behind a façade of formal democratic institutions".

Besides, in the Vietnamese culture, consent-seeking practices and communal interests outweigh individual interests and de-emphasise different or opposing opinions. As to the emphasis on uniformity and the superior status of government leaders, a large proportion of the population take the hierarchical rule for granted or as natural. Social conventions induce people to submit to the party-state's authoritarian rule for the virtue of hierarchy and communal interest. Conventional expectations still have considerable influence on people's political attitudes and behaviours. In the name of normative values, people are often discouraged to be politically vocal. These narratives are produced and reproduced over time through the actions of individuals in society and function as a disincentive for people to undertake political action.

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6 Formalized channels and rules of political action

This chapter places the focus on concrete forms of political action within the Vietnamese formal political institutions. I investigate several legal instruments governing political action, to identify how the party-state has institutionalized certain forms of political action. In addition to examining these formalized channels and procedures, I investigate empirical practices and experiences of people's political action within the established institutional arrangements.

Section 6.1 scrutinizes the institutionalized forms of political action that are recognized as lawful and conventional. Considering data availability, I selected a few institutionalized forms of political action, specifically, complaint filing, petition submission and grassroots participation in decision-making on policies and projects. Section 6.2 investigates the party-state's pre-emptive and reactive approaches to people's political action. Looking into the party-state's strategies of framing certain forms of political action as extra-institutional and illegitimate, I seek to identify the boundary between toleration and repression. In section 6.3, attention is given to forms of political action that seem neither completely institutional nor entirely extra-institutional under the Vietnamese formal political system. I look at the rise of Internet-based political action to assess to what extent the online space may serve as a novel venue for political action by the Vietnamese people. Besides, public gatherings and public protests are often framed as extra-institutional, despite the right of assembly as enshrined in the Vietnam Constitution. I investigate evidence from the Asian Barometer Survey on collective political action and elucidate how the party-state has formulated collective political action as extra-institutional.

By answering the research question of when and how political action is tolerated and/or controlled within the Vietnamese formal political institutions, and why, this chapter contributes to theoretical discussions on the institutional

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features of authoritarian regimes that accept popular political action to a limited extent and strategically criminalize political action in certain forms and on particular topics, in alignment with the goal of regime stability.

6.1 Institutionalized forms of political action

6.1.1 Expression of opinions and filing complaints

Article 25 of the Vietnam Constitution explicitly guarantees the rights to speech, information access, assembly and to hold demonstrations. As Figure 6.1 displays, Vietnam has a wide array of laws, decrees and ordinances that prescribe people's political rights, such as the 2013 Law on Reception of Citizens (the right to complain to the government) and the 2007 Ordinance on Democratic Implementation at Communes, Wards and Towns (the right to participate in policy decision-making at the local level).

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Figure 6.1. Vietnam's legal framework of political rights and freedom
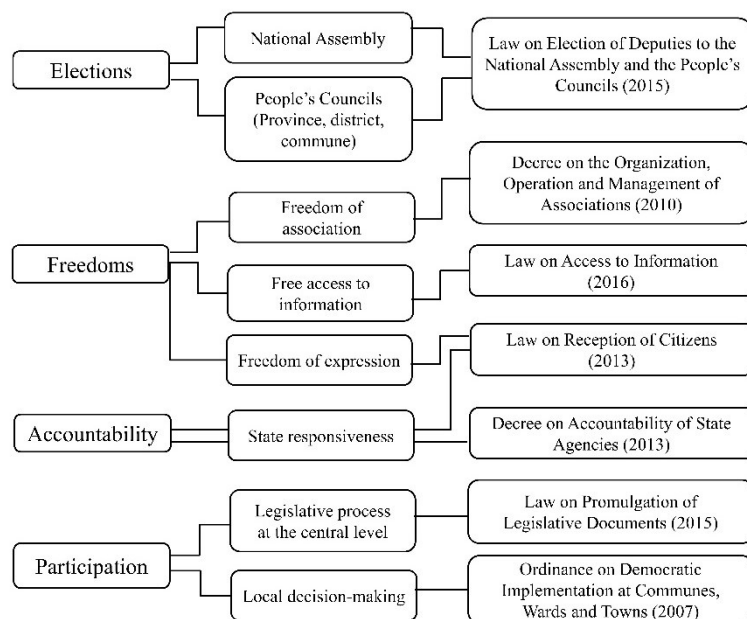
Source: Adapted and updated from Duong (2004: 7).

More specifically, the right to contact public officials and express one's opinions is concretized in the Law on Reception of Citizens (*Luật số 42/2013/QH13 Tiếp công dân*). 'Reception' (*Tiếp*), here, refers to the act of state actors receiving opinions and suggestions from citizens. The law allows people to visit state agencies and submit their opinions in written form, such as a petition or letter. Citizen reception offices are established at the offices of state agencies, including the Party, the National Assembly, ministries and central and local government. At the central level, the Government Inspectorate, which is a ministerial-level agency, has the Central Citizen Reception Committee. Furthermore, there are bureaus for Settlement of Complaints-Denunciations and Inspection in the north, central and southern regions. Within the Government Office (*Văn phòng Chính phủ*) that assists the Prime Minister and

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other government agencies in their activities, there is also a Department of Complaints, Denunciation and Anti-Corruption Monitoring.

In addition, the law stipulates that state agencies at all levels must receive citizens. For example, at least two days a month must be set aside for this by the chairpersons of the district-level People's Committees. Chairpersons of commune-level People's Committees must do so at least once a week. The law similarly obliges National Assembly deputies to receive people's opinions regularly and address them transparently and fairly. With these provisions, the law systematically sets out an organized mechanism and channel of receiving public opinions. The law is generally practiced; that is, people submit opinions and government agencies receive them. According to the Government Inspectorate, state administrative agencies at all levels received 305,769 submissions of all kinds from citizens including complaints and denunciations. Among these those eligible were transferred and handled by competent agencies (Van 2020). With respect to complaint subjects, land disputes such as resettlement and compensation make up the majority. As of 2020, 61.5% of all complaints submitted by citizens were associated with land (Van 2020).

The Law on Complaints (*Luật số 02/2011/QH13 Khiếu nại*) is more focused on negative statements from citizens who consider the performance of another individual or organization unsatisfactory. 'Complaint' (*Khiếu nại*) in this law refers to a request to reconsider an administrative decision or to review the conduct of a state agency or official working within an agency. Under this law, people have the right to lodge a complaint at a citizen reception office and request that the accused (agency or person) change their decision or behaviour. The accused shall respond to the complainant, and responsibility for responding to citizens is held by the Party and state agencies at every level, including the National Assembly, the People's Councils, People's Committees and mass organizations. Once a complaint is submitted, the competent agency facilitates dialogue between the complaining person and the accused to arrive at a settlement. If the complainant disagrees with the settlement, they have the right to file a second complaint, which is then presided over by the next higher agency in the hierarchy. If a complaint is still not satisfactorily

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settled, the complainant can file an administrative lawsuit for a judicial determination.

Another law, the Law on Denunciations (*Luật số 25/2018/QH14 Tố cáo*), guarantees citizens the right to report any wrongdoing or misconduct by individuals or organizations. 'Denunciation' (*tố cáo*), here, refers to a report of any unlawful act which may harm the interests of citizens, organizations or the state. For instance, a person can report embezzlement of public funds committed by an official working in a district-level People's Committee. Such denunciation is then managed by its upper-tier, the provincial People's Committee. As administrative litigation, this law provides a sanctioned channel for people to report corrupt or illicit acts by public officials or other ordinary citizens to the government.

The denouncing person should fill in the given form with sufficient evidence to back up the denunciation. The denunciation then goes through review, inspection and verification processes, which are to be concluded within 30 days of the date the form is accepted. The law stipulates that the denunciation settlement uniformly follows the state's administration system. State agencies must submit reports on the results of their management of people's denunciations to their respective supervisory agencies. For example, the central government reports these to the National Assembly, whereas the People's Committees report to the People's Councils.

6.1.2 Engagement in the decision-making process

Institutional settings for people's participation

At the national level, the Law on Promulgation of Legislative Documents (*Luật số 80/2015/QH13 Ban hành văn bản quy phạm pháp luật*) guarantees people's right to participate in the legislative process. Stipulating the principle of 'democracy' in the process of drafting legal documents, the law requires state agencies to solicit and respond to opinions from individuals and organizations. Several approaches are prescribed for this, such as posting information on an official portal, asking people directly and holding meetings

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('New Law on Promulgation' 2015). The government releases draft legal documents on its official web portal, inviting individuals and organizations to submit comments by filling out the online form. Also, the government may organize consultative meetings with those who are interested in or affected by a law before it passes the National Assembly.

Compared to the previous version (*Luật số 17/2008/QH12*), the 2015 Law on Promulgation of Legislative Documents places more emphasis on publicity and democratic processes in reception of opinions or complaints from organizations and individuals and responding to them in the process of developing legal documents. Nevertheless, the government often posts draft legal documents on its website and passes legislation without any notice, depriving people of the opportunity to get involved in the law-making process in a timely way. Also, the law has insufficient obligatory provisions to force the drafting state agencies to communicate with those with an interest in the legislation and indicate to them whether their interest has been reflected in the relevant decisions (Gillespie 2006: 254).

At the grassroots level, the right to participate in decision-making is guaranteed by the Ordinance on the Exercise of Democracy in Communes, Wards and Townships (*Pháp lệnh số 34/2007/PL-UBTVQH11 của Ủy ban Thường vụ Quốc hội*: *Pháp lệnh Thực hiện dân chủ ở xã, phường, thị trấn*) issued by the Standing Committee of the National Assembly. The ordinance pertains to a variety of socio-economic issues related to communities and their residents. As its stipulations are ostensibly grounded on the value of people's political participation in local public affairs, it is often labelled the 'grassroots democracy' ordinance. However, the ordinance does not allow people to participate fully in every respect. Rather, the level of local people's participation is stratified into four categories: (i) 'content to be publicized', (ii) 'content to be discussed and decided by the people', (iii) 'content to be commented on by the people before being decided by competent authorities' and (iv) 'content to be supervised by the people'.

The first category, 'content to be publicized' is marked by virtually zero possibility that the people will be able to influence a decision. In other words, no room is available for people's participation in decision-making, as the local

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government merely announces its decision to its residents. The decisions are made by state actors and then released to the local people through means such as posters displayed at the People's Councils and People's Committees, announcements by public-address system and village leaders' communications to residents. The subjects publicized include plans for socio-economic development, investment projects and inspection results of local public officials. As decisions are already made and merely transmitted to local residents, people do not get involved as an interactive actor, but rather are passive recipients of information.

The level of participation is slightly higher in the next category, 'content to be discussed and decided by the people'. Here, people and their village leader decide issues by voting. However, the subject matter is generally limited to contributions to community development, such as whether and how much residents will contribute monetarily or non-monetarily to support an activity such as road construction. At this level, people have opportunity to discuss and decide on details of their contributions, for example, to the above-mentioned community infrastructure projects.

The third category, 'content to be commented on by the people before being decided by competent authorities', is rather more mixed in the extent to which people have the power to affect decisions. Here, local authorities are to solicit people's opinions using one of three methods stipulated in Article 20: organizing meetings, distributing opinion-gathering forms and setting up mailboxes to collect written comments. People thus have the opportunity to voice their thoughts through the given channels. However, decision-making power is hardly given to local people, as the final decision is made by state actors.

The last category is 'content to be supervised by the people'. Setting aside the matter of substance, in reality, this category is the only one in which the people are given a modicum of genuine engagement in decisions. In addition to filing a complaint directly to local authorities, people can perform supervision activities on their own through a People's Inspection Board (PIB, *Ban thanh tra nhân dân*) or Community Investment Supervision Board (CISB, *Ban giám sát đầu tư cộng đồng*). According to the Law on Inspection (*Luật số*

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56/2010/QH12 Thanh tra), a PIB that supervises the local government is established and operated under the guidance of the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF). Board members are elected by local people, and their tasks include supervising the implementation of policies and laws, responses to people's opinions and compliance with the Ordinance on the Exercise of Democracy in Communes, Wards and Townships.

PIB and CISB are, in some respects, places where people at the grassroots level have an opportunity to get engaged in supervising activities of local state actors and policy implementation in their community (Dinh 2021). However, CISB is usually organized on an ad hoc project basis, and it is not allowed for people to form such boards on all matters. These PIB and CISB frameworks appear very organized and participatory, yet they are rigidly institutionalized to harness the scope of people's political action to a limited range of projects and policy implementation (e.g., infrastructure building) in their localities.

Limited implementation in practice[28]

The Ordinance on the Exercise of Democracy in Communes, Wards and Townships stipulates no concrete penalty for officials who do not abide by the ordinance in executing their day-to-day responsibilities. Since there is no controlling mechanism that imposes a penalty for non-compliance, the exercise of the ordinance depends on the willingness of local public officials, and thereby differs from region to region. This conclusion accords with Duc and Minh's (2008) finding that successful practice of the grassroots democracy ordinance depended on the degree of political will demonstrated by the higher-level government agencies (e.g., provincial officials). Hayton (2010: 43), similarly, pointed out that local leaders may ignore or take an unfavourable attitude towards people's participation in the local decision-making process, even though central state actors expect local state actors to implement the ordinance. Besides, communes generally have limited power of decision-making

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[28] An earlier version of this section is presented in Kwak (2019b). Since its publication, this section has been extensively expanded for this dissertation.

and policy monitoring. Since the decentralized administrative decision-making power is mainly confined to the provincial level, the commune-level grassroots democracy has been realized only selectively across the communes, with little substance in monitoring and holding local officials accountable (Vasavakul 2019).

Whereas the ordinance states that contributions for community development 'are to be discussed and decided by the people', people's decisions are often forced. The 2019 PAPI survey found that among the 4,702 respondents who indicated making a contribution in any form (money, labour or in-kind) to a community development project (e.g., building a playground or road) during the past year, 47.6% stated that they had contributed involuntarily following a request made by a village head (27.9%) or local authorities (20.7%).

In another survey, conducted by Hoang and Doan (2019) in the five provinces of the Central Highlands, only 54% of respondents (650 out of 1,203 persons) stated that the local government accepted people's comments, and 38.7% (465 persons) responded that their opinions were not integrated into project processes (Hoang and Doan 2019). Regarding people's experience of supervision, 36.6% of respondents said that they had engaged in activities to supervise and evaluate projects, and 45.2% said they had not participated in any such activities (Hoang and Doan 2019). Based on their findings, Hoang and Doan (2019) concluded that people had little power to influence and supervise local projects, with the majority of their activities being limited to simply receiving information and discussing the projects with the local government.

Another consideration is the background of the ordinance. As Box 6.1 details, the ordinance did not stem from a willingness of the party-state to promote greater grassroots participation in policy decision-making. Rather, its aim with the legislation was to prevent the development of mass action after an incident of widespread unrest in Thai Binh province in 1997 (Abuza 2001). The Thai Binh case motivated the party-state to institutionalize the concept of grassroots democracy, opening up participation opportunities to local people "to hold the local authorities accountable and responsive to local society's demands" (Hai 2019: 532).

Box. 6.1. Mass unrest in Thai Binh province

Several protests broke out among peasants and ordinary residents in Thai Binh province in 1996 and 1997. The protesters stood up against the local government's unfair fee collection and spending on local infrastructure development projects. Although some residents had submitted complaints through an official government channel and held peaceful demonstrations, the local government hardly responded to the protest at an early stage. This led to more aggression among the protesters, such as seizing the offices of the commune-level People's Committee and damaging the properties of the local officials (Kerkvliet 2001: 266; Vasavakul 2019: 46). As the unrest expanded, the number of protestors increased to thousands, and people from other communes joined to fight against corruption and undemocratic governance by local public officials.

As the unprecedented protest developed, the party-state sent 1,200 police and a number of Politburo members to Thai Binh for an on-site investigation, delisting, arresting or prosecuting some 50 local officials (Abuza 2001: 84). The public unrest alerted the leaders to the need for a new, different policy in response to complaints. Nevertheless, the leaders blamed local officials for the unfolding events, and their gesture for reform was limited to anti-corruption, transparency and public engagement in decision-making processes instead of overall reform of the political institutions (Abuza 2001: 84-85).

Indeed, the party-state's response hardly aimed to "accommodate the peasants' views on state land ownership" (Le 2015: 157), yet the mass protest reportedly motivated the drafting of the decree promulgating the Regulation on the Exercise of Democracy in Communes (*Nghị định số 79/2003/NĐ-CP Quy chế thực hiện dân chủ ở xã*), which was later upgraded to the Ordinance on the Exercise of Democracy in Communes, Wards and Towns. Also, after the unrest in Thai Binh, the party-state announced the decree promulgating the Regulation on the Reception of Citizens (*Nghị định số 89-CP/1997 Quy chế tổ chức tiếp công dân*), which requires state agencies at all levels to receive complaints and proposals from citizens. This is the preliminary version of the Law on Reception of Citizens.

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The ordinance strategically incorporates public complaints into "established political channels provided by the state instead of resulting in unrest or even rejection of the political system" (Mattner 2004: 126). The principles of the ordinance, while seeming akin to the concept of grassroots democracy, in this respect, neither genuinely guarantee nor promote democratic participation of citizens, but provide a formalistic institutional construct with little potential to change real-life conditions (London 2009). Since the institutional framework sets the scope of people's participation, the concept of participation is applied in a restrictive way, and the political engagement of local people is limited (Zingerli 2004). The ordinance, rather than giving decision-making power to the people, limits local influence in making or affecting local policy decisions. Since the so-called grassroots democracy ordinance took effect, little has changed towards more genuinely democratic interactions between the government and local people (Le 2020). Considering the context behind the ordinance, it should perhaps not be perceived as a sign of grassroots democracy, but as a formalistic side-track invoking strategic constraints.

6.2 Public order: A tipping point between toleration and control

6.2.1 Channelling strategy

As discussed in the previous section, the party-state has institutionalized certain types of individual political action: submitting opinions in a letter, filing a complaint and participating in the local decision-making process. These forms of political action are well documented in Vietnamese legal instruments and sanctioned under formal political institutions. Yet, the same legal instruments prohibit people from exercising their right to incite others to gather and complain together or to spread propaganda against the party-state. The party-state's more politically motivated interests are reflected in the institutionalization of the selected forms of political action.

For state actors, it is more convenient to channel people's concerns and complaints via formalized channels and routes, so as to keep popular political

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action under its own control. Public officials receive complaints, take the measures stipulated by the various legal documents, and report the outcomes to higher-level authorities if necessary. Popular opinions collected at the local level are similarly subjected to the formal step of being reported up the hierarchy, via "the local-central chain of command" (Duong 2004: 6). In this regard, public demands and voices are usually not an abrupt surprise to Party leaders in Hanoi, as the party-state leaders are kept informed of developments through the hierarchical structure and vast Party network across the country (McCarty 2001: 13). At the same time, the availability of the formal channels and processes sends a signal to the people that the party-state is responsive, which likely contributes to solidifying the party-state's political legitimacy.

6.2.2 Criminalization of political action

Institutional settings for control

In a communication to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (United Nations Human Rights Committee 2018), the Vietnamese government emphasized that individual citizens and organizations have the right to file a complaint and to make themselves heard by a state agency. To do so they must follow the procedures set out in the Law on Complaints or the Law on Denunciations. Despite this assurance, political rights are not fully guaranteed in reality.

The 2015 Penal Code (*Luật số 100/2015/QH13 Hình sự*) serves as a powerful framework for criminalizing various forms of political action in the name of public order, national stability and the state's interest. Its provisions constrain opportunities and capacities for political action by identifying them as 'unlawful'. According to the penal code, an act which disturbs public order or challenges the regime is identified as a crime, resulting in 12-20 years' imprisonment, a life sentence or even capital punishment. Even those who encourage others to join an activity against the party-state can be sentenced to 5-15 years' imprisonment. In addition to the penal code, several additional legal

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instruments specify rules of public order. According to the Decree on Sanctioning Administrative Violations in Cultural and Information Activities (*Nghị định số 56/2006/NĐ-CP Về xử phạt vi phạm hành chính trong hoạt động văn hoá - thông tin*), activities of publication or content production (e.g., films) that may cause disorder, reject the country's achievements in history or arouse opposition against the party-state are subject to a fine of up to thirty million Vietnamese Dong ($1,320).

However, not every political action taking the formalized channels is tolerated or accepted. Several frameworks set more refined rules on how people should undertake political action. While state actors tolerate some political action by channelling it into the established formal political institutions, they attach several conditions to the individuals and organizations accessing these. When people resort to a formal channel to complain or demand change in policies, strict rules of 'public order' come into play. The Constitution and other laws stipulate that citizens shall exercise their principal rights and participate in state affairs in such a way that the person does not take advantage of or abuse such rights in order to disturb public order or to infringe upon the interest of the state.

In multiple legal documents, the importance of public order and the party-state's interest is stressed. The party-state penalizes political action that is deemed to disturb public order or to deviate from the state's interest, framing it as 'unlawful'. The narratives of 'disturbing public order' and acting 'against the interest of the state' are politicized as the pretext for the party-state to take repressive measures against actors who raise critical or opposing opinions. State authorities decide and take repressive measures against actors under the banner of public order "with impunity and without accountability" rather than complying with the normative principle of the rule of law (Thayer 2014: 157). Thus, the criminalization of political action applies not only to anti-regime dissidents who explicitly pose a subversive threat to the party-state but also often extend to criticism or demands about pressing problems in society. Ambiguous language in the penal code, such as 'abusing freedoms' and 'infringing upon the interest of the state', enables state actors to penalize citizens merely for expressing critical views on the government if they so desire.

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In addition to repression in a formalized manner, the party-state makes the use of extra-institutional means of repression. The local police send 'invitations' to a targeted person due to his/her political action to interrogate, verbally intimidate, and discourage their future activities; if the person continues, he/she gets exposed to a high risk of more intensive threats: for instance, authorities and government-backed thugs throw stones into their house, make him/her get fired, intimidate the target or his/her family members and friends, and even intentionally cause bodily harm such as vehicle crash and kidnapping (Human Rights Watch 2021; Kerkvliet 2019; Thayer 2014; The 88 Project and Global Human Rights Clinic 2021). Through such furtive approaches, the party-state overawes people, making them feel powerless and submit to the existing political regime.

Consequences of political action: Who are repressed, and when?

According to The 88 Project (n.d.), as of early November 2021, a total of 532 profiles have been collected of those who had been arrested, imprisoned or at risk of repression.[29] According to the Vietnam General Statistics Office (2020a), the total population of Vietnam as of April 2019 was more than 96 million. Considering population size, the numbers of arrestees indicated above appear very small. However, the details underlying these cases are quite strong in demonstrating the risks brought by having the bravery to express opinions, despite the very real threat of repression. Considering that the list of those who have taken political action on The 88 Project database is not exhaustive, the actual number of people who face political repression may be higher. Moreover, it should not be overlooked that the number of people who are observably

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[29] The 88 Project database uses the term 'activists' but clearly states that it does not define 'activists' by whether a person identifies him/herself as an activist, but by the nature of their action. For example, anyone being vocal on social or political issues or calling for institutional reform was included in the category of activists (The 88 Project, n.d.). Many of them are ordinary citizens with jobs. I therefore regard them as politically outspoken people rather than strictly distinguishing between ordinary citizens and professional activists.

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tried or imprisoned does not present every dimension of repressive response, since the party-state also represses them using more covert approaches, being careful about domestic and international eyes (Kerkvliet 2019).

From the review of the profiles, I found diversity in the characteristics of those who were or may be persecuted. Among the collected profiles on the database, 450 are Kinh people, which is the major ethnic group, making up nearly 85% of the Vietnamese population, and 442 persons were male and 89 female (The 88 Project, n.d.).[30] The activists held a diverse range of jobs, such as drivers (21 persons), religious leaders (17 persons), journalists (27 persons), teaching professionals (18 persons) and lawyers (6 persons) (The 88 Project, n.d.). Several persecuted individuals had even been senior members of the CPV, worked for state agencies or were veterans. There were also ordinary citizens without any political affiliation or prior record of political activities.

The subjects of the documented activities are wide-ranging and include exercise of freedom of expression, freedom of the press, human rights, religious freedom and democratic change, which state authorities have perceived as offenses under the penal code (The 88 Project, n.d.). Many in the database expressed criticisms or shared information on pressing national issues, such as the government's management policy for highway toll booths and its response to China in the territorial dispute over the South China Sea. According to Thayer (2014: 142), some activists strategically use less sensitive topics, such as environmental issues, to indirectly target the party-state. However, the policy issues raised by the persecuted activists in the database were not limited to political demands. The activities cover a very broad spectrum of pressing issues in Vietnam. For example, they include, in addition to concerns about environmental disasters, the law on special economic zones.

Nonetheless, public criticism about these and other policy issues has often resulted in repression. I distilled a common tipping point for arrest or other form of state repression: the public expression or sharing of critical comments about topics condemning the current formal political institutions either online or offline. In other words, the form and topic of the political action appear to

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[30] The gender of one person was unknown.

have been crucial yardsticks in increasing the risk of repression. As people became engaged in publicly raising politically sensitive topics and advocating democratic values, they came onto the radar of state authorities and faced a high risk of repression because of it. Many in The 88 Project database had reportedly been assaulted or arrested as a consequence of their activities on blogs and social media platforms.

As discussed, state actors criminalize political action using the norms of public order or the state's interest. In my review of The 88 Project database, I found various criminal charges applied to those who had undertaken political action and were subsequently treated as law offenders. Table 6.1 presents the charges filed against the arrested people, encompassing narratives of public order, the state's interest and abuse of freedom.

Table 6.1. Criminal charges for political action (2017-2021)

Article number	Criminal charge	Number of people charged
109	Establishing or joining an organization that act against the government	8
113	Infringing upon the life of public officials or other people to stand against the government by physical or mental threats, intimidation or attack	3
116	Sabotaging the unity of society and causing hostility in society to oppose the government	2
117	Making and spreading information that is distorted or may cause distress among the people to oppose the state	52
118	Encouraging, inciting and mobilizing other people to disturb security to oppose the government	13
134	Inflicting physical harm on another person that causes injury or disability	1

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155	Insulting another person	1
156	Making and spreading false or damaging information about another person	2
178	Deliberately damaging public or private property	2
318	Disturbing public order	123
330	Resisting law enforcement officers who are performing their duties, utilizing threat, interruption or violence	9
331	Abusing the freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of association and other democratic freedoms to contravene the interests of the state	42
337	Deliberately revealing or appropriating confidential information	1
390	Failing to report the activities that prepare to commit or commit crimes specified in the penal code	1
Total		260

Source: The 88 Project database.
Note: This list covers only those who were arrested/persecuted under the currently valid 2015 Penal Code from December 2017 to November 2021.

Most of those arrested, 123 out of 245 persons, were charged with violation of Article 318, 'disturbing public order'. Under Article 117, 45 persons faced the criminal charge of 'spreading information that is distorted or may cause distress among other people to oppose the government'. Also, 34 people were charged under Article 331 for 'abusing the freedom of speech, press, religion or association to infringe upon the interest of the state'.

The sentence of imprisonment received by those who raise their voices has varied from several years to more than a decade (The 88 Project, n.d.). Even some of the incarcerated regime critics got released on condition that they

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would leave the country (Kerkvliet 2019). As discussed in Chapter 5, personal connections can bring about a different consequence. From a study of 68 regime critics in the period 1995 to 2015, Kerkvliet (2019) found that 46 of them who were associated with the CPV, either themselves or via family members, experienced detention or imprisonment. On the other hand, there were also regime critics who were not tried or jailed despite their continued criticism, possibly because they had connections with someone in the party or the government; thus, personal ties to the party or government officials do not always guarantee exemption from repression, but at least sometimes serve to protect a person (Kerkvliet 2019). These uncertainties add to variations in repression as a consequence of critical political action.

6.3 Operating in grey areas: Online and collective political action

6.3.1 Cyberspace as an emerging space

The Internet facilitates not only the mobilization of people but also the spread of information and opinion before, during and after political action (McPhail and McCarthy 2005: 10-11). Internet-enabled forms of political action have emerged in Vietnam, too. According to the 2019 PAPI survey, responding to a question about which media was a source of information about national affairs and government, the proportion of those relying on TV was highest (83.0%), followed by the Internet (46.6%), meetings (41.0%), personal contacts (40.7%) and social media (37.6%).[31] This demonstrates that a considerable number of Vietnamese people receive information about national affairs and government via the Internet or social media.

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[31] Multiple answers were possible. Data from the PAPI core dataset (permission for access was obtained).

Despite party-state control, for example, in blocking access to some domestic and international websites, the Vietnamese people, particularly the educated and urban residents, tactically find ways to circumvent the firewalls erected by state authorities. This enables them access to some political webpages run by foreign media agencies and pro-democratic activists (Nguyen and Datzberger 2018: 4). In a survey study, Le et al. (2018) found that 61% of 152 respondents believed that Vietnamese civil society space had moderately expanded over recent years, and that further expansion was feasible in the future thanks to the Internet and social media and the growth of groups, including politically critical and outspoken ones.

Blogs and social media, especially Facebook, have burgeoned as new communication platforms and tools through which people can raise their voices. During the amendment process of the Constitution, various groups and voices involved in raising demands made the most of blogs and social media to contest the existing constitutional ideas and values (Bui 2014). In particular, the blogosphere has expanded in Vietnam, laying a foundation for people to express their opinions on various policy issues and social problems. In Vietnam, like other countries, bloggers have diverse social backgrounds and include ordinary citizens as well as scholars and journalists who publicly criticize the party-state and disseminate information about the wrongdoings of state actors (Duong 2017: 378). [32] The bloggers raise issues that have hardly or never been covered by the state-censored, mainstream media. They have many followers, too, with some bloggers becoming influential in raising public awareness and forming public opinion (Duong 2017: 378-379). The growth of blogs has opened the door for the Vietnamese people to express their opinions on a variety of policy issues without following the formalized processes. Communications via such platforms have developed into more consolidated, concrete collective action as well. Forming 'The Network of Vietnamese Bloggers', over 100 bloggers released a statement in 2013 calling for greater political

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[32] To clarify, this does not mean that every blogger is critical of the government. There are pro-CPV bloggers who support the Party and the current political system. For a rich description of this type of bloggers, see Duong (2017).

rights and freedom and for abolishing the provision in the penal code that criminalizes individuals who exercise their right of expression (Civil Rights Defenders 2015). Besides, for several years a group of Vietnamese bloggers have been vocal and initiated multiple campaigns to raise awareness of people's political rights and to seek solidarity with international communities (Civil Rights Defenders 2015).

Along with increased use of the Internet, the online petition has emerged as another form of political action through which people are choosing to raise their voices about social and political issues (Morris-Jung 2015a: 4).[33] Complaints and petitions spread online have in some cases become concretized into collective political action in public spaces. The reverse is also seen: people share updates on political action via social media and YouTube to reach a wider public. However, some actions on social media are perceived as illegitimate, such as signing an online petition, inciting others to sign and expressing critical comments on the CPV or government. This implies that these are subject to control. Vietnamese state actors do not completely shut down access to foreign media outlets or social media platforms, but they do practice tight censorship over online political action. As use of the Internet has proliferated, the party-state has developed legal instruments to prevent the development of cyberspace into an open venue for political action. Online censorship can be traced back to the 1990s, when the inter-ministerial Vietnam National Internet Coordination Committee (*Ban Điều phối Quốc gia mạng Internet ở Việt Nam*) was established to supervise and control Internet-spread content and information that may be detrimental to national security (Boymal et al. 2007: 412).

The Law on Network Information Security (*Luật số 86/2015/QH13 An toàn thông tin mạng*) stipulates the state's firm commitment to regulating cyberspace for political stability and social order. Moreover, the Law on Cyber Security (*Luật số 24/2018/QH14 An ninh mạng*), promulgated in 2018, further tightens the party-state's control of cyberspace. State authorities are thus given

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[33] Petitions can be described with a couple of different terms in Vietnamese: petition or recommendation (*kiến nghị*), appeal (*lời kêu gọi*), open letters (*thư ngỏ*) and so forth (Morris-Jung 2015a: 4).

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authority to request both domestic and international Internet service providers to locally store data on users and submit such information and even to remove perceived offensive content within 24 hours at the request of a competent agency of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) or the Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC). Critics within and outside of Vietnam have raised a wide array of concerns in this regard, particularly that the law justifies the likely infringement of freedom of media and expression (*Associated Press* 2018). Formally, the party-state uses a rationale that its online management policy aims (i) to "create a healthy cyber environment" which is not detrimental to public order and others' rights and (ii) to eliminate harmful content that "infringes on the rights and legitimate interests of the state" (United Nations Human Rights Committee 2018: 17).

Furthermore, the party-state launched a military cyber monitoring unit in 2017, named Task Force 47, under the Ministry of National Defence. With the explicit goal of combatting "wrongful opinions" that undermine the legitimacy of the party-state, an estimated up to 10,000 officers serve as cyber troops dedicated to overseeing and detecting critical opinions that may, from the party-state's viewpoint, threaten the socialist regime (Nguyen 2018). The party-state strives to rein in cyberspace, increasing the cost of critical expressions and constraining the boundaries of freedom of expression in the online sphere. In addition to Task Force 47, the party-state has orchestrated so-called "public opinion shapers" to strategically spread the party-state's propaganda, disseminate pro-regime opinions and ultimately manipulate the online discourse (Dien 2021).

Altogether, Internet-based political action occupies a grey area in terms of its role as a platform for individual and collective political action, standing in-between an innovative space and a controlled space. As in real life, anti-party or anti-government opinion on the Internet is perceived as a threat to the legitimacy of the CPV-led regime, and on those grounds, Vietnamese authorities have clamped down on online political action (Dien 2021). Public pressure for freedom of information and greater opportunity for healthy political discussions, in combination with expanding use of the Internet, are nonetheless straining party-state surveillance and repression (Abuza 2015: 18).

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6.3.2 Collective political action

Collective political action in reality

To see what types of people have been involved in political action at a more aggregate level, and to determine the extent to which they have done so, I utilized data from the Asian Barometer Survey. The survey asked respondents whether they had ever joined with others to raise an issue or signed a petition during the past three years (Table 6.2).[34]

In 2005, only 0.6% (7 persons) and 1.8% (22 persons) out of 1,200 respondents reported having taken such action once and more than once, respectively – extremely small numbers indeed. However, the number of people who had taken such action at least once increased appreciably over time. In 2015, 14.4% (172 persons) and 11.6% (139 persons) out of 1,200 respondents stated that they had taken such action once and more than once, respectively. Nevertheless, people's continued reluctance to join with others to raise an issue or sign a petition remained salient. In the 2015 survey, 26.7% (321 persons) of respondents stated that they would not join with others to raise an issue or sign a petition under any circumstances.

Table 6.2. Experiences in joining with others to raise an issue or sign a petition

Response to the question of whether respondents had ever joined with others to raise an issue or signed a petition during the past three years.	Frequency (%)		
	Wave 2 (2005)	Wave 3 (2010)	Wave 4 (2015)

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[34] The survey did not specify the term 'an issue'. In this respect, it may include not only pressing policy issues but also a variety of day-to-day concerns and problems pertaining to one's personal life or a small group in a community.

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I have done this more than once	22 (1.8%)	139 (11.7%)	139 (11.6%)
I have done this once	7 (0.6%)	59 (5.0%)	172 (14.4%)
I have not done this, but I might do it if something important happens in the future	1,170 (97.5%)[1]	880 (73.9%)	542 (45.1%)
I have not done this and I would not do it regardless of the situation			321 (26.7%)
Can't choose	1 (0.1%)	51 (4.3%)	21 (1.7%)
Decline to answer	_[2]	62 (5.2%)	6 (0.5%)
Total	1,200	1,191	1,200

Source: Asian Barometer Survey core dataset (Permission for access was obtained).
[1.] The 2010 and 2015 surveys did not split this into two different questions.
[2.] This response option was not provided in Wave 2.

I looked closer at whether a relationship could be found between certain socio-demographic variables and the experience of taking political action. Considering data availability, I chose three variables for study: age, gender and educational background.[35] The analysis was performed using a Pearson's

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[35] The technical report of the 2015 Asian Barometer Survey Vietnam recognizes some errors in the records of household income when interviewers typed numbers to classify them into five quintiles. Considering data validity, I have decided not to perform the chi-square test with the income variable. This technical report is only available to those who submit a formal request to the secretariat. In the 2005 Asian Barometer Survey, an enormous proportion (97.5%) of the respondents said that they had never taken part in political action. Therefore, I only performed the chi-square test with the 2010 and 2015 survey.

chi-square test of independence.[36] In SPSS, I set the level of significance (p) at .05, and tested the following three null hypotheses:

- *Null hypothesis 1. No significant difference exists between age groups in experiences of joining with others to raise an issue or in signing a petition.*
- *Null hypothesis 2. No significant difference exists between men and women in experiences of joining with others to raise an issue or in signing a petition.*
- *Null hypothesis 3. No significant difference exists between different educational level groups in experiences of joining with others to raise an issue or in signing a petition.*

Age

First, age was found to be significantly related to experiences of political action, χ^2 (12, N=1,173) = 46.609, $p < .05$ (Table 6.3). In view of the significant association between age and experiences of joining with others to raise an issue or signing a petition, I rejected the null hypothesis. In the latest 2015 Asian Barometer Survey, 7% of the 10-29 age group, 9.2% of the 30-39 group, 13.7% of the 40-49 group, 15.9% of the 50-59 group, and 23.0% of the over 60 group responded that they had joined with others to raise an issue or signed a petition more than once. It is worth noting that the older generation groups had a higher percentage of affirmative responses to this question, compared to the younger generation groups. To be more specific, many of those in the age groups 40-49, 50-59 and over 60 had taken such action at least once. The frequencies among the middle-aged and older generations were higher than ex-

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[36] I would emphasize that the relationship does not refer to a causal effect or correlation. It refers to an association between the categorical variables. The chi-square test was performed only with the valid responses, the responses of 'can't choose' or 'decline to answer' being excluded from the test. Due to space limitations, the full test outcomes of both the 2010 and 2015 Asian Barometer Surveys including the expected frequency for each variable are available at Appendix 5.

pected. Calculations using the 2010 survey data produced the same result, confirming an association between age and experiences of political action, χ^2 (8, N=1,078) = 24.480, $p < .05$.

Table 6.3. Chi-square test by age group (2015 Asian Barometer Survey)

Group	Number (% within the group) who indicated having joined with others to raise an issue or signed a petition during the past three years.			
	More than once	Once	Never but will do so	Never and won't do so ever
10-29	28 (7.0%)	45 (11.3%)	211 (52.8%)	116 (29.0%)
30-39	23 (9.2%)	33 (13.2%)	123 (49.2%)	71 (28.4%)
40-49	31 (13.7%)	42 (18.5%)	97 (42.7%)	57 (25.1%)
50-59	25 (15.9%)	29 (18.5%)	58 (36.9%)	45 (28.7%)
Over 60	32 (23.0%)	23 (16.5%)	52 (37.4%)	32 (23.0%)

Chi-square value = 46.409, df=12. $p < .05$.

Source: Asian Barometer Survey core dataset and author's calculations.

Gender

Disaggregated by gender, the chi-square test results indicate, again, a significant association, χ^2 (3, N=1,173) = 11.451, $p < .05$ (Table 6.4). Therefore, I rejected the null hypothesis. In the male group, the percentage of those who had experience in joining with others to raise an issue or had signed a petition was larger than in the female group. Some 13.6% of male and 10.1% of female respondents said that they had taken such action more than once. Some 16.8% of male and 12.7% of female respondents had done so once. Frequencies among men respondents were larger than the expected counts whereas women

respondents were smaller than the expected counts. Thus, men tended to take such political action more than the expected frequency. Calculations on the 2010 survey data confirmed the presence of a relationship between gender and the experience of political action, χ^2 (2, N=1,078) = 14.290, $p < .05$.

Table 6.4. Chi-Square test by gender (2015 Asian Barometer Survey)

Group	Number (% within the group) who indicated having joined with others to raise an issue or signed a petition during the past three years.			
	More than once	Once	Never but will do so	Never and won't do so ever
Men	77 (13.6%)	95 (16.8%)	260 (45.9%)	135 (23.8%)
Women	61 (10.1%)	77 (12.7%)	282 (46.5%)	186 (30.7%)

Chi-Square value = 14.290, df=2. $p < .05$.

Source: Asian Barometer Survey core dataset and author's calculations.

Educational level

Finally, the chi-square test results indicate a significant association between educational level and political action, χ^2 (12, N=1,173) = 65.113, $p < .05$ (Table 6.4). In the 2015 survey, the percentage of those who had taken such action was highest in the group with the lowest educational level. Some 25.7% of those with no formal education or incomplete primary school said that they had joined with others to raise an issue or signed a petition during the past three years. Nonetheless, percentages in the other groups were similar: 12.7% in the group that had completed primary school or equivalent, 10.0% among those who had completed secondary school or equivalent, 10.7% of those who had completed high school or equivalent, and 13.4% of those who had completed a bachelor's or post-graduate degree.

In this case, however, calculations using the 2010 survey data produced contradictory results; that is, for this data no association was found between educational level and political action, χ^2 (8, N=1,046) = 8.345, $p > .05$. Therefore, I reserve judgment about the relationship between educational background and experiences of political action. Nonetheless, I do not completely reject the null hypothesis.

Table 6.5. Chi-square test by educational background (2015 Asian Barometer Survey)

Group	Number (% within the group) who indicated having joined with others to raise an issue or signed a petition during the past three years.			
	More than once	Once	Never but will do so	Never and won't do so ever
No formal education or incomplete primary school	18 (25.7%)	11 (15.7%)	29 (41.4%)	12 (17.1%)
Completed primary or equivalent	9 (12.7%)	4 (5.6%)	35 (49.3%)	23 (32.4%)
Completed secondary school or equivalent	34 (10.0%)	29 (8.5%)	161 (47.4%)	116 (34.1%)
Completed high school or equivalent	59 (10.7%)	119 (21.6%)	248 (45.1%)	124 (22.5%)
Bachelor or post-graduate degree	19 (13.4%)	10 (7.0%)	68 (47.9%)	45 (31.7%)

Chi-square value = 46.409, df =12. $p < .05$.

Source: Asian Barometer Survey core dataset and author's calculations.

To sum up, from the chi-square tests of the three socio-demographic variables, age and gender were found to be associated with experiences of political action in the form of joining with others to raise an issue or signing a petition. Higher percentages of such experiences were found among men compared to women, and among older generations compared to younger generations. At the same time, I cannot reject the null hypothesis regarding an association between educational background and experiences of political action, due to the contradictory results from the 2010 and 2015 survey data. While I note the statistically meaningful associations found for both age and gender, the overall fair distribution of the response rates across the groups on each variable merit note. No particular group dominated in experiences of joining with others or signing a petition. This implies that political action has not been limited to a group with a specific age, gender or educational background.

Framed as extra-institutional

Collective political action is less preferred by state actors. As yet, Vietnam has no specific law on demonstration, but two legal rules regulate people's assembly in public space. According to the Circular Guiding the Implementation of a Number of Articles of Government Decree No. 38/2005/ND-CP of 18 March 2005 Stipulating a Number of Measures to Ensure Public Order (*Thông tư Số 09/2005/TT-BCA Hướng dẫn thi hành một số điều của Nghị định số 38/2005/NĐ-CP ngày 18/03/2005 của Chính phủ quy định một số biện pháp bảo đảm trật tự công cộng*), any public gathering with more than five persons must be registered and obtain approval from the district or provincial-level People's Committee. Representatives or organizers of a public gathering should submit an application dossier, which the People's Committee scrutinizes and either disapproves or approves while issuing specific guidelines on what is allowed and prohibited. When a public assembly is deemed as disruptive to public order, the local administration or public security forces dismiss the assembly, if necessary using physical deterrence such as body searches, temporary detention or even violence. While not every protest is identified as

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extra-institutional and subject to repression, collective forms of political action are not sufficiently institutionalized in Vietnam and thereby generally less tolerated (Kerkvliet 2014: 102).

According to the abovementioned Ministry of Public Security circular, prohibited acts include not only those that may harm other people or cause inconvenience at public places, but also gatherings for politically motivated purposes; for example, gathering in a large group in front of a state agency or holding items such as banners to oppose the party-state's laws, policies and guidelines. According to the circular, security agents or police officers are obliged to ensure public order by guiding people towards the established channels and procedures for political action in accordance with the Law on Complaints and the Law on Denunciations.

Based on an empirical case study of a protest against unfair compensation for land and alleged misappropriation by local officials in Vietnam, Chau (2019) found that the protesters, rural villagers, used several creative tactics to avoid their protest action being framed as opposing the party-state's land policy itself or as challenging the regime's legitimacy. First, the protesters used non-violent, non-aggressive means so as not to fall into a charge of disturbing public order. Second, the protesters made use of representatives considered to have more credit in their commitment to the party-state (e.g., veterans and CPV members) in meetings with local officials and media reporters to demonstrate that the protest did not aim to pose a threat. Third, when the protesters submitted a formal petition, they framed themselves as law-abiding citizens and used terminologies conveying the message of a rightful request for a better life for their family.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter investigated the manner in which political action is tolerated and/or repressed under Vietnam's formal political institutions, finding this to be limited in both form and scope. This analysis adds to the rich literature on authoritarian regimes that uphold nominally democratic institutions as a strategy for channelling and controlling popular political action. As claimed in

previous studies, such as Gandhi and Przeworski (2007), authoritarian regimes strategically set up political institutions to secure their tenure in power. Under these formal political institutions, people's political action loses its edge, as it is absorbed into the given rules of the game.

The legal instruments reviewed in this chapter, particularly the Law on Reception of Citizens, the Law on Complaints and the Penal Code, underline that political action may not disturb public order, nor may it infringe upon the interest of the party-state. In particular, the substance of the so-called grassroots ordinance (the Ordinance on the Exercise of Democracy in Communes, Wards and Township) warrants critical consideration in terms of its actual outcomes in regard to citizens' political rights. Indeed, in Vietnam, the people's participation in decision-making is stratified, with the populace most often relegated to the role of passive recipients to be informed or to speak when asked to comment. Thus, people's engagement in grassroots decision-making is mainly limited to being informed of decisions or being invited to a government-hosted consultative meeting. The ordinance stipulates what the people may discuss and what their level of engagement should be. Consultations are in some cases guaranteed, but decision-making power is rarely given to the people. Important decisions remain the purview of party-state authorities, and when it comes to politically sensitive topics, popular opinion is rarely brought to the table.

The formal channels and regulations established for people's expression in fact serve as a legitimation strategy for the regime. They demonstrate state actors' mere nominal tolerance of people's political action, while giving the people the impression that state actors do listen to their opinions. The party-state defines the language and formula of 'permissible' political action in its own terms. At the same time, the established laws, using ambiguous language, enable state actors to twist the intention and nature of people's political action to its own arbitrary interpretations. In this respect, the party-state may arrest and prosecute people who raise their voice on pressing issues or criticize the current political system. Online expressions and activities are thoroughly screened by state authorities, as much as activities in public spaces. Those who post critical comments online are subject to repercussions including arrest and

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imprisonment under the criminal charge of disturbing public order. Also, though the right to assembly is respected by law, in practice, public gatherings and protests are often framed as extra-institutional and thereby subject to control in the name of protection of public order.

Taking these conditions into account, the Vietnamese formal political institutions introduce an edge of precariousness to people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action, through a combination of channelling and criminalizing political action. In addition, the data presented in this chapter demonstrate the party-state's practice of criminalizing contentious political action, while justifying arrests by reference to legal stipulations. Kaase and Marsh (1979: 41) observed that extra-institutional political action seldom conforms to the rules and processes of political action allowed under a political regime. Similarly, the party-state in Vietnam labels political action critical of state actors or its single-party regime as extra-institutional and thereby illegitimate. The legal mandate to preserve public order has been applied to a wide range of people's actions, and often used to silence political action, driven by the party-state's endeavour to maintain the legitimacy of the regime. In this way, political action that is deemed unfavourable to the existing single-party regime can be set outside of the boundaries accepted by the party-state.

I argue, therefore, that the limited forms of political action are institutionalized in Vietnam selectively to circumvent criticisms of or demands on the existing political regime. All in all, the Vietnamese people can take political action within a considerably limited scope and extent predetermined by the party-state. This chapter demonstrated that the party-state merely nominally tolerates people's action, by channelling it into existing channels and processes. However, it also represses people's political action by criminalizing it when state actors perceive it as a threat to the legitimacy or longevity of the single-party regime. The given channels and rules thus appear to be little more than a façade for nipping political criticism and opposition in the bud.

7 The relationship between public protest and state repression

As discussed in the previous chapter, political action taken outside the given channels and rules is framed as extra-institutional and thus subject to control. Among the many forms of collective political action that may take place, this chapter zooms in on one: the public protest. In this study, I understand public protest as a public expression of disapproval or objection to an idea, decision or behaviour of state actors. In order to determine under what conditions public protests have incurred repression in Vietnam, I performed a cross-case analysis of 60 protest events in Vietnam between 2010 and 2020.

The goal of the cross-case analysis was to find salient patterns that might explain the relationships between public protest and a repressive response by the party-state. Theoretically, the cross-case analysis builds on insights from two literatures: the literature on state perception of threat and the literature on authoritarian regimes, discussed in Chapter 2. Considering both theoretical dimensions and the Vietnamese political context, I unpacked specific public protest events to identify elements that could logically be compared across protest event cases.

Section 7.1 applies the theoretical discussion on state repression to the Vietnamese political context, thus contextualizing the party-state's perception of threat. According to Rucht et al. (1998: 9), "protest is by its very nature a complex phenomenon". In the case of Vietnam, too, various factors can be found that affect the overall form that protests take. In regard to such factors, and considering data availability, I chose three protest factors for investigation: scale, topic and means. Each of these may affect the degree of threat the protest is perceived as posing to the party-regime. I recognize the potential importance of informal politics in the relationship between political action and state response, as discussed in the previous chapters. However, it was meth-

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odologically unfeasible to answer the question of whether and how much personal connections of protesters with the party or the government affected the intensity of repression in Vietnamese society based on the collected data. In this section, therefore, I focus on the three factors that can be qualitatively stratified into different categories.

I classified each protest case into the three different levels by its size (scale), political sensitivity (topic) and its aggressiveness (means). Since the classification of the selected factors was dependent on the interpretation of a case, it may give rise to a question of reliability. From the aspect of intra-rater reliability, I reviewed and categorized the cases several times with a sufficient time interval of several months. Section 7.2 presents analysis results on the protest cases and elaborates on notable findings to explain the relationship between public protests and state repression. I also provide a narrative account of some protest events. Section 7.3 summarizes conclusions from this analysis at the nexus between public protest and party-state repression, teasing out theoretical insights on state repression of collective political action under authoritarian regimes.

7.1 Setting up the conceptual classification

7.1.1 Scale

The first factor influencing the degree of threat perceived as emanating from a public protest is the scale of the protest. In this regard, larger-scale collective action is considered more likely to pose a threat to the state, leading to repression (Ayoub 2010; Beers 2016; Davenport 2000; Göbel 2021; Earl et al. 2003; Tilly 1978). Previous research operationalized scale with different numbers, as the meaning of 'large scale' is relative, depending on the research, case selection and features of the data (c.f. Yang 2016; Cebotari and Vink 2013). Besides, it must be noted that in the case of anonymous protests held in open, public spaces, obtaining precise counts of participants is seldom possible, making conjectures on numbers of participants commonly the only option (Rucht et al. 1998: 69).

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For the present analysis, I divided scale into three categories, according to estimated numbers of participants. When a protest was staged by more than a thousand people, I classified it as 'very large scale'. Examples in this category from the data are the protest involving 5,000-7,000 Hmong ethnic minorities (C5) and that involving a mob of a thousand workers at the Vung Ang Economic Zone (C23). When a protest was reported as ranging between (nearly) a hundred and hundreds of protesters, I categorized it as 'large scale'. Examples in this category are the protest involving hundreds of farmers in Hung Yen province (C11), that of around 700 villagers in Nghi Thiet commune (C31) and that involving hundreds of parents at Nguyen Trai school (C32). Finally, protests involving from several up to dozens of protesters were classified as 'small scale'. Examples in this category are a gathering of more than 20 activists (C25), a protest involving dozens of street vendors in Vung Tau province (C28) and one involving dozens of farmers in Dong Tam commune (C57).

7.1.2 Topic

The second factor influencing the perceived threat of a public protest is the political sensitivity of the protest topic. From the threat perception hypothesis, protests that touch upon politically sensitive topics or contain anti-government purposes are perceived as a greater threat, increasing the likelihood of a repressive response by the state (Ayoub 2010; Davenport et al. 2011; Earl et al. 2003; Earl and Soule 2006; Kriesi et al. 1995; McAdam 1982; Sullivan 2016). Kriesi et al. (1995: 97) suggested four factors determining whether a topic would be regarded as politically sensitive: (i) it involves an issue pertaining to a high amount of material resources, (ii) it poses a challenge to the existing power system or power holders, (iii) the government perceives its stability under threat and (iv) it involves the national interest (e.g., public security or resources).

Political threats are generally more influential in prompting state repression than behavioural threats such as protesters' use of violence (Davenport

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2007a). Under authoritarian regimes, political opposition often embodies demands for democratic institutional reforms, which are inevitably perceived by the regime as "anti-systemic in nature" and thereby subject to repression (Albrecht 2010: 19). According to Ong and Han (2019), in a case study on China, protests related to human rights, ethnicity and religion brought a high risk of repression.

For the party-state, political reform advocates are "the most troublesome and threatening critics" in that their call for a multi-party political system involves regime change (Kerkvliet 2019: 115). As to protests on topics considered 'politically very sensitive' in the Vietnamese context, I considered topics forming the highest level of threat to the Vietnamese party-state to be human rights, democratic freedom, a challenge to the authority or a decision of state authorities, the legitimacy of the CPV, and other institutional demands concerning the current single-party regime. Examples from the data in this category are protesters demanding greater political rights and legislation under the law on demonstration (C9), a protest accusing the government of politically motivated arrest and calling for justice (C22) and a protest against the law on special economic zones and the law on cybersecurity (C49).

The next category is that of 'politically sensitive' protests. Examples from the data of politically sensitive topics are the accusations against China of territorial aggression in disputed waters (C4), opposition to relocation for industrial park development (C12) and suspected toll fraud at a build-operate-transfer (BOT) toll station (C53). [37] As several highways in Vietnam were constructed on the BOT model, transparency in toll fee management has recently emerged as a flashpoint of public protest. These do not explicitly challenge the regime but still involve the political or economic interest of either central or local state actors (e.g., foreign policy) or require state actors to make high concessions (e.g., resource allocation).

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[37] The BOT model refers to the project model that investors (usually a private entity) builds an infrastructure, operates it for the contracted period, and then transfers it to the state.

Göbel (2021) found from a China case study that local state actors were more likely to repress protesters, even if their protest was small in scale, if the protest called for higher concessions. In the Vietnamese context, protests over forced relocations or insufficient compensations often involve the political and financial interests of party-state officials at either the central or local level. As discussed earlier, constant land disputes stem from the state's management of the land on behalf of the people, as stipulated in current Vietnamese land law. Also, anti-China protests can be considered as bringing a significant risk of repression by the party-state, as the party-state has a political interest in avoiding any provocation of the Chinese government, due to its close political and economic ties with China. The anti-China protesters were deemed sensitive in that (i) people not only rebuked China for its continued assertive actions in the disputed maritime territory but also got infuriated by the party-state's dependence on China; and (ii) the nationalism sentiments embedded in the protest included people's growing awareness of the option of reconsidering the concept of the nation that has been propagated by the CPV (Vu 2014b).

The lowest level of political sensitivity, here labelled 'not politically sensitive at face value', includes protests regarding the environment or personal interests within a community. Examples from the data of protests labelled 'not politically sensitive at face value' are opposition to transforming a parking lot into a shopping centre because of the expected lack of parking space (C26), accusations against a Taiwanese steel factory of massive fish deaths caused by its discharge of toxic chemicals (C30), opposition to a local government's plan to merge two secondary schools (C40), and opposition to the landfill for pollution and low compensation for people living around the landfill (C60).

Such protests may appear far from politics, but on closer examination multiple layers may be found entailing criticisms and demands towards state actors while not being explicitly political. Environmental activities sometimes have political layers, for instance, calling out corruption of state actors (Dixon 2004: 22-23). Over a decade, environmental activism in Vietnam has increased despite the restrictions that remain. Environmental pollution caused by a factory or road construction may not pose a direct threat to the party-state, but disappointment and anger may shift, for example, into a call for

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greater government transparency (Bui 2016; Morris-Jung 2015a). Since environmental concerns are sometimes used tactically for embedded opposition to the government, state authorities may take a repressive stance on them (Kerkvliet 2019: 72-75).

7.1.3 Means

Confrontational means is another factor influencing the degree of threat a protest is considered to pose to the state and thus the likelihood of repression (Ayoub 2010; Davenport 1995; Earl et al. 2003; Göbel 2021; McAdam 1982). In this study, confrontational means refers to the use of physical force or tools that may cause any inconvenience, injury or damage to humans or resources. Violent or aggressive means obviously pose a threat to public security, which gives justification to state actors, especially the police, to exercise their authority to take a repressive response. I distinguish three categories of confrontational means. The first, 'very confrontational', implies that a protest uses violence and is thus likely to incur repression. Examples from the data are protestors setting fire to a police vehicle (C3), being armed with knives and petrol bombs (C16), breaking into a factory complex (C33), impounding vehicles (C51), and taking police officers hostage (C57).

The second category, 'moderately confrontational', concerns protests that do not use very confrontational means but still have the potential to cause physical inconvenience. I thus expect that repression is likely to occur. Examples from the data of confrontational means are protesters blocking a road by wielding bricks and materials (C34) and setting up a camp to block the entrance to a factory (C42).

The lowest level of confrontational means is designated here as 'non-confrontational'. These are peaceful gatherings which are unlikely to face state repression. Examples from the data are protestors walking along the street and waving banners (C8), gatherings in front of the Hanoi municipality building (C13) and protestors gathered at the Ninh Hiep Commune People's Committee (C26).

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7.1.4 Repression

This study investigated reported, visible repression taken by state actors, mainly through public security forces, in response to protests. As a variety of state actors may be involved, ranging from national or local-level government to public-private agents (Earl 2003), this study defines state actors as both CPV cadres and public officials exercising their authority or power in the name of fulfilling their duties to uphold law and order. In particular, the police use force in responding to protesters to prevent or reduce public disorder, implementing the state's authority to disperse and punish such 'unlawful' activity (Ayoub 2010; della Porta and Reiter 1998; Earl and Soule 2006; McPhail and McCarthy 2005; Nassauer 2019; Waddington 1998). While acknowledging variations among state actors, I use the term 'state repression' at an aggregate level for analytical convenience, since this cross-case analysis does not aim to distinguish differences in state response within the group of state actors.

This study applies three categories of state repression. The highest level of repression is 'heavy repression', referring to physical assault or attack causing injury, hospitalization or death. Examples from the data are instances in which protesters were beaten and injured (C31); where the police used water cannons and electric rods, causing a few injuries (C42); and a clash in which several people were killed (C57).

'Moderate repression' is less intense, but still involves restrictions imposed by state actors to exercise authority over protesters or to physically crack down on them to terminate a protest or prevent its further development. This category includes coercive measures as well, for instance, bulldozing an area to implement a construction project or cutting telecommunication lines, considering that these behaviours, as part of repression, subdue protesters by force or authority exercised by state actors. Examples here from the data are the police cutting electricity in a protest area (C5), the police cordoning off the area (C14), the police arresting demonstrators (C17), the police detaining dozens of people (C20), and 200-300 police officers surrounding protesters and herding them to a bus (C28).

The lowest level of repression, 'minimal or no repression', consists of two types of responses: (i) gentle use of authority, with state actors not using force

but asking protesters to disperse or just watching them hold a protest, and (ii) interactive responses in the form of dialogue or consultation with protesters. Examples from the data include the Hanoi police just watching a protest and later leading the protesters away (C6), the deputy chairperson of a town's People's Committee coming to protesters and explaining the government's plan so as to persuade them (C28), local authorities in Quang Xuong commune organizing a dialogue with protestors (C40) and the police spending three hours persuading people to disperse (C52).

7.2 Cross-case analysis results

7.2.1 General overview of the protest cases

Looking at geographical distribution, 33 cases took place in Northern Vietnam, 19 protest cases in Central Vietnam, four cases in Southern Vietnam, and four cases in more than one province or city (e.g., Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi).[38] The concentration in Northern Vietnam is attributable to the fact that a majority of the protests were held in the capital, Hanoi. People travelled to Hanoi to stage a protest in front of a line ministry building, the CPV petition office or the National Assembly. This was a key way they expressed frustration that their political actions through a local formal channel such as petition submission had been ignored by local state actors (C10, C12, C34, C42). With collective action in Hanoi, therefore, they expected to make themselves heard. As to repression, there was no particular region to which high-intensity repression was concentrated; seven out of 33 protests were located in the Northern region, five out of 19 protests in the Central region, two out of four protests in the South, and no protests occurring in multiple provinces/cities.

Most of the protest cases in which state actors responded in a non-repressive manner were handled by local authorities, such as the Chairperson of the

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[38] Northern Vietnam includes Northwest, Northeast, and Red River Delta regions; Central Vietnam includes North Central Coast and South Central Coast regions; Southern Vietnam includes Central Highlands, Southeast, and Mekong River Delta regions.

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communal People's Committee and the deputy director of a provincial department of Education and Training. On the other hand, there were also cases in which central-level state agencies got involved. Central-level state agencies tended to keep themselves distant from land protests, letting provincial or district-level officials take responsibility for settling these problems (Kerkvliet 2019: 56-57). A ministry, for instance, might make an announcement about a case or call on local government or security forces to ensure public order or to communicate with residents (C5, C23, C39, C57). While no particular pattern was detected in the involvement of the central-level state agencies, I observed that many of these cases had at least one of the three studied threat factors.

Protesters were diverse, including but not limited to farmers, Catholic priests and parishioners, artists, professors and even veterans. While many protests were staged by those with similar socio-economic characteristics (e.g., fishing in the same community, being evicted due to the same land development project), there were protests in which participants were a group of like-minded citizens whose characteristics were very different though they gathered for a common goal (e.g., opposition to the China's territorial aggression). In addition, there were protests that involved people who themselves or their affiliation had become a target of state surveillance or even experienced repression such as imprisonment in the past. These, interestingly, did not end in high-intensity repression (C4, C14).

In the dynamics of protest and state response, it is worth mentioning that not only citizens and state authorities but also other stakeholders, such as Vietnamese or foreign business entities, were involved. For instance, in the case of environmental pollution, local people whose health conditions or source of living were affected demanded that authorities come up with a better solution or order the shutdown of a factory (C20, C21, C29, C30, C38, C42, C44, C47, C58). Besides, several protests over relocation or low land compensation involved SOEs (e.g., Viettel Group, the telecommunications company run by the Ministry of Defence) or land development investors, as the land-related protests usually raised allegations over lack of transparency or unfair decisions in favour of businesses (C11, C37, C57). Considering the prevalence of patronage and corrupt practices between state and business actors, as discussed

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in Chapter 5, there is a possibility that these aspects of Vietnamese informal political practices played a role behind the scenes of party-state repression. I leave this possibility open.

7.2.2 The conceptual classification results

For each element of protest, I created a classification matrix in order to more systematically synthesize and compare the features of the 60 protest event cases. My aim was to find any meaningful patterns that might explain the relationship between public protest and state repression in Vietnam. This section reports on that analysis, providing a descriptive account of the overall case distribution in the conceptual classification matrix.[39] In the forthcoming matrix tables, the numbers in parentheses indicate the total number of protest event cases within the data. Light shaded cells indicate cases that fit the threat-response hypothesis, while dark shaded cells indicate outcomes that were contradictory to what was assumed. Due to space limitations, I do not describe every case but elaborate on selected cases that deserve particular attention.[40]

Scale

First, Table 7.1 displays the three levels of scale and the corresponding levels of repression. The table shows that protests with a 'very large scale' did not always result in heavy repression as assumed. Unexpectedly, most of the cases (6 out of the 7 cases) led to moderate or no repression. Only one very large scale protest resulted in heavy repression. Within the 'large scale' category, less than half of the protests did not face repression (15 out of the 35 cases). As for the category 'small scale', three protests resulted in heavy repression, whereas five protest cases did not result in repression.

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[39] To enhance reliability, the initial version of the conceptual calibration scheme was reviewed by a Vietnamese researcher. We went through the collected cases one-by-one, identified several differences in calibration, discussed and revised the classification scheme.

[40] The full details of the 60 public protest cases are available online. See Online Appendix at https://osf.io/47gck.

Table 7.1. Protest scale and repression

	Heavy repression	Moderate repression	No repression
Very large scale (7 cases)	C30 (1 case)	C5, C23, C49 (3 cases)	C33, C38, C41 (3 cases)
Large scale (35 cases)	C2, C3, C7, C11, C12, C18, C31, C42, C50, C59 (10 cases)	C8, C10, C13, C14, C17, C19, C27, C29, C37, C47 (10 cases)	C6, C20, C21, C22, C24, C26, C32, C34, C36, C39, C40, C44, C46, C51, C52 (15 cases)
Small scale (18 cases)	C16, C57, C58 (3 cases)	C1, C4, C9, C15, C25, C35, C45, C48, C53, C55 (10 cases)	C28, C43, C54, C56, C60 (5 cases)

It notable that only one very large scale case (C30) brought about heavy repression. That protest took place in July 2016 and was attended by thousands of people who took to the streets in Quang Binh province, accusing the Taiwanese steel company, Formosa, of releasing toxic chemicals, causing massive fish deaths. The police responded with arrests, and injuries were reported among some protesters (*Radio Free Asia* 2016). Nevertheless, other protests attended by nearly or more than a thousand people (C33, C38, C41) ended without repression.

In the case of C41, in September 2017 2,305 vendors doing business at the traditional An Dong Market in Ho Chi Minh City staged a protest in front of

the market building. They displayed banners condemning the market's prolonged refurbishment, as the project had lasted for more than four years. The vendors were present throughout the city centre, wearing red caps and T-shirts. Despite the large scale of the protest, the public officials in charge of the area responded by convening a dialogue with the vendors later on the day of the protest (*VN Express* 2017). Although they did not reach an agreement, it is worth noting that the local government did not quell the protesters and attempted to listen to public voices, refraining from cracking down on the huge crowd that had gathered (*VN Express* 2017).

Contrary to the hypothesis, some small-scale protests faced heavy repression. One of these is case 58, a protest that occurred in March 2020. At least dozens of residents of La Van village, Pho Thanh commune, blocked garbage trucks from entering a waste plant in protest against the serious pollution allegedly caused by its toxic waste (*Radio Free Asia* 2020a). According to a video circulated on Facebook, hundreds of public security forces beat the protesters and took them in for detention (*Radio Free Asia* 2020a).

Topic

The threat hypothesis proposes that protests on politically very sensitive topics are likely to bring about repression. Nonetheless, in my data protests on topics of high and moderate political sensitivity did not always end in repression (Table 7.2). 11 protest cases categorized as 'politically very sensitive' were scattered across the three degrees of repression: three of the cases resulted in heavy repression, six resulted in moderate repression and two cases brought no repression. Rather unexpectedly, four protests in the category 'not politically sensitive at face value' did result in heavy repression.

Table 7.2. Political sensitivity of protest topic and repression

	Heavy repression	Moderate repression	No repression

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Politically very sensitive (11 cases)	C3, C18, C50 (3 cases)	C5, C9, C14, C15, C45, C49 (6 cases)	C22, C38 (2 cases)
Politically sensitive (24 cases)	C2, C7, C11, C12, C16, C57, C59 (7 cases)	C1, C4, C8, C10, C13, C17, C19, C23, C27, C35, C37, C48, C53, C55 (14 cases)	C6, C43, C54 (3 cases)
Not politically sensitive at face value (25 cases)	C30, C31, C42, C58 (4 cases)	C25, C29, C47 (3 cases)	C20, C21, C24, C26, C28, C32, C33, C34, C36, C39, C40, C41, C44, C46, C51, C52, C56, C60 (18 cases)

The three cases of protests on politically very sensitive topics that provoked heavy repression warrant a closer look. One of these concerned a march of hundreds of villagers on the headquarters of the Bac Giang Province People's Committee in July 2010 (C3). The villagers condemned the police for the death of a young man who had been taken into custody. The police responded by beating the protesters causing multiple injuries (*Radio Free Asia* 2010). In a similar vein, around 500 people gathered at a funeral in March 2013 (C18). The deceased man had been found dead in a sewage drain in Hoi Hop commune. Those gathered demanded justice and raised allegations of his death being caused by a son-in-law of the Chairperson of Vinh Phuc Province (*Radio Free Asia* 2013). The police used force against the protesters. A video clip and pictures were spread online showing police knocking down a family member. After the protest, police launched an investigation, construing this incident as a disturbance of public order (*Radio Free Asia* 2013).

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The final case that provoked heavy repression (C50) took place in September 2018 in Quang Ngai province. Here, hundreds of protesters gathered at the government's offices to demand the release of 31 people who had been detained following protests against pollution caused by a waste-processing plant. The protesters and police clashed, and many protesters were beaten (*Radio Free Asia* 2018b). The common theme cutting across these protest cases was that people accused provincial or lower-level state actors of misuse of their authority and demanded justice.

In contrast, three cases belonging to the same category of politically very sensitive topics had an opposite consequence: moderate repression (C14) and no repression (C22, C38). These protests concerned an accusation of human rights violations against the Vietnamese government, outspoken support of social activists and bloggers and condemnation of police violence against people. However, in these cases, the protests were merely observed by the police or ended without critical clashes. These cases, therefore, deviate from my assumption that protests on topics that are politically very sensitive are likely to be met with heavier repression.

In the middle categorization, 'politically sensitive topic', the cases were dispersed, albeit unevenly, and not concentrated in the high level of repression as expected. Seven of the 24 cases resulted in heavy repression, 14 cases brought moderate repression and three cases did not bring about repression. Land disputes and complaints were found to provoke strong repression. Residents or farmers expressed grievances regarding insufficient compensation provided for lands they had to give up or a project development plan which would force them to leave their lands (C2, C8, C11, C12, C16, C27, C37, C43, C48, C57). Among these ten cases, only two land-related protests ended up with no repression (C8, C43) and the rest of the cases led to moderate or high intensity repression, ranging from being taken to detention to being beaten by the security forces.

At the lowest level of categorization, 'not politically sensitive at face value', few protests encountered a repressive response by state authorities (four of the 25 cases resulted in heavy repression and three cases in moderate repression). Unexpectedly, state authorities harshly repressed environmental

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protests, which are categorized here as presenting a low level of political sensitivity. For example, in September 2017, around two hundred people gathered in protest for several months in Hai Duong province, setting up a camp and blocking the way to the textile factory, Pacific Crystal Textiles (C42). Arguing that the Hong Kong-owned company was discharging wastewater that was detrimental to residents, the protesters demanded termination of its operation. As a consequence, around 500 security forces were deployed and used water cannons and electric batons to disperse the protest, beating the protesters, setting fire to their tents and inflicting injury upon them (Nguyen 2017).

Means

I expected protests using confrontational or aggressive means to be more likely to result in state repression. Table 7.3 displays the cases arrayed by this last factor. Like the other threat factors discussed, in this classification matrix some cases follow the expected path whereas others show notable deviations from the threat hypothesis. Even the protests within the same category of confrontational means faced different consequences.

Table 7.3. Confrontational means of protest and repression

	Heavy repression	Moderate repression	No repression
Very confrontational (13 cases)	C2, C3, C12, C16, C50, C57, C59 (7 cases)	C5, C37, C47, C49 (4 cases)	C33, C51 (2 cases)
Moderately confrontational (11 cases)	C11, C42, C58 (3 cases)	C23, C48 (2 cases)	C28, C34, C44, C53, C56, C60 (6 cases)

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Non-confronta-tional (36 cases)	C7, C18, C30, C31 (4 cases)	C1, C4, C8, C9, C10, C13, C14, C15, C17, C19, C25, C27, C29, C35, C43, C45, C55 (17 cases)	C6, C20, C21, C22, C24, C26, C32, C36, C38, C39, C40, C41, C46, C52, C54 (15 cases)

Among the collected cases, 13 used very confrontational means. Seven of these faced heavy repression. One salient example is a protest that occurred in January 2020 (C57). Here, dozens of villagers in Dong Tam commune clashed with the security forces over the military's use of land that the villagers argued had been confiscated with unfair compensation. In December 2019, the villagers had submitted a public letter to the government presenting two main arguments. First, they said that the government had acquired the land not for public interest but to sell for profit to Viettel, the country's largest telecommunications service provider, owned by the Ministry of Defence (Le 2020). Second, villagers stated that both the local and the central government had not genuinely interacted with them but instead tried to conceal the land dispute (Le 2020). The protesters, armed with knives and petrol bombs, attacked the security forces and killed three of them (*BBC* 2020). The security forces beat the protesters and used excessive force, resulting in the death of one villager (*BBC* 2020). The authorities arrested 22 protesters on murder charges, blocked social media posts on the clash and arrested several people who posted about it online (Chandran 2020).

Another protest case is worth closer examination (C49). In June 2018, protests were staged by thousands of citizens across several provinces over opposition to two legislative bills: the Law on Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and the Law on Cybersecurity. The protesters demanded the repeal of the Law on SEZs as it grants up to a 99-year land lease to foreign investors which may be exploited by Chinese capital. The Law on Cybersecurity, as discussed in Chapter 4, was decried by protesters, as the law will tighten state control over online content and curtail freedom of speech. As the protests escalated, in

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some places the protesters turned more violent, vandalizing buildings and setting fire to vehicles. After the protest, the National Assembly announced the suspension of the Law on SEZs, yet the Law on Cybersecurity passed with 86% approval by the deputies, and the police detained, arrested, and fined hundreds of the protesters for criminal charges (Hai 2018).

In another case, occurring in May 2020 (C59), the police beat and injured ten farmers in Giang Thanh commune, Kien Giang province. Around a hundred farmers of the Khmer Krom ethnic minority had opposed the police's attempts to clear lands they had been farming but which were designated as a conservation area (*Radio Free Asia* 2020c). While details vary regarding which party hurt the other first during this clash, these cases illustrate that protesters' use of violence against security officers can be a motivation for security forces to respond in a very repressive manner.

A contrasting case is provided by another protest that used very confrontational means and yet was met by a less repressive response of state actors. Around 500 people gathered at the My Tho commune office in Binh Dinh province in April 2018 (C47). They blocked a highway, threw sand at security forces and took five public officials hostage. Using violent means, they demanded the release of residents who had been detained after their participation in an environmental protest against the construction of a wind power plant (*Radio Free Asia* 2018a). The protest was large scale, on a politically sensitive topic, and the protesters used very aggressive means. However, contrary to my expectation, state actors did not use excessive force or take repressive measures in response; they just dispersed the protest and detained around 14 people for disturbing public order (*Radio Free Asia* 2018a).

On the opposite side of the matrix, 17 out of the 36 cases using moderately confrontational means resulted in moderate repression, and 15 out of the 36 cases using non-confrontational means resulted in little or no repression. These results suggest a link between confrontational means and repression. On the other hand, state actors did not practice repression against some protesters even when they damaged private property, such as a factory or vehicles, during their action (C33, C51), though these can be said to have threatened

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public order. It is also worth noting that four protest cases that were peaceful marches or simple gatherings faced heavy repression (C7, C18, C30, C31).

7.2.3 Recurring patterns: Deviations from expectations and unpredictability

Weak explanatory power of the threat factors

The first pattern found can be summed up as a weak explanatory power of the three threat factors in responses of state repression. Indeed, the protest cases following the expected response paths (light shaded cells in the tables) did not constitute the majority of the cases. While some cases fit neatly into the assumptions, many deviated from the expected paths, suggesting the need for further investigation. The calibration result, in Appendix 3, demonstrates this weak consistency between the level of the threat factors and the state's response. Thus, protests registering high on the threat factors did not necessarily provoke a more repressive state response. Moreover, we see that protests sharing similar or the same characteristics in regard to scale, topic and means had different outcomes in terms of repression.

To examine whether repression was more likely to occur when a protest presented a high level of threat on more than one factor, I performed an additional analysis of any aggregate effect that the threat factors might have. I classified the cases in four groups indicating how many times a case was categorized into the highest level of any of the threat factors and resulted in heavy or moderate repression. As a result, there were 36 cases that incurred heavy or moderate repression, of which 17 were not high on any of the selected threat factors. Figure 7.1 presents the categorization for the protests registering the highest levels of the threat factors studied; very large scale, politically very sensitive, or very confrontational means.

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Figure 7.1. Links between the highest levels of the threat factors and repression
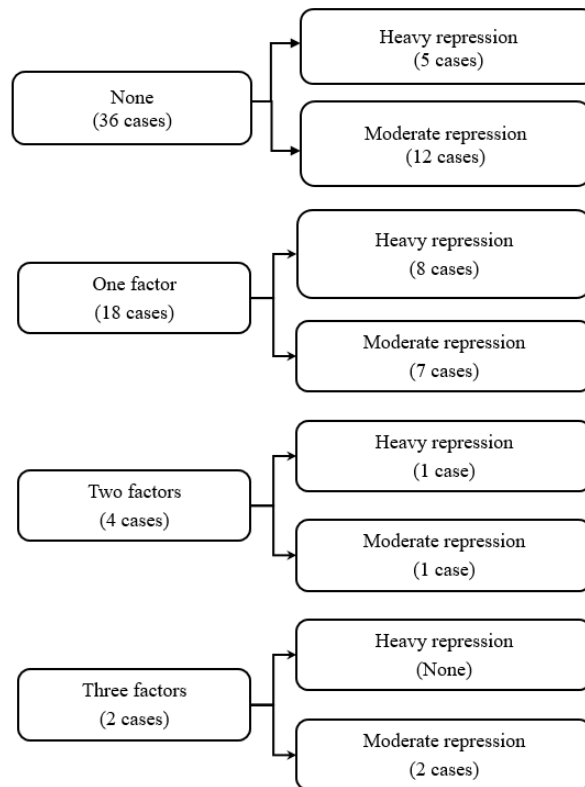
Even though the cases were high on at least one of the threat factors, some of them resulted in the lowest category of repression: little or no repression. Thus, there were also protest cases that were not in line with the hypothesized relationship. Among the 18 protest cases presenting a high level of threat on one of the factors, eight cases led to a high level of repression in response (C2, C12, C16, C18, C30, C50, C57, C59), and seven cases led to a moderate level of repression (C9, C14, C15, C37, C45, C47, C53). Second, four cases presented the highest level of threat on two of the three factors. However, only one of those protests led to a response of heavy repression (C3), and one case

led to a moderate level of repression (C23). The other two cases led to little or no repression. Last, only two protest cases out of the 60 cases studied were categorized as the highest on all three factors, and interestingly, they led to not heavy but moderate repression.

Inconsistency in state repression

The second pattern found from the analysis is inconsistency in high-intensity repression. Bringing together the results of the matrixes in the previous section vertically, we see that even protests that explicitly challenged or threatened state actors or the political regime were not met with heavy repression. Yet, repression was practiced in some cases, even when protests seemed very unlikely to pose a threat to the party-state (See Figure 7.1).

To elaborate, many of the public protests in the data were spurred by anti-China sentiment due to the China-Vietnam territorial tensions and aggression over the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea (C4, C6, C7, C14, C17, C19, C23, C35, C54, C55). Patriotic sentiments gave the anti-China protesters morally high leverage – at least, enough for state actors to overlook their activities. Yet, the authorities eventually sought to contain the anti-China movement due to the alleged involvement of politically outspoken voices hostile to the Vietnamese party-state (Bui 2013: 92). When these protesters raised political claims challenging the legitimacy of the party-state's regime, the party-state applied multiple formal and informal strategies to hinder further collective action; for instance, blacklisting, temporary detention and house arrest of key figures, alongside the issuance of public warnings via state-owned media (Bui 2013). However, nationalistic anti-China protests caused the party-state to vacillate between the country's ideological and economic ties to China and the growing, continued popular grievances and demands (Vu 2014b). In this respect, the party-state does not want to see people harshly criticize the performance and leadership of the current political regime (Thayer 2014: 142; Vasavakul 2019: 45).

Across the cases, the protesters demanded that China stop its aggression in the disputed maritime territory. Most of these protests used peaceful means,

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particularly rallies and street marches singing patriotic songs and holding signs. However, they elicited different responses. No repressive force was reported in three cases: for instance, the Hanoi police watched a protest and gently asked them to leave the area of the Chinese embassy (C6, C54). In contrast, six anti-China protests ended in detentions and arrests (C4, C17, C19, C23, C35, C55).

On another topic, protesters gathered on a similarly large scale and used confrontational means, but with different consequences. In March and April 2015, around 500 people staged a series of protests against massive tree-cutting implemented by the Hanoi authorities. The protesters marched the streets calling for them to stop. The participants wore T-shirts and held up banners and pictures in support of preserving the trees. At first, in March 2015, the police allowed the march to continue, and the Hanoi People's Committee temporarily suspended the tree-cutting campaign to conduct an investigation and release clear information on the project (C24). However, in April 2015 when more than 20 people again took to the streets of downtown Hanoi in protest, the security forces broke up the gathering, and dragged the participants onto a bus (C25). Even though the overall protest topic and means were the same, the responses taken by state authorities were different. In an extensive case study of this protest case, Kwak (2019a) claimed that state authorities turned intolerant as criticism of the government became sharper and more distinct. Nonetheless, here again, the severity of the party-state's repression of public protest appears selective.

The same means of protest led to different intensities of repression in other cases as well. Four cases in which protesters took local government officials or police officers hostage to negotiate their demands (C5, 37, 47, 50) ended in different consequences. In one case, the police responded by beating the protesters (C50). In other cases, the military cordoned off the protesters, cut off their electricity and telecommunications services and local authorities moved in to detain several of the participants (C5) or they arrested and detained the protesters (C37, C47).

Grouping the repression practices employed into the same or similar types, the most common response taken by state actors was found to be on-the-

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ground penalties, particularly detention and arrest of protesters (C3, C4, C9, C11, C15, C17, C30, C37, C45, C47, C49, C57), with state actors framing the protesters as disturbing public order. Whereas the penal code stipulates that state actors shall use violence only if violence is the only option to capture law offenders, it is unclear whether the use of violence has in fact been exercised as stipulated in the law. Violent repression, leading to casualties, was commonly observed among the protest cases, for instance, with security forces opening fire on protest participants (C2, C16) and causing injuries by beating or clashing with protesters (C7, C11, C12, C18, C23, C30, C31, C42, C49, C57, C59).

As observed in the previous section, the public security forces have used force and heavy repression on protesters despite protesters employing non-confrontational means. Moreover, though the Vietnamese government has denied allegations of deploying plain-clothed agents, the involvement of such agents, or unidentified persons, has been reported by protesters and other witnesses. They are said to follow and observe protesters or to physically attack them alongside the police (C7, C12, C14, C25, C31, C45). The norms of preserving public order and the party-state's interest are definitive and prescribed across the central and subnational levels. Nonetheless, substantial space seems to exist for inconsistency in these norms' application in response to public protests on a day-to-day basis. Police have arrested protesters for alleged disturbance of public order, even when no laws were violated and protesters followed instructions issued by local authorities. For instance, seven drivers held a protest (C53) at the Pha Lai toll booth in the town of Chi Linh in March 2019, raising allegations of improper toll fee collection (*Radio Free Asia* 2019). Even though the protesters moved their camp off of public land to land used by one of the protesters following a request by local authorities, the police later arrested six of the seven drivers (*Radio Free Asia* 2019). Considering these deviations from expected outcomes, repression appears to depend more on the state actors' discretionary application of the narratives of public order and the state's interest, leaving relatively little assurance for the public that responses are informed by rules and laws.

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7.3 Conclusion

Despite being framed as extra-institutional and thus subject to state control, public protests have been staged by various groups of Vietnamese people across the country. To answer the question of whether and under what conditions a protest might provoke a repressive response by the party-state, this chapter presented a cross-case analysis concerning 60 protest events that took place in Vietnam between 2010 and 2020. I zoomed in on three elements of protests: scale, topic and means. Davenport (1995) found in a study of 53 countries that regime type is the most significant characteristic in explaining the different perceptions of threat and different degrees of state repression. Thus, I paid particular attention to associations between party-state endeavours to ensure regime stability and repression of public protest. A link was hypothesized between three characteristics, or factors, of protests and the extent of threat the protests were deemed as posing to the party-state's legitimacy and the interest of state actors. Protests posing a greater threat were expected to provoke a more repressive response.

The results of the cross-case analysis indicate an unpredictability and inconsistency in the relationship between protest features and state repression. The threat factors studied – large scale, politically sensitive topics and confrontational means – appear to have informed state repression to a certain degree, either individually or together. However, considerable deviations were observed among the cases, demonstrating unpredictability in the relationships between the three factors studied and the party-state's repressive responses. No stand-alone threat factor demonstrated sufficient validity to explain alone the relationship between public protest and state repression. I found that each threat factor was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to explain the occurrence of state repression. In other words, the threat factors studied did not explain the outcome of each protest case with regard to repression, and considerable deviations were observed on each threat factor. Nor could a uniform pattern be identified regarding the tipping point for repression.

Even protests exhibiting the same levels of the threat factors resulted in different magnitudes of repression; and heavy repression was found across

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protests with different levels of the same threat factor. Some protests on politically sensitive topics did not end in repression; whereas protests on considerably less sensitive topics, such as the environment, encountered harsh reprisals with force. The results of this chapter correspond to an argument by Pham et al. (2019) that when security forces practice repressive measures, their decisions are neither made transparently nor consistently applied across cases.

This cross-case analysis has yielded meaningful insights on the unpredictability of state responses to public protest in authoritarian regimes. At the same time, it leaves us with a question as to what factors are stronger than others in provoking state actors to respond repressively to protests. The results of this cross-case analysis confirm Davenport's (2007a) observation that state repression neither always occurs on a linear path nor is completely proportional to the intensity of the threat. From my analysis, I draw two conclusions.

First, public protest in Vietnam is framed as an extra-institutional repertoire of political action that is often subject to repression in inconsistently varying degrees. The three factors indicating the extent of perceived threat posed by a protest – scale, topic and means – did prove meaningful for gauging the consequences of the protest; but they were not decisive in explaining all incidences of state repression. Second, public protest in Vietnam carries a high cost of action due to the unpredictability of potential repression. While authoritarian regimes are explicit in pursuing regime stability through repressive responses to potential or actual threats to the regime, the findings in Vietnam's case indicate inconsistency and irregularity in practices of repression of public protests. The relationships found between characteristics of public protests and party-state repression in Vietnam confirm the presented hypothesis only to a limited extent.

8   The role of domestic and foreign actors

Now I direct my attention beyond state actors, looking into Vietnamese and foreign actors engaged in discourses of people's political participation. I raise the question of whether and how they play a role in creating a more inclusive political environment. In particular, this chapter studies three groups of actors: (i) mass organizations, (ii) social organizations and (iii) foreign actors (external development agencies and INGOs). This chapter draws on not only document research but also five months of fieldwork conducting interviews with experts working for mass organizations, social organizations and external development agencies.

Section 8.1 discusses the status and activities of Vietnamese mass organizations under the present political regime. I would highlight at this point that I separated mass organizations from the category of state actors discussed in Chapter 4 and placed them in this chapter for the analytical purpose of assessing whether they serve to encourage people's rights to participation. By synthesizing the expert interview data and the relevant literature, I identify the institutional status and characteristics of their activities in light of their contributions to promoting people's political rights and freedom.

Section 8.2 shifts focus to social organizations formed by like-minded citizens. Specifically, social organizations in this study refers to organizations that implement activities on social and political agendas, such as policy advocacy towards state actors. This study does not aim to make a mere assessment of whether social organizations are free or not, but aims to provide a more refined account of the relationship between social organizations and the party-state through the lens of the concept of civil society. Through document research and expert interviews, the analysis seeks to identify the scope of social organizations' performance and their limitations under the established political institutions.

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Section 8.3 focuses on the projects conducted by foreign actors in Vietnam related to promoting greater rights for political action. It investigates what foreign actors have done to promote better enabling conditions for people's political rights. Among the collected project data, the timeframe of this analysis ranges from 2005 to the present day. I first provide a descriptive account of some of the projects observed in this study. Then I present the findings of a thematic analysis of the projects, in order to identify recurring patterns across the projects and across the experts interviewed in the field. Although their economic and diplomatic stakes in Vietnam varied, I claim that these foreign actors have a shared understanding and objective in promoting democratic normative values in the name of external democracy promotion. I therefore use the term 'foreign actors' at an aggregate level in the thematic analysis.

This chapter concludes, in section 8.4, by answering the research question of how mass organizations, social organizations and foreign actors have engaged in promoting greater political opportunities for and repertoires of political action in Vietnam. As such, the chapter adds meaningful insights to scholarly discussions on the institutional conditions of civil society and external democracy promotion under a single-party regime.

8.1 Mass organizations

8.1.1 Unique identity under the Communist Party of Vietnam

Mass organizations have a long history in Vietnam. They were established by the Indochinese Communist Party – a predecessor of the CPV – to mobilize the people for fights for independence in the 1930s and 1940s (United Nations Development Programme 2006: 7). Due to confidentiality, I do not provide further specification of which organization they talked about. Setting them aside, many interviewees working in other affiliations (e.g., external development agency) just referred mass organizations as a general affiliation.

By nature, mass organizations are affiliated with the CPV. From a political perspective, mass organizations hold a unique position and exhibit character-

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istics not seen in liberal democratic countries. They have local offices in provinces, districts and communes, and their management is guided and subsidized by the CPV. With their extensive memberships across the entire country, mass organizations implement a variety of activities and projects in support of their members or a broader group of the Vietnamese people at both the national and local levels.

Mass organizations are distinguished by their anchoring in Vietnamese law and in Vietnam's own historical and political context. The Constitution, in Article 9, stipulates that the VFF is the political base of the government, represents the people's rights and interests, contributes to the manifestation of democracy and practices social supervision and criticism. In the Vietnamese political system, thus, mass organizations are formally recognized as a partner that government agencies shall cooperate with. The Law on Organization of Local Government (*Luật số 77/2015/QH13 Tổ chức chính quyền địa phương*) orders close cooperation between local governments and mass organizations in managing local affairs. Besides, Article 15 obliges local governments to provide information to mass organizations and to respond to their recommendations. Backed by such legal precepts, mass organizations are eligible to participate in and monitor policy processes to ensure that the people's opinions are reflected in policy decisions. Thus, they hold a unique legal status in representing the broad interests of their members and the wider populace.

8.1.2 A selective role as an intermediary between the party-state and the people

In addition to their authorized connections with the government, mass organizations have an intimate relationship with the populace. Mass organizations have diversified their role by becoming more actively committed to represent and deliver the opinions of their members, as metaphorically "an important entry point" of political participation (Bach 2014: 45). Mass organizations at the grassroots level nowadays have greater independence in their activities

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than in the past and are committed to supporting people to attain a better quality of life, particularly poor and marginalized groups (Nørlund 2007). Hence, the VFF has increasingly played a monitoring role in the performance of the party and state agencies and in providing suggestions or criticism. For example, when the mass fish death incident broke out in 2016 due to a toxic chemical spill by Formosa, the Prime Minister ordered the central and local governments to fulfil compensations paid by Formosa to the affected people in a transparent manner and that the processes were to be supervised by various segments of society, including the people, the media, the VFF and its member organizations ('Formosa Admits Responsibility' 2016).

In my fieldwork, several interviewees working for the government or mass organizations stressed that the party-state expects mass organizations to play a role as an intermediary between the party-state and the people.[41] An interviewee working for a democracy and law department at a mass organization (no. 40, vice director of a department) told me that one of their organization's missions was to keep the government in check and provide critical feedback on policies on behalf of the people. For instance, the organization held public consultations to elicit people's opinions about draft bills and requested responsible government agencies to revise such bills if these were found to be detrimental to certain groups, such as ethnic minorities. This interviewee said that their organization organized dialogues at which government officials and the people affected by a policy agenda were invited to discuss concerns together. An interviewee from another mass organization (no. 41, vice director of a department) reiterated that a citizen reception room had been established at the headquarters of their organization where any citizen – even those who were not members – could come to express complaints or discuss concerns. According to this interviewee, mass organizations often reach out to local people, elicit their opinions and report these back to the Party or state agencies.

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[41] The reference to multiple interviewees at an aggregate level here and hereafter is the outcome of my investigation of the expert interviews conducted during my fieldwork in Hanoi from October 2018 to February 2019.

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Due to their activities representing and advocating on behalf of people, mass organizations are sometimes positioned on the party-state actor side of an issue and at other times on the non-governmental actor side. Their scope of activity demonstrates the aforementioned diversification from their traditional role of mobilizing people, towards greater lobbying and advocacy for the interests of the people (Larsen 2011: 317).

Despite the suggestions of popular representation and diversifying roles, there are nonetheless views that consider the status and relationship of mass organizations vis-à-vis the Party unchanged (Wischermann 2013, Wischermann et al. 2015, Reis 2014). Thus, guaranteed by the Constitution and law, mass organizations mobilize and instruct their members to comply with laws and decisions of the ruling groups within the CPV and central government. Regarding the Law on Complaints, the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF) and its member socio-political organizations are responsible not only for receiving people but also for instructing people to strictly abide by the law, in accordance with the party-state's framing of political action in compliance with the formal channels and lawful rules. Indeed, the VFF's interactions with the public are limited to topics unrelated to political criticisms or opposition against the current CPV-led regime.

Similarly, mass organizations stand on the people's side only to the extent that their actions do not conflict with the organization's identity under the Party umbrella. A clear boundary is thus drawn in the scope of their activities. Mass organizations are far from what other liberal democracies label CSOs, taking into account their relationship with the Party. They report their activities to the CPV, follow its guidelines and take no action that criticizes or opposes the existing political regime. According to one interviewee (no. 40, vice director of a department), their organization had to report to the CPV when performing its role of monitoring policies and providing a consultation function for the government.

For the Vietnamese people, mass organizations are a platform with "a semi-democratic function" (Le Trong 2014: 176). While they allow people to express their opinions, these organizations are "the Party's ears" to mobilize and control society at every level (Le Trong 2014: 176). To ensure order and

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unity within society, the Standing Committee of the Central Committee of the VFF annually instructs VFF offices at every local level to maintain committed to propaganda and information dissemination to the public so as to ensure better awareness of and compliance with the given lines and policies of the party-state (Dinh 2021). For the CPV, mass organizations are an effective channel to deliver Party messages and mobilize the public to follow its decisions. At the grassroots level, the VFF makes the use of multiple means of propagation, which include loudspeakers, handouts such as leaflets, and mobile radios (Dinh 2021: 165). Besides, the VFF is the main functional body of the Party-led elections, demonstrating its contribution to the stability of the existing single-party regime. The VFF delivers the party-state's decisions and propaganda at the local level, helping with election activities and gathering opinions from within communities.

Many of my interviewees working for social organizations, external development agencies and INGOs claimed that mass organizations treated people according to the doctrine of the CPV, and therefore should not be interpreted as a Vietnamese manifestation of civil society. Mass organization activities were said to be confined to episodic concerns in people's everyday lives, not including working towards greater political rights or freedom for the people. Setting aside its organizational nature, their function and activities are hardly related to promoting individual or collective political rights and freedom. In other words, the VFF mostly advocates improvements with socio-economic development objectives, not political objectives. Thus, mass organizations' policy monitoring and advocacy on behalf of the people have remained limited to policies far removed from the politics of the single-party regime. Whereas mass organizations provide a platform where people can raise their opinions, they, by nature, serve to convey the commands of the party-state to the populace (Bach 2014: 43). In this respect, it is inappropriate to identify mass organizations as a venue where people have freedom to express opposition to and dissatisfaction with the political environment under the current regime.

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8.2 Social organizations in Vietnamese civil society

8.2.1 Activities under structural restrictions

Regulations in establishment and operation

The Constitution, Article 25, stipulates that Vietnamese citizens have the right to assemble and form associations following the law. In Vietnam, social organizations refer to non-governmental organizations which voluntarily self-manage and operate for non-profit purposes under Vietnamese national laws and their own respective statutes. Social organizations, in general, work with the aim of meeting legitimate interests of their members and participating in the management of government and society. Vietnamese social organizations have a presence in the legal and policy formulation process by submitting inputs to state agencies and representing the interests of society (Pham 2011; Bui 2013). Compared to decades ago, Vietnamese social organizations have greater freedom in their activities to some extent, but they remain vulnerable and can be discontinued by state authorities if deemed unacceptable (Wells-Dang 2014: 170).

Requirements to establish and operate an association in Vietnam stem from the state's "uniform management" of citizen-run organizations (Sidel 2008: 152-154). When like-minded people establish an organization, they are required to register and obtain authorization to operate. The Decree on Organization, Operation and Management of Associations (*Nghị định sở 45/2010/NĐ-CP Quy định về tổ chức, hoạt động và quản lý hội*) stipulates that the Ministry of Home Affairs (*Bộ Nội vụ*) is to evaluate and decide on issues of establishment or dissolution of a social organization when such organization operates inter-provincially or nationwide. When an organization operates within a province, the provincial-level People's Committee must approve its establishment. Applicants must complete paperwork in multiple to obtain an officially registered status, but in reality, the process is more one of gaining 'approval' from state authorities. It often takes up to 60 days to go through the process of establishing an association, which is much longer than the three days required to establish a private business (*Viet Nam News* 2016). The Law

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on Association has been drafted but never passed the National Assembly over two decades due to disagreement regarding several areas, including the degree of freedom and regulations over foreign aid. For instance, an argument was raised over the revision of the draft to constrain an association from receiving foreign aid if their activities are perceived as a threat to social order or political stability (*Viet Nam News* 2016).

Like other legal arrangements, the Decree on Organization, Operation and Management obliges associations to submit to the instructions and management of state authorities. Social organizations are required to be registered under the official state system, and their engagement in policy processes is limited to providing comments on policies through the formal channels (Le Trong 2014). Besides, the registration process is rigorous, as the authorities screen whether organization board members have oppositional political views or any potential for challenging the political regime (Wells-Dang 2014). Even after they acquire a permit, social organizations must report some changes in their operations (e.g., when a new leader is appointed) and submit an annual report to the competent state agency. Furthermore, activities deemed to pose a threat to public order, customs and conventional norms are prohibited. Thus, social organizations' scope of autonomy vis-à-vis state actors is structurally constrained by the formal political institutions.

Limited subjects and activities

The Decree on Organization, Operation and Management sets out the right of social organizations to engage in policy-related research, consultation and projects and to provide critical comments. However, an important phrase follows; that is, 'at the request of state agencies'. The topics on which social organizations can work are thus highly regulated and monitored, and state intervention and subsequent control remain prevalent. Indeed, the cost of explicitly advocating democratic norms is very high for Vietnamese social organizations. In a benchmark assessment of Vietnamese civil society conditions, Le et al. (2018) found that Vietnamese social organizations did not have sufficient freedom of association (2.16 points out of 5) or freedom of

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activity (2.58 points), and that they had limited impact in promoting human rights (2.94 points) due to self-censorship and party-state intervention in their activities.[42]

Under such constraints, few social organizations have functioned as watchdogs touching upon sensitive topics, such as corruption or the performance of state actors (Thayer 2009). As Spires (2011: 35) observed, not all CSOs work for democratic purposes in authoritarian states. The climate of fear leads Vietnamese social organizations to avoid explicitly confronting state actors (Fforde 2011), and some even contribute to reinforce the current political system rather than fighting for greater citizen participation (Reis 2014; Wischermann 2013). During the expert interviews, numerous people stressed that Vietnamese social organizations did not dare to speak out on politically sensitive topics because they were afraid of repercussions. Vietnamese social organizations still must struggle with the power of state actors intervening or imposing sanctions on their work. The rights of associations, therefore, cannot be said to include free, independent action affecting policies.

For example, one social organization interviewee (no. 24, a director) shared an experience in which a public dialogue on justice in the court system was shut down by the police on the day of the event. The police, moreover, contacted the university which employed a foreign professor who had been invited to deliver a keynote speech to discourage the professor from attending the dialogue. In another example, an interviewee from a social organization (no. 34, deputy-director) told me of repercussions of being involved in writing

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[42] The assessment is the result of a survey of 152 respondents and in-depth interviews with 30 people. For a measurement of the dimensions of civil society space, this study set up three components: social and cultural values that are related to the normative concept of civil society; civil society capacity to achieve the normative concept; and state regulation of civil society. A variety of the indicators related to these components are assessed on a five-point rating scale.

a report for the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). [43] When looking at the composition of the stakeholders that contributed information for the summary report submitted to the UPR, no Vietnamese organization was listed in the 2009 report; rather, the contributing organizations were foreign actors (e.g., Human Rights Watch). However, in the 2019 report, more stakeholders contributed, some of which were home-grown Vietnamese organizations. It is worth noting that even mass organizations (e.g., the Vietnam Farmer's Union and Vietnam Women's Union) got involved. Even though there some Vietnamese organizations presented a nuance defending the current party-state, arguing that human rights conditions have been improved, it is still noteworthy to see more vibrant engagement of Vietnamese organizations in raising voices on human rights violations and problems in Vietnam.

According to the interviewee (no. 24, a director of a social organization), many social organizations were active behind the curtain to disseminate the conditions of human rights in Vietnam to the international community making the use of Vietnam's third UPR. Almost 60 Vietnamese organizations got together to write the report and submitted it to the UNHRC and to the Commissions for Foreign Affairs under the CPV, which are the decision-makers on topics of international human rights. After submission, officials from the Ministry of Public Security came to the interviewee's office repeatedly over a period of almost six months, to interrogate him/her and make threats. The interviewee told me that the officials only stopped their harassment when he/she

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[43] The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a peer review of a member state by other member states every 4-5 years. Other member states, as the UPR Working Group, monitor the institutional status and violations of human rights of a target member state. The UPR is organized by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) with the objective of promoting human rights. The UPR consists of three documents: the national report of which information is submitted by the state under review; a compilation of UN information by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; and a summary report provided by other stakeholders such as NGOs, CSOs, academic institutions, and human rights activists. After a review of these documents, the final outcome report is released. It contains findings and recommendations. Vietnam went under review in 2009, 2014 and 2019.

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had insisted that the organization would report the behaviour to the UNHRC if it continued.

An interviewee (no. 45, coordinator, social organization network) explained that state actors responded differently, depending on how social organizations behaved and what subjects they raised. The government was said to take a more amicable stance towards social organizations that took non-confrontational approaches. In this respect, he/she claimed that a dialogue-oriented, step-by-step approach, although slow, was pragmatically the safer means to create greater opportunities in the political sphere in the long term. Several other interviewees working for social organizations mentioned a similar strive to form amicable relationships, even in formal dealings, in order to gain more chances to interact with and influence state actors. They also pointed out that many leaders or founding members of Vietnamese social organizations were retired senior officials from the state or Party apparatus, which was advantageous for making contacts, delivering opinions and affecting policies, because of their solid personal connections with government authorities.

Several interviewees working for social organizations claimed that civil society activities were welcome as an efficient service deliverer but were not tolerated in a role of promoting individual political rights and freedom. An interviewee (no. 10, officer, social organization) told me that their organization was specifically dedicated to corruption problems, and the government did not want to listen to any data they had collected or insights they had gained about the issue. This interviewee said that few chances were available to discuss such an agenda with government officials, and that all their organization could do was just to post its activities and research findings online.

Another interviewee (no. 38, programme officer, social organization) shared an experience interacting with the government. A ministry had invited social organizations including his/hers to solicit opinions on the revision of a law. Eventually, the government withdrew a specific provision in the law, following comments from the social organizations. According to him/her, this interaction was only possible because the topic raised was far from politically sensitive. In many interviews, state actors were said to ignore or dislike social

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organizations that raised sensitive subjects, as Marston (2012) suggested that discussions between state agencies and social organizations in Vietnam are more active when the subject does not involve political or economic interests of state actors.

8.2.2 Rare but ongoing political confrontation

Some social organizations have been outspoken in raising politically sensitive topics or criticizing the current regime, regardless of the structural and practical limitations and the risk of control. However, such political opposition and challenges form a marginal share of the diverse forms of civil society activities in Vietnam (Wells-Dang 2014). Nonetheless, there exist loosely organized forms of thematic networks and associations that connect like-minded social organizations to exchange information and take concerted action. For example, the People's Participation Working Group (PPWG) is a network of individuals and organizations formed to promote people's participation in local development policies and projects. Others include the Writers Association of Ho Chi Minh City, the Vietnamese Students for Human Rights Association and the Independent Journalists' Association. According to The 88 Project database, many of the people persecuted are members of these groups, which have often been targeted by state actors (The 88 Project, n.d.).

Politically sensitive demands have been raised by various groups among the Vietnamese people over the last decade, but never has this ended in substantive changes being made to the formal political institutions. In April 2006, the Manifesto on Freedom and Democracy was issued by 118 activists, religious leaders and intellectuals explicitly criticizing the authoritarian power structure led by the CPV. The manifesto also demanded democratic reforms towards a pluralistic, multiparty system. The key participants formed a political coalition, Bloc 8406 (*Khối 8406*), and the group expanded further using the means of online communication and a petition which thousands signed. As its presence grew more noticed, state authorities arrested dozens of members, and sentenced them to several years' imprisonment (Human Rights Watch 2011).

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In September 2013, more than a hundred intellectuals issued the petition titled Civil Society Forum *(Diễn đàn xã hội dân sự)*, calling for a peaceful transformation of the Vietnamese regime into a genuine democracy with respect for individual rights and freedom (*Radio Free Asia* 2013). That same year, the Brotherhood for Democracy was formed by human rights advocates. It publicized information on democracy and human rights and provided legal support to victims whose rights had been infringed because of corruption or land appropriation. Its activities were perceived as subversive, again resulting in the imprisonment of several members. The Facebook group is still active today, followed by more than 39,000 Vietnamese and international users.

Another notable example of collective political action is Petition 72 (*Kiến nghị 72*), concerning revision of the Constitution. The petition was submitted by a group of 72 intellectuals including a former Minister of Justice when the party-state announced a constitutional revision in 2013. The petition demanded greater democratic freedoms and requested compliance with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions, suggesting the adoption of values of the liberal democratic model (Bui 2013; Morris-Jung 2015a). The group sent a letter to each deputy of the National Assembly, and posted a draft proposal for the Constitution online in petition form, garnering more than 14,400 signatures (Wells-Dang 2014: 170). [44] While this collective action was high profile and gained a public character, the suggestions in the petition did not feed into the revised Constitution, and some members were arrested. [45]

Such institutional and practical conditions have led some social organizations to seek other strategies outside the formal political institutions. One of these is activities underground. Some social organizations working on politically sensitive subjects go unregistered, which enables them to maintain more autonomy in their activities. In a number of my fieldwork interviews, I heard

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[44] The full original letter is available at 'Toàn Văn Kiến Nghị 72' (2013).
[45] Note that there are different interpretations of the impact of these collective actions. A majority of the members of Bloc 8406 and Petition 72 were educated and white-collar and lived in urban areas or even abroad, which makes the networks alienated from representing the voices of a broad spectrum of the people (Kurfurst 2015: 140).

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about Vietnamese social organizations working underground and not making themselves officially known or registered.

One interviewee (no. 24, director, social organization) ran an unregistered network of activists. They told me that 'being unregistered' had both advantages and disadvantages. Despite their public awareness-raising activities on human rights and political freedom, the group had remained relatively free of the risk of facing a crackdown, since it did not officially exist; the members worked on an individual basis. On the flip side, the organization seldom had opportunities to voice its concerns to party-state representatives; nor could it implement donor-funded advocacy projects, as it does not exist in the state's registry. Indeed, without a formal status, unregistered organizations cannot officially implement policy advocacy or engage in policy-making processes.

A second strategy availed by Vietnamese individuals and organizations committed to working on politically sensitive topics is to build a network with the overseas diaspora or foreign organizations. The overseas Vietnamese community and people with Vietnamese heritage living abroad, chiefly in Australia, the United States and France, are usually outspoken in calling for regime change. They also tend to be more vocal in reporting on and criticizing human rights situations in Vietnam. By reaching out to this wider audience in the international community, Vietnamese activists interact with overseas residents and foreign nationals who are working for political change in Vietnam, exchanging information and performing advocacy activities together. Several such opposition groups, founded in Vietnam or abroad, hold no formal position under the Vietnamese formal institutions and are perceived as illegal by the party-state (Thayer 2009: 11-18). Table 8.1 provides a brief overview of some transnational groups actively working for political rights and freedom in Vietnam.

Table 8.1. Transnational groups working for political rights and freedom in Vietnam

Name (Base)	Objective/performance

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The 88 Project (United States)	- Raises awareness about and advocates for activists and political prisoners in Vietnam. - Provides news about human rights in Vietnam and activists at risk.
Vietnam Human Rights Network (United States)	- Promotes human rights in Vietnam and seeks international support through a global network of activists and organizations. - Provides support to activists in Vietnam.
Quê Me: Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (France)	- Promotes human rights in cooperation with civil society in Vietnam through presentations on the international stage (e.g., at the United Nations). - Provides support to victims of human rights abuses in Vietnam.
Vietnam Right Now (Web-based)	- Provides news about human rights in Vietnam through a transnational network of activists and organizations in Vietnam and beyond.
Viet Tan (Web-based)	- Advocates for human rights and liberal democracy and disseminates the status of human rights in Vietnam through a transnational network of ordinary citizens and activists in other countries. - Supports public political action (e.g., protests, petitions) in Vietnam. - Provides training for activists to enhance their capacity to lead change through non-violent approaches.

8.3 Foreign actors: External development agencies and INGOs

8.3.1 Overall profiles of activities

According to the OECD statistics (n.d.), $2.8 billion and $2.4 billion were officially contributed to Vietnam in 2018 and 2019, respectively, under the

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Creditor Reporting System (CRS) 1000 Total All Sector.[46] Of this sum, the amount of aid directly targeting democracy promotion was marginal. Gross disbursements for CRS 150: I.5. Government and Civil Society, Total, was $71.4 million in 2018 and $75.3 million in 2019. For the sub-code CRS 15150- Democratic Participation and Civil Society, the one most closely related to political participation and political rights, a much smaller portion of aid was disbursed: $8.2 million in 2018 and $12.7 million in 2019. This forms a very small percentage of the total aid amount provided, around 0.3% in 2018 and 0.5% in 2019. Nevertheless, it is still worth noting that foreign actors have been engaged in the agenda of participation and civil society in Vietnam.

While these numerical figures demonstrate small but noteworthy commitments of foreign actors, more specific details are needed on the projects that have been implemented in practice to promote greater political opportunities and rights in Vietnamese society. As outlined in the methodology discussion, in Chapter 3, I collected documents from external development agencies on 20 of their projects and subjected these to an in-depth thematic analysis.[47] First, I grouped the collected projects into clusters of similar modalities. Two major modalities of foreign actors' commitments were distinctive: (i) technical support for Vietnamese state agencies and (ii) grants to Vietnamese and foreign non-governmental actors.

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[46] In terms of tracking aid flows released by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), CRS provides overall data of commitments by donors for recipient countries. According to the OECD statistics (n.d.), the objective of the CRS database is "to provide a set of readily available basic data that enables analysis on where aid goes, what purposes it serves and what policies it aims to implement, on a comparable basis for all DAC members". Also, this amount includes not only the OECD DAC countries, but also bilateral, multilateral and non-DAC countries. The amount refers to gross disbursements, in constant 2018 US dollar prices. The data were accessed and retrieved on 23 April 2021.

[47] See Appendix 4 for the list of the projects.

Technical support to state agencies

A primary form of external democracy promotion is technical support, or short-term projects targeting state agencies. For example, the 'Good Governance and Public Administrative Reforms' (GOPA II) project, co-funded by the Government of Denmark and the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), with a budget of 60 million Danish Krone ($9.4 million) for the period of 2012-2015, had several pillars, including inter-parliamentary cooperation, joint seminars, short-term scholarships and training courses for National Assembly deputies and staff (Governments of Vietnam and Denmark 2011). Its main objective was listed as to increase awareness of democratic norms and capacity to integrate these into policymaking processes.

The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) provided a grant to Plan Vietnam to implement a project to strengthen grassroots democracy and civil society in Vietnam. The project targeted not only ordinary citizens but also state actors. With the objectives of promoting people's participation in decision-making and building Vietnamese civil society at the grassroots level, NORAD provided over $360,000 to implement activities in 2006 and 2007 (Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation 2007). To achieve this goal, Plan Vietnam provided training on the legal instruments and norms concerning people's participation for officials at the district and provincial levels, disseminated leaflets on the norm of grassroots democracy and carried out campaigns (Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation 2007). Thus, the project sought to raise awareness among local people of their rights to political participation and to influence local officials to practice the norm of grassroots democracy.

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Grants to Vietnamese and foreign non-governmental actors[48]

Grants to Vietnamese social organizations and to foreign CSOs have been one of the most common forms of support chosen by foreign actors. As a part of GOPA II, the 'Public Participation and Accountability Facilitation Fund' (PARAFF) was conducted in the 2012-2015 period. With the main goal of promoting participation and government accountability in law and policymaking processes, grants and technical assistance were provided to Vietnamese social organizations. In particular, PARAFF's priority in providing grants was clearly stated as organizations committed to monitoring legislative processes of the selected themes such as democratic governance (Governments of Vietnam and Denmark 2011). The support also covered research on citizen participation in policy processes, raising awareness among the supported organizations and their partners on this topic, monitoring and feedback on better participation, and accountability provided by social organizations to state actors, alongside networking of social organizations with state actors, such as deputies of the National Assembly and officials from other government offices. From an independent, mid-term review, it was found that this project had helped many Vietnamese organizations engage more actively in law-making processes.[49]

In a similar vein, the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF) has provided financial assistance to support Vietnamese social organizations (United Nations Democracy Fund 2014). From 2012 to 2014, the project entitled 'Civil Society Empowerment in Advocacy and Policy Development in Vietnam' was conducted to improve the capacity of Vietnamese social organizations to contribute to democratic policymaking processes and to network with state agencies (United Nations Democracy Fund 2014). With a budget of $175,000, the pro-

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[48] The projects covered in this chapter do not necessarily belong to CRS 15150. Information is not available that makes possible to identify which CRS code was labelled on a project.

[49] Sidel, M. and Q.N. Pham (2015) 'Technical Review of the Public Participation and Accountability Facilitation Fund (PARAFF)'. The report was obtained from an interviewee during the fieldwork and cannot be retrieved.

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ject supported 15 small advocacy activities run by Vietnamese social organizations. The project also conducted a training needs assessment and subsequently provided training for social organization staff (United Nations Democracy Fund 2014).

Also, the European Commission has implemented the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) scheme in Vietnam. This has provided grants for activities promoting civil society, human rights and fundamental freedoms in target countries. According to the 2018-2020 grant scheme, three areas of priority were specified: (i) protection and promotion of land and resource-related rights for ethnic minorities, (ii) promotion of abolition of the death penalty and (iii) promotion of information on human rights issues online (European Commission 2019). The amounts of the grants were large, ranging between €350,000 and €450,000 for projects of a 24-36-month duration. The grants were open to not only Vietnamese social organizations but also to CSOs in the member states of the EU that work in Vietnam, as long as they involved at least one Vietnamese co-applicant.

A similar modality was observed in the grant 'Strengthening and Supporting Civil Society in Vietnam', funded by the Department of State of the United States. This grant programme was open to US-based and foreign-based NGOs, public international organizations and other non-profit organizations to promote human rights, to support capacity development among Vietnamese CSOs and to advance transparency of the Vietnamese government. Foreseeing an implementation period between 18 and 36 months, the grant was open between $500,000 to $750,000 for one selected grantee organization (United States Department of State 2019). Its call for applications states explicitly that recipient activities should ideally be engaged in Vietnamese legal and policy reforms (United States Department of State 2019).

Limitations in activities

Any official development cooperation project planned by a bilateral or multilateral development agency and receiving more than a specified amount of

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finance must be submitted for review by the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI). The MPI exerts a tight grip on project activities through its power in aid fund allocation and management. Many of my interviewees said that it was very unlikely that an external development agency would get a green light for a project that included politically sensitive elements.

The party-state has responded to the increasing influx of INGOs by setting out the playing field to its advantage. Foreign NGOs face multiple regulations in their operation. The Decree on Promulgating the Regulation on Management and Use of Foreign Non-Governmental Aid (*Nghị định số 93/2009/NĐ-CP của Chính phủ: Ban hành Quy chế quản lý và sử dụng viện trợ phi Chính phủ nước ngoài*) stipulates the conditions and processes that foreign NGOs should comply with in project implementation in Vietnam. A project proposal should be submitted and assessed by the Ministry of Finance (*Bộ Tài chính*), the Ministry of Planning and Investment (*Bộ Kế hoạch và Đầu tư*) and other related state agencies. Projects dealing with policy, law, security or religion are subject to review and approval by the Prime Minister. Moreover, Article 33 of the decree authorizes the Ministry of Public Security (*Bộ Công an*) to supervise project implementation with an eye to political security and public order. Several interviewees in the category of foreign actors raised the problem posed by this decree, describing it as a bureaucratic as well as political constraint on their activities in promoting political rights and freedom.

As a structural intermediary to bind INGOs to the Vietnamese administrative system, the party-state established the People's Aid Coordinating Committee (PACCOM) under the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO). The main objective of the VUFO, which is a socio-political organization under the VFF, is to promote mutual relationships with people from foreign countries and to take charge of foreign non-governmental aid. Thus, PACCOM is responsible for facilitating relationships between INGOs and local state agencies or local partners and acts as a focal point and manager of INGO development projects at the national and subnational levels. Considerations of areas of operation, administrative registration, field visits, project implementation and partnering local agencies are managed by PACCOM. The

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party-state labels this as 'cooperation grounded on friendship'. Yet, at the institutional level, PACCOM is part of the framework for monitoring and guiding INGOs to ensure they operate within the boundaries favoured by the party-state (Salemink 2006).

According the Decree on Registration and Administration of INGO Operations in Vietnam (*Nghị định số 12/2012/NĐ-CP của Chính phủ: Về đăng ký và quản lý hoạt động của các tổ chức phi chính phủ nước ngoài tại Việt Nam*), foreign NGOs should submit an application to obtain a permit to operate in Vietnam. The government then assesses whether the NGO meets the requirements set by the Vietnamese formal political institutions. The Committee for Foreign NGO Affairs (COMINGO) is an assisting body to the Prime Minister related to INGO operations in Vietnam. COMINGO's members include high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other line ministries or agencies. Often being screened and interrogated by state authorities, foreign NGOs have no more autonomy than domestic social organizations.

One interviewee (no. 10, senior officer, INGO) recounted an experience in which they had submitted a proposal to establish an organization for research and advocacy on Vietnamese governance. After three years of waiting, the proposal was rejected without a clear explanation from the authorities. Judging by a series of questions and follow-up demands made by the competent agency, the interviewee concluded that the state authorities did not like the topic 'governance'. An anecdotal experience that I had during my fieldwork (Box 8.1) aptly demonstrates state authority intervention. The issue was the topic of an international conference, to which state agents objected.

Box. 8.1 Anecdotal example: Forced cancellation of an international conference

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During my fieldwork, I received an email invitation from a social organization to an international thematic policy discussion on the topics of transparency, accountability and anti-corruption scheduled for 8 December 2017. The event was co-organized by several domestic and foreign agencies, including a UN agency, INGOs and social organizations. On the day of the meeting, I arrived at the hotel in Hanoi to find the conference had been cancelled that very morning. The organizing committee, standing in the foyer, said that the presenters had not been able to come. When I glimpsed inside, everything was set up but the conference room was empty.

Several interviewees whom I met later were aware of this incident. They said state authorities had forced the organizers to cancel the event, putting pressure on the presenters as well. Several interviewees suggested that authorities might have perceived the topics of the event as too politically sensitive. One interviewee (no. 34, deputy-director, social organization) who was involved in organizing the conference told me that the government had contacted the organizers and required permission the day before the conference, mentioning the Prime Minister's Decision on Organization and Management of International Conferences and Seminars (*Quyết định số 76/2010/QĐ-TTG của Thủ tướng Chính phủ: Về việc tổ chức, quản lý hội nghị, hội thảo quốc tế tại Việt Nam*).[50]

That decision requires both Vietnamese and foreign actors to submit details on any planned international event related to sectors such as security, religion and human rights. To carry out such an event, permission must be granted by the Prime Minister. For events in other sectors, permission should be granted by the competent authority (e.g., a minister or chairperson of the provincial People's Committee). Among the details to be included in the application for permission are not only basic temporal and spatial information about the conference, but also participants, topics and funding sources. Article 5 of the decision stipulates that the conference shall be cancelled if the organizers do not follow this procedure.

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[50] In February 2020, it was revised with the same title (*Quyết định số. 06/2020/QD-TTg*).

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In practice, according to the interviewees, not every conference or event goes through the reporting process, and state authorities use 'the rule' as a card to play at their discretion. Even on similar or same topics, some conferences are tolerated whereas others are repressed. Interviewees claimed that this incident illustrates state authorities' inconsistent and arbitrary application of restrictive rules. In this case, several interviewees said that bilateral development agencies, including the embassies of their home countries, informally expressed regret to the Vietnamese counterpart about the forced cancellation, even raising the issue at a high-level dialogue.

Reflecting on previous civil society support experiences in Vietnam, Norway pointed out the limitations of Vietnamese social organizations in advocating on democratic subjects (Abuom et al. 2012). The EU described its most common approach for Vietnamese organizations as service delivery, saying that there was little space for them to play a role in policy advocacy in light of the constraints on civil society (European Union 2014). Since another active donor in civil society support, Sweden, noted that its pursuit of political and civil liberties remained at odds with Vietnam's one-party political system (Forsberg and Kokko 2008: 45), little change has been observed in the party-state's low level of toleration regarding topics of foreign actors' projects when these were related to political rights and freedom.

Among the expert interviews, several people in the foreign actor category said they often got frustrated with the discrepancy between their commitments and the lack of progress in the Vietnamese political environment, adding that state authorities resorted to coercion when their activities were perceived as undesirable from the party-state's perspective. One interviewee (no. 8, policy analyst, external development agency) stated that the termination of operation of several bilateral development agencies in Vietnam was in part attributable to the lack of change within Vietnam's formal political institutions, despite their continued inputs and support for change from within. This phenomenon reflects a value conflict between the party-state's rigidity in not changing its formal political institutions and the democratic values pursued by the foreign actors.

8.3.2 Thematic analysis: The activities of foreign actors

Using the expert interview data and documents on 20 projects of foreign actors, I performed a thematic analysis to identify what role the foreign actors played in promoting better conditions for people's political rights under the Vietnamese single-party regime. In choosing projects, rather than applying strict selection criteria, I sought projects on which sufficient information was available and the project objective was linked to democracy promotion. These might concern, for instance, political rights, freedom or civil society. My first analysis step was to review the data and codes I had initially assigned in line with theoretical discussions on democracy promotion. Being flexible in alternating inductive and deductive coding, I added new codes that emerged from the collected data. This process resulted in the final codebook for the thematic analysis (Table 8.2).

Table 8.2. Codebook for the thematic analysis of foreign actors' projects

Code	Description
Normative dissemination	Refers to the normative promotion of democratic norms, particularly political rights and freedom, including freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom of religion.
Participation in decision-making	Refers to participation of individuals or social organizations in making decisions on policies or projects that may affect their lives, including consultations and decision-making processes at the grassroots level.
Social organization support (civil society support)	Refers to financial or technical support for activities of social organizations in expectation of civil society development in Vietnamese society.
Institutional reform/change	Foreign actors directly and explicitly call for institutional reforms towards a (liberal) democracy.

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Diplomatic channels	Foreign actors make use of diplomatic channels (e.g., bilateral dialogue or international conventions) to officially promote democratic norms and values.
Direct intervention	Foreign actors take direct interventionist action to achieve their objective of democratic changes in a country.
Capacity building	Refers to awareness raising or capacity building of state actors, social organizations or a wider public within society about democratic norms (e.g., training or campaign).
Financial support	Foreign actors provide financial support (e.g., grant or budget support) to the government or social organizations to support initiatives aiming to improve people's political opportunities.
Interaction and cooperation	Foreign actors try to keep good relationships with both Vietnamese state actors and social organizations. They build rapport and implement projects in cooperative terms with the Vietnamese state actors, while continuing to interact with Vietnamese social organizations.

Next came distillation of salient and recurring codes into higher-node clusters, and finally into the themes. Figure 8.1 presents the resulting thematic map depicting the two main patterns, or approaches, through which foreign actors were found to have carried out their activities in Vietnam: non-confrontational approaches and informal approaches. These patterns and the underlying codes are elaborated below. Not every code in Table 8.2 was observed in the collected data. For example, it was found that none of the foreign actors studied intervened directly, such as by launching aggression by force, to achieve their goal of democracy promotion.

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Figure 8.1. The resulting thematic map: Approaches of foreign actors
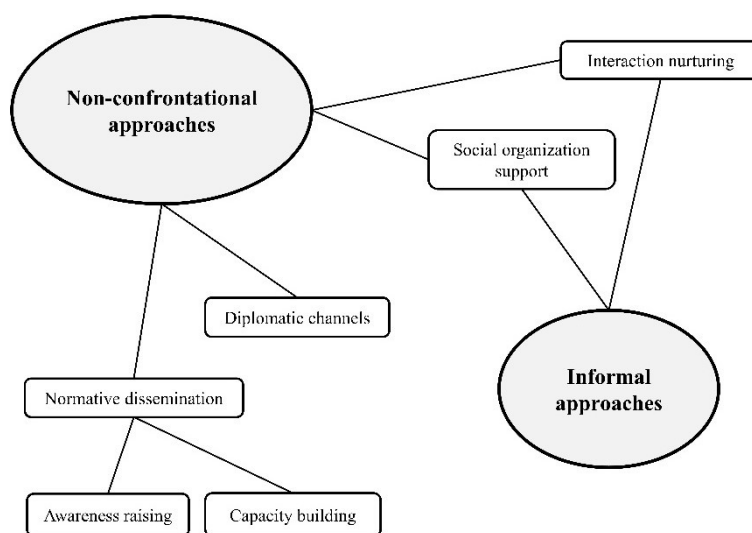
Non-confrontational normative approaches

In most of the projects studied, foreign actors took non-confrontational approaches in which a main method was dissemination of democratic norms and values to encourage state actors to adopt and respect these. Most foreign actors were more inclined towards normative dissemination than to confrontation or interventionist mobilization, such as increasing state actors' awareness of integrating democratic norms into their day-to-day responsibilities, or through indirect financial support, such as a grant to an initiative that could contribute to greater political rights and freedom. Capacity-building projects targeted different groups of state actors, ranging from deputies of the National Assembly to public officials in state agencies, as well as Vietnamese citizens. None of the projects sought to incite the Vietnamese people to take subversive action against the party-state. Several interviewees working for bilateral or multilateral development agencies said that their agencies tried to make the most of

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diplomatic channels, such as an international assembly or bilateral summit, to publicly request Vietnamese public officials and leaders to better respect democratic norms.

An interviewee in the category of state actors (no. 6, former ambassador/senior government official) said that the Vietnamese government was, in general, favourable towards and willing to build good relationships with foreign actors in development cooperation, except in two spheres: political institutional reforms and religious missionary activities. In this regard, foreign actors exhibited caution and were strategic in considering political sensitivities embedded in their cooperation objectives. Awareness raising and capacity building among state actors were the most common approaches of normative dissemination. Foreign actors rarely pushed democratic demands, such as a multiparty system or full-fledged freedom of association and assembly, as they were well aware that these norms were not favoured by their Vietnamese counterparts. Thus, non-confrontational approaches were in large part an involuntary choice, being an inevitable compromise between what foreign actors wanted to achieve and what was allowed in the given political context. In addition, several interviewees working in bilateral development agencies said that they had to take into account the economic interests of their home country vis-à-vis Vietnam.

Another finding from the analysis is that many of the projects of foreign actors sought to nurture interactions between social organizations and state actors. One interviewee (no. 33, specialist, INGO) stated that a widely used strategy was to invite public officials to workshops or policy seminars where they could discuss particular topics or policy directions together and provide evidence-based suggestions, such as survey results and field research data. By doing so, foreign actors expected that Vietnamese state actors would become gradually more familiar and comfortable with democratic norms in policy-making and policy implementation. Though it is hard to accurately measure outcomes in this regard, many of the projects in this analysis envisioned such increased awareness among Vietnamese state actors, particularly about the need to better integrate democratic norms and principles into formal state institutions.

In other cases, foreign actors provided financial support to create more opportunities for Vietnamese social organizations to actively interact with state actors. Dialogues and normative consultations are examples of such support. These were aimed not at forcing changes by applying external pressure, but rather towards generating a more favourable political environment for Vietnamese individuals and organizations to get involved and exert influence on state actors. One interviewee (no. 39, ambassador, external development agency) told me that his/her embassy took the approach of sharing international conventions with the Vietnamese government to point to areas that could be improved in Vietnamese formal political institutions. According to this interviewee, the Vietnamese government did care about being part of the international community and interacted with foreign actors, but he/she added, state actors became stubborn when foreign actors excessively raised politically sensitive topics, such as a multiparty system.

Foreign actors did target social organizations in their efforts to support Vietnamese civil society. Some projects aimed at raising awareness among ordinary Vietnamese citizens about their political rights. In these, Vietnamese social organizations often played a pivotal role as implementing agents, making use of their competencies in reaching out to people at the local level. One interviewee (no. 16, representative, international non-profit organization) emphasized that their organization did not try to provoke the Vietnamese government, but instead sought to promote the advocacy, research and consultation activities of Vietnamese social organizations within the given political system. Another interviewee (no. 44, programme officer, INGO) said that his/her organization did not pursue institutional change, but supported local social organizations to implement local-level outreach and awareness raising, particularly among marginalized and vulnerable groups (e.g., ethnic minorities). Topics of this work included people's right to identify problems in their lives, to raise their voice and to participate in local decision-making processes.

Many of the foreign actors in this study provided Vietnamese social organizations financial and technical support in which the expectation of civil society development was explicitly or implicitly embedded. Nevertheless, foreign actors were careful not to give an impression that their support might incite

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popular action, political contention or disruption. One interviewee (no. 42, programme officer, external development agency) explained that the party-state feared the concept of 'civil society' or 'CSOs', since it did not want to see an increase in demonstrations or other forms of collective political action in the name of a free and independent civil society. Notwithstanding the structural constraints and the watchful eyes of state actors, by supporting social organizations, foreign actors aimed to pave a way forward, towards a more active role for Vietnamese social organizations in policy affairs.

My thematic analysis revealed a tendency among foreign actors to attach values to their financial and technical support to Vietnamese social organizations. Their projects endeavoured to contribute to more active and resonant social organizations. Some of the projects investigated explicitly mentioned 'civil society development', and even projects that did not do so displayed nuances of a commitment to expand the scope of social organizations' activities. For instance, project objectives often entailed the expectation that social organizations would gain greater capacity and opportunities for meaningful policy engagement with less restrictions in the long term. To summarize, I found in their commitments to social organizations, and in their interactions with and support for these organizations, foreign actors conveyed the liberal democratic norms of civil society which foreign actors hope to see emerge in Vietnam.

Informal approaches

Informally nurturing interactions with state actors is the second main pattern, or approach, evident in foreign actors' activities in Vietnam. Informal practices function as either an increased cost or a strategic detour for foreign actors. Multiple interviewees commented that personal connections and even patronage benefits were crucial for project implementation. For instance, one interviewee (no. 20, director, INGO) told me that she/he, as a foreigner, had invested considerable time and energy in building rapport and becoming friends with influential counterparts, so that projects went smoothly. Cooperation with socio-political organizations was another means of rapport building

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mentioned by foreign actors. Several interviewees in the category of foreign actors said that they worked closely with the VFF and with other socio-political organizations on policy advocacy.

One interviewee (no. 8, policy analyst, external development agency) said that their agency worked closely with the VFF in order to obtain permissions and smooth project implementation – although few VFF officials were supportive of cooperation with foreign actors. Another interviewee (no. 37, governance programme assistant, INGO) stated that their organization tried to make the most of the unique status of socio-political organizations. Considering that the VFF can reach out to local people and elicit public opinions, their organization had conducted a project supporting local VFF officials to improve their capacity to monitor government performance more transparently and to implement appropriate policy advocacy to the government.

Another interviewee (no. 20, director, INGO) argued that local government officials tended to be more favourable and responsive to projects from which they could expect benefits, such as a promotion or financial gain. They recounted a situation in which officials indirectly demanded extra money as a bribe. Another interviewee (no. 21, director, INGO) shared a similar experience in which local government officials requested 20% of the total project budget as a so-called 'commission'. One interviewee (no. 42, programme officer, external development agency) noted that conference organizers sometimes had to give money to local police officers in order to be able to organize a conference without a surprise crackdown at the scene of the event. Although they resisted or sought to rectify such corrupt or unjust behaviour, the aforementioned interviewees said that giving in to these informal practices was often inevitable, in order to carry out their activities.

At the same time, foreign actors did support Vietnamese social organizations behind closed doors and outside the formal procedures. These practices were not formally documented but raised repeatedly during the expert interviews. One interviewee (no. 11, head of department, external development agency) described informal support provided by his/her embassy. When a social organization approached them to discuss their activities and plans related to promoting civil society or democratic norms, he/she, as decision-maker,

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could allocate a small support grant, for instance, for an activity to raise public awareness of political rights.

Some Vietnamese groups supported by foreign actors went unregistered, as did networks of dedicated activists working on politically sensitive topics, defying the state's control. As discussed earlier, one interviewee (no. 38, governance project officer, INGO) claimed that unregistered organizations had substantial flexibility in working on sensitive issues, but they lacked a powerful enough presence to demand change from the government. While individuals and groups working outside the conventional framework may have more freedom, they also bear limitations on their activities. Therefore, unregistered groups' extra-institutional identity and activities bring both advantages and disadvantages.

Another interviewee (no. 39, ambassador, external development agency) told me that their embassy informally interacted with individual Vietnamese bloggers and activists to keep informed of pressing problems and public demands in Vietnamese society. In addition, an interviewee (no. 24, founding member, social organization) from an unregistered group described a secretive way of cooperating with foreign donors. One of the group members received money from a foreign donor on a personal bank account and spent it for the organization's activities. Another interviewee (no. 45, coordinator, social organization network) mentioned that his/her network had received a small amount of funding from foreign donors to avoid the bureaucratized control of state authorities. These informal practices thus provide an extent of relief from the established formal rules and processes, giving Vietnamese and foreign actors some room to work on agreed goals together. However, these informal modalities remain sporadic and episodic.

8.4 Conclusion

Mass organizations, social organizations and foreign actors have different backgrounds and approaches, and each plays a very limited role in promoting greater political rights and freedom for the Vietnamese people. Mass organizations provide an easy-to-access platform where the Vietnamese people can

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express opinions concerning day-to-day problems. However, people cannot rely on mass organizations as genuine civil society actors, as within them, they cannot express critical political opinions and expect mass organizations to represent them. Mass organizations operate under and aim to deliver on the instructions of the CPV. The party-state expects mass organizations to convey community voices to the Party and state authorities and bring the Party's commands to the local level. Even though mass organizations have diversified their activities, they hardly guarantee people opportunities to express themselves or act freely. These organizations therefore do not promote greater opportunities for political action within the Vietnamese populace but serve as the grassroots foundation of the CPV-led political regime. Mass organizations are, by nature, far from the domain of civil society.

Activities of the Vietnamese social organizations seem conceptually to belong to the domain of civil society. However, these organizations by and large operate under structural constraints emanating from the current political institutions. In other words, the scope of their activities hinges upon the government's approval and response to them. They can engage in policy processes or advocate policies when they are tolerated by state actors. Also, the scope of their activities varies depending on how they work with state actors and their ties to state actors. Social organizations are not free from the watchful eyes of the party-state. This has led social organizations to take divergent approaches to continue their activities within the given structural limitations.

Political engagement of social organizations can take the path of either low-key policy advocacy or politically outspoken engagement. Some social organizations are politically outspoken, release critical statements regarding the current single-party regime and spread information about the party-state's violations of political rights. As Wischermann et al. (2016) observed from a study of organizations in authoritarian regimes, including Vietnam, social organizations cannot be characterized into a single fixed type that either challenges or reinforces the authoritarian regime. However, in Vietnam, confrontations and outspoken opposition expose social organizations to a high risk of state repression. The structural constraints are a critical impediment to the scope of social organizations' activities, which illuminates the dynamics of a

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constrained civil society domain which is common across authoritarian regimes.

The approaches taken by Vietnamese social organizations demonstrate the properties of a compromised civil society under authoritarian rule, labelled in previous research as 'rightful resistance' (O'Brien 1996), 'semi-opposition' (Linz 2000), 'regime-loyal opposition' that does not stand against authoritarian control, and 'tolerated opposition' to the extent that it is tolerated by the authoritarian regime (Albrecht 2010: 21). There are Vietnamese social organizations that engage in "embedded activism". That is, they endeavour to gain legitimacy from state authorities and engage in policy change by taking a collaborative approach in cooperative relationships with local government or the VFF rather than disobeying given institutions (Vu 2019).

From the thematic analysis, I found that most engagement of foreign actors followed two patterns: (i) non-confrontational normative dissemination and (ii) informal support to social organizations. Regarding the first, foreign actors attached importance to normative dissemination and availed of financial and technical support to raise awareness among state actors. This path does not yield quick outcomes, but it is widely regarded as a safer option to preserve relationships and thus continue working towards the goal of nurturing enabling conditions for greater political freedom in the long run. Foreign actors' commitment to disseminating democratic norms stems from their conviction that state actors and citizens will become increasingly comfortable with the values of political rights and freedom and thus recognize the need to adopt democratic norms themselves. Foreign actors hardly deviated from the given political system, and their status and role conceptually and empirically has boiled down to a low-key agent of normative promotion.

Regarding the second pattern, foreign actors formally and informally supported Vietnamese social organizations and activists. However, such support has generally reflected foreign actors' expectation of a contribution to the development of a Vietnamese civil society. Most, if not all, foreign actors made a pragmatic compromise between their normative ambitions and the Vietnamese political realities, and adapted to the given formal political institutions. Rather than targeting the general Vietnamese citizenry, the foreign actors in

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this analysis tended to target social organizations to help them play a more active and independent role in civil society, to help them effectively raise voices for a common cause or engage in policy change. In this respect, foreign actors provided informal support to Vietnamese social organizations working on advocacy, campaigning and research committed to promoting greater political rights and freedom in the expectation of civil society development.

The research question posed in this chapter was how have Vietnamese mass organizations, social organizations and foreign actors engaged in promoting better conditions for political action in Vietnam. Overall, I see little chance of institutional changes led by social organizations or foreign actors anytime soon, considering the strategic positioning observed among many actors, which sought to avoid confrontations with the party-state and focused on policy advocacy and normative promotion. At most, Vietnamese social organizations and foreign actors can be characterized as low-key mediators in promoting greater political rights and freedom. Nevertheless, their commitment to normative promotion cannot be overlooked and their influence on the formal political institutions remains to be seen in the longer term.

9   Analysing regime stability strategies and the realities of political action

The previous chapters investigated the formal and informal institutional conditions within Vietnam and the various forms of political action tolerated, constrained and repressed. Moreover, the roles of three types of domestic and foreign actors involved in this realm were investigated: socio-political (mass) organizations, social organizations and foreign actors. Now it is time to gather the findings from the chapters and synthesize them into an analytical conclusion.

This chapter consists of four parts. First, in section 9.1, I theorize the Vietnamese party-state, focusing on identifying how it maintains the single-party regime. As an analytical point of departure, I adopt Gerschewski's (2013) three pillars of stability – legitimation, repression and co-optation – to elucidate the party-state's strategies and practices towards the goal of regime stability. Moreover, I expand the notion of co-optation to include not only the circle of state actors but also critical voices raised within society, to make sense of how authoritarian regimes respond to these.

Second, in section 9.2, I connect the party-state's approaches and practices towards regime stability with the dynamics between popular political action and the party-state's response. By applying the conceptual classifications of political action to the empirical findings, I identify the ranges of toleration and repression resulting from the party-state's strategies and practices towards regime stability. Section 9.3 then interprets the scope of Vietnamese civil society and links it to the activities of Vietnamese and foreign actors. I discuss how and why the three types of players have had such a limited role in promoting greater political rights and freedom in Vietnam.

Section 9.4 concludes the chapter, answering the overarching question running throughout this dissertation: "How and under what conditions have the

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Vietnamese people been tolerated and/or repressed in taking various forms of political action under the Vietnamese single-party regime?"

9.1 Theorizing the party-state: Hegemony and regime stability

9.1.1 Legitimation through structural rigidity

The hegemony of the CPV in Vietnamese politics can be illustrated by referring to Gerschewski's (2013) observation that political power in authoritarian regimes is generally monopolized by the closed group of the ruling elite and not evenly shared across wider strata of society. As elucidated in Chapter 4, the CPV derives its political legitimacy from the Constitution and other laws that formally authorize *de jure* and *de facto* the single-party regime. The law's formalized assurance of the status of the CPV is the basis of the Party's dominance as the country's sole leading political force, enabling it to exercise its influence over state management and policy implementation.

At this point, the distinction between legitimation (as a process for obtaining legitimacy) and legitimacy from the public (as an outcome of the public's recognition of rulers as just and acceptable) merits emphasizing. As discussed in Chapter 2, Buchanan (2002) observed that legitimacy and legitimation do not always go hand in hand. Legitimacy depends on whether the authority claims of incumbents are accepted by those who are affected by their ruling. While the party-state seeks to generate and maintain the legitimacy of the single-party regime, its legitimation strategies have mainly been oriented towards justifying its ruling and enforcing laws and orders rather than public consent.

Vietnam's diversified means of legitimation demonstrate similarities with the accounts of authoritarian regimes by several scholars, such as Burnell (2006), Dukalskis and Gerschewski (2017), Gandhi and Przeworski (2007) and von Soest and Grauvogel (2017). Dukalskis and Gerschewski (2017) enumerated four institutional tools of autocratic legitimation: (i) indoctrination, (ii) public passivity, (iii) socio-economic performance and (iv) democratic-

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procedural institutions. From the investigations of formal and informal political institutions in Chapters 4 and 5, I found that each of the tools proposed by Dukalskis and Gerschewski (2017) was present in the party-state's legitimation strategies. The Vietnamese party-state has used all of these strategies. Moreover, its formal political institutions are sufficiently strong to self-justify the single-party regime. Indoctrination and propaganda through school curricula, publications, and media illustrate the party-state's power and capacity to generate public consent or at least acquiescence to the regime's ideology and narratives. The nationwide reforms and spectacular economic growth, accompanied by better living standards, are another source of legitimacy that is grasped by the party-state in pursuit of regime stability. In addition, several aspects of informal politics contribute, intended or otherwise, to the legitimation of the current regime. As the data from the Asian Barometer Survey demonstrates, presented in Chapter 5, hierarchal relations between state actors and the people are widely established in Vietnamese society, seemingly leading many people to accept the current system of rule.

Dukalskis and Gerschewski (2017) observed that authoritarian regimes use pseudo-democratic institutions to generate mass consent to their rule. The party-state seeks legitimacy through strongly controlled election processes involving meetings with constituencies, high turnout rates (reaching nearly 100%) and, of course, the dominance of CPV members among those elected. For example, the rationale of the party-state in holding and winning elections lies mainly in demarcating public consent and thus in reinforcing legitimacy through formalistic means. Though elections are not competitive, the party-state holds them every five years, winning almost 100% of the vote. The party-state uses such electoral wins to signify the CPV's authority and to solidify its political legitimacy. My argument aligns with Magaloni and Kricheli (2010: 129), who claimed that autocratic regimes seek to win elections, albeit noncompetitive, with high turnouts to "generate an image of invincibility" of the regime and a sense of unity in society. Schedler (2002), similarly, attributed manipulated competitive elections to authoritarian regimes' pursuit of legitimation.

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Table 9.1 presents a matrix of Vietnam's political legitimation as practiced by state actors on behalf of the regime or generated in society. In my analysis, the party-state's legitimation is inherently a form of self-legitimation and still lacks genuine public consent, as it is not primarily generated by constituencies through just and fair competition. This seems to make the party-state feel insecure with popular criticisms of the political system. The potential for such doubt or criticism motivates state actors to take repressive measures in response to individuals and groups that express political opposition or condemnation, perceiving them as a threat to regime stability.

Table 9.1. Vietnam's mechanism of political legitimation

Political institutions	Institutional instruments	Objectives and (expected) consequences
Formal	The Constitution and legal documents guarantee the status of the CPV as the singular leading force in society Elections (process and result) Indoctrination and propaganda through schools, media, and publications	Justification of the rule of the CPV-led, single-party regime Reinforcement of (un)critical public support and acceptance of the single-party regime
Informal	Patriarchal relations between state actors and the people Emphasis on communal (the state's) interest	Internalization of public acceptance Discouragement of criticism or opposition to the party-state

9.1.2 Diversified scope and intensity of repression

Chapter 2 referred to Tilly's (2006) two variables for localizing the interplay between a regime type and contentious political action: (i) governmental capacity to control the populace, activities and resources; and (ii) the degree of democracy, or in other words, the extent that the public has the right to affect

the government and freedom from oppressive action by the government. Characterizing regimes by whether they have low or high values on these two respective variables, Tilly (2006: 25-27) produced a conceptual quadrant. Applying this quadrant, I place Vietnam in a zone of 'high governmental capacity' and 'nondemocratic'. Indeed, the Vietnamese party-state has demonstrated the institutional capacity to control society, whereas, at the same time, people's political rights are insufficiently protected. However, I argue that there are discrepancies between the robust set of institutional instruments formulated to control society and the exercise of the set of rules in practice, which is diversified and unpredictable.

Regarding a state's choice for repression, Davenport (2007b) suggested that a state, regardless of regime type, chooses repression by weighing its costs and benefits. However, a tipping point of repression is reached earlier in authoritarian regimes than in democratic ones since the former is often politically motivated to practice repression by its goal of regime stability. Chapter 2 discussed the contributions of several scholars, including Albrecht (2010), Gershenson and Grossman (2001) and Tilly (1978), who stated that authoritarian regimes respond to popular political action by weighing the costs of toleration and of repression in light of regime stability. In authoritarian regimes, weak or absent mechanisms of vertical accountability make it hard to hold state actors responsible for their repressive measures, even if people experience these as unjust.

In Vietnam's case, state actors do not respond with repression to every critical voice and action among the populace. Mobilizing the necessary human resources for this would be too costly for the party-state and risk public backlash. In her research on repression, Earl (2011: 275) emphasized the importance of analysing how various control mechanisms used by authoritarian regimes connect and reinforce one another. Following Earl's (2011) suggestion, I examined multiple institutional instruments and practices of Vietnamese state actors, connecting these to the broader context of the authoritarian regime.

The hegemonic power of the CPV works in two ways. First, the domination of the party-state lowers its cost of repression, while increasing the people's

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cost of political action, through society-wide means of pre-emptive control such as institutional constraints, censorship, and surveillance. Institutional constraints can further be divided into overall suppression of individual political rights and freedoms and constraints to the establishment and operation of social organizations. Thus, the party-state uses a comprehensive set of restraints on both individual and collective political action in order to nip any threat to the party-state in the bud, before dissent can blossom into a more severe form of political action that is harder to control. Equipped with the well-organized hierarchy of the state management system and with surveillance penetrating virtually every corner of the country, state actors have enough power and resources to detect popular political action, formulate it as a threat, and take a repressive response.

In a case study of China, Huang (2015) found that propaganda was used as a signal to forewarn the public of the regime's strong power to suppress opposition and maintain political order. The Vietnamese party-state lends support to this claim, in that propaganda here aims not only to indoctrinate people as part of regime legitimation but also to cultivate fear and dissuade people from initiating political action against the party-state. Indeed, Vietnamese propaganda conveys a message of the party-state's firm willingness and power to control society while justifying single-party rule and decrying criticism of the present political regime as illegitimate. The cultivation of fear through direct and more nuanced forms of repression is sufficient to demoralize the people, leading them to feel that they lack the capacity and power to influence state actors. According to data from the 2015 Asian Barometer Survey, presented in Chapter 5, almost half of the Vietnamese respondents did not feel capable of participating in politics. The cultural emphasis on communal interests, and possibly in the broadest sense, the state's interest, nurtures passivity, discouraging people from raising critical or oppositional voices.

According to Le Trong (2014) and Hai (2019), the party-state is willing to listen to public demands and criticism, but its response is selective and mainly centred on the preservation of the current political system. At the same time, as elucidated in Chapter 6, more targeted repression is practiced against specific, politically outspoken individuals and groups. The party-state makes the

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most of the official public security forces and is said to clandestinely hire thugs to intimidate and threaten targeted persons. Online it uses opinion shapers to shepherd public opinion. Organizations with expertise in political rights and freedom, such as Human Rights Watch and The 88 Project, have consistently claimed that the security forces, and even plain-clothed agents, make surprise attacks on individuals who are merely planning to join a protest or post a commentary on their social media.

Chapters 6 and 7 presented examples of pre-emptive and proactive moves by Vietnamese state actors, taken under the auspices of laws, to control people's political action. These ranged from psychological intimidation to imprisonment. Combinations of such countermeasures were found to be the dominant form of repression used by the Vietnamese regime. The cross-case analysis of protest events, presented in Chapter 7, demonstrated that a variety of repressive measures, including detention, arrest, and physical harm, have been practiced against those who joined in protests – though the subjects of many of these protests had little to do with political demands for regime change.

Thus, by combining society-wide and targeted repression, the party-state constantly forewarns society and penalizes political criticism and opposition. Table 9.2 presents the dual layers of society-wide and targeted repression, utilizing institutional and extra-institutional means, as practiced by Vietnam's state actors at national and local levels.

Table 9.2. Vietnam's mechanism of repression

Means	Society-wide repression	Targeted repression
Institutional	Institutional constraints on individual political rights and freedom Institutional constraints on establishment and operation of social organizations Censorship of media, publications, and online content by	Taking an individual in for questioning and interrogation House arrest, detention, and imprisonment by imposing criminal charges

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	competent governmental agencies	
Extra-institutional	Mass surveillance across the country using a network of local informants and, allegedly, plain-clothed security agents	Secretly monitoring targeted persons/groups Intimidation, threats, and physical abuse by allegedly plain-clothed security agents or government-hired thugs

9.1.3 Dual co-optation: Within state actors and public critical voices

Within the circle of state actors

Though this study does not intend to compare Vietnam to China, my argument is in line with Abrami et al. (2013) who found in their comparative analysis of Vietnam and China that Vietnam's institutional arrangements were more oriented towards power-sharing among political leaders. This sharing of power was characterized as a balanced collective leadership through a 'diffused troika' of the CPV General Secretary, the President, and the Prime Minister, though with an increasing checks-and-balances function of the Central Committee of the CPV vis-à-vis the Politburo. In the Vietnamese case, leadership turnover takes place within the party's inner circle, leaving the basic foundation of power-sharing intact. Rather than political power being concentrated in a single person, shared leadership is institutionalized in Vietnam and facilitates "patronage politics and the cultivation of a loyal following" (Abrami et al. 2013: 258).

In terms of regime stability, the party-state needs to minimize the possibility of elite conflict and ensure internal cohesion within the circle of state actors. The Vietnamese party-state seeks unity within the circle of state actors, particularly the ruling elite, by sharing political power and privilege. This finding conforms with the positions of several scholars, such as Gandhi and Przeworski (2007), Kailitz and Stockemer (2017) and Svolik (2012). Though there are variations in perspectives and orientations on certain agendas within the circle of state actors, the Vietnamese political regime constantly seeks to generate

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its legitimacy at the central and local levels based on shared values and ideological belief in the CPV-led single-party regime. This aspect supports Kailitz and Stockemer (2017), who argued the significance of legitimation for regime durability, particularly within the group of the political elite.

Non-competitive elections and the dominance of the CPV members in the National Assembly and other state agencies have enabled the CPV to maintain solidarity and exchange benefits. Non-CPV members can be nominated and elected as National Assembly deputies or members of the People's Council, but every candidate is screened by the National Election Commission and the VFF before the election. Therefore, Vietnamese election processes and results are quite predictable, since candidates who are not aligned with the CPV are filtered out through a multi-step process of preliminary assessment. The pre-electoral processes enable the Party to have little concern about losing an election, as they lower the risk of intra-circle rebellion, such as legislators forming a subversive network to stand against the CPV or attempting to seize power.

As discussed in Chapter 4, decentralization has been implemented in Vietnam, but autonomy given to subnational state actors remains fragmented. In principle, the organized hierarchy of state management makes state agencies accountable to the equivalent-level state agency and to their higher-ups, with horizontal and vertical accountability institutionalized in laws. Central-level state actors hold on to sufficient power to exert influence over appointments and dismissals of local state actors. On the other hand, scholars have pointed to a discord in behaviour between state actors at the central and local level (Gainsborough 2010; MacLean 2013; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Vasavakul 2019; Vu 2014a; Vu 2017; Waibel and Benedikter 2014; Zingerli 2004). Some affluent provincial governments have acquired more controlling power in managing their regions, adjusting, or even bypassing, instructions from Hanoi. Therefore, contradictory aspects of the centralized political system and deviations in discretionary behaviours of local state actors are worth noting in understanding the complex dynamics between the central and local state actors.

Nevertheless, it has little impact on the common goal of sustaining the single-party regime. Regardless of their administrative level, state actors are committed to working for the interests of the party-state. Loyalty to the CPV

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is codified in law as an obligation, which structurally binds state actors to CPV membership and to following the Party's directives. State actors at any level who fail to meet the loyalty requirement are subject to penalties including dismissal from office. The institutionalized hegemony of the CPV and the co-optation mechanism combine to reinforce state actors' loyalty to the existing political regime, which neutralizes intra-party conflicts. The persistence of the CPV in affecting the formal political institutions aligns with the claim by Brownlee (2007), Geddes (1999), and Magaloni (2008) that a ruling party powerful enough to secure elite cohesion is essential for the endurance of authoritarian regimes. Vietnam also illustrates the observation of Magaloni and Kricheli (2010) that the single ruling party shares power and provides rents to Party cadres so that they choose to cooperate with the regime instead of attempting to overthrow it.

In addition to formal political institutions, informal politics and practices influence perceptions and practices of state actors, as presented in Chapter 5. From the party-state's perspective, patronage provides useful toolkits for transferring monetary and non-monetary gains to state actors within the existing political regime, in the expectation that this will lead them to be less motivated to seek regime change. Being a CPV member itself does not necessarily guarantee perks or financial rewards, but it does create a high chance of accessing privilege and benefits in work and in personal life. Therefore, the CPV generates incentives for loyalty and distributes spoils, reducing the likelihood of intra-party subversive attempts. Moreover, public officials and representatives of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) conspire to exchange financial benefits from land acquisition and compensation processes, as discussed in Chapter 5 (e.g., Dang et al. 2020; Le 2019; Nguyen 2017; Nguyen 2020; Vuving 2010). These practices take place behind closed doors and remain prevalent in Vietnamese politics, serving to co-opt the business elite into the circle of the ruling elite.

These features of the Vietnamese informal conventions align with Gandhi and Przeworski's (2007) observation that a political party under a single-party regime provides access to power or incentives to those who follow the party, which brings about the prevalence of patronage. By making the most of both

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the formal political structure and informal politics, the Vietnamese single-party regime reduces the risk of a political split or conflict within the circle of state actors. Thus, despite occasional discord in policy implementation between lower and higher echelons of state actors, no serious intra-elite conflict or coup has been observed in Vietnam, as few of the actors involved strive to break away from a common goal of the status quo and are committed to ensuring endurance of the current CPV-led regime.

Co-optation of popular discontent

Even though I theorize the Vietnamese party-state as a powerful actor with sufficient institutional resources and capacity to generate political legitimacy and to practice repression for ensuring the stability of the single-party regime, I note that the Vietnamese regime does not use its iron fist at all times. The party-state co-opts public critical voices through pseudo-democratic institutions to neutralize them. This finding aligns with work by several scholars, such as Dukalskis and Gerschewski (2017), Dimitrov (2013) and Gandhi and Przeworski (2007), who investigated the co-optation strategies used by authoritarian regimes, such as setting up formal institutions for eliciting opinions and demands from society. Based on an extensive study of all authoritarian regimes in the 1946-1996 period, Gandhi and Przeworski (2007) argued that authoritarian regimes set up nominally democratic institutions not just for window dressing but rather for their political survival.

Advancing their insights with reference to the Vietnamese case, the party-state can be said to listen to public opinion through its formal political institutions and in pursuit of its own ends. First, the party-state framework is geared to detect political dissent and potential seeds of public unrest that might otherwise go unnoticed until they become harder to control. Repression and co-optation are trade-offs which the party-state balances to lower the cost of a potential popular political action. Second, the party-state is adept at generating an impression of inclusiveness and responsiveness to the public, which may be conducive to public acceptance of its rule. Third, the party-state can effectively depoliticize political action by absorbing it into the given channels and

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routes. As Henry (2012) theorized from a case study of Russia, as noted before, the complaint-filing process in Vietnam demobilizes people by limiting complaints to those made by individuals and by framing collective action as extra-institutional. Fourth, the institutionalized routes and rules give the party-state a basis for justifying control of political action that is deemed illegitimate, under the banners of public order and the state's interest. In Vietnam today, as in other authoritarian regimes, official channels, and legal instruments of accepting public opinions are by nature nominally democratic and built on the firm objective of sustaining the single-party regime.

While the co-optation strategy is mainly buttressed by formalized channels and rules, informal politics is another prevalent framework for dealings between state actors and the Vietnamese people. As discussed in Chapter 5, the Vietnam Corruption Barometer reports that the Vietnamese people recognized corruption as a pressing problem, but at the same time, many people paid bribes to public officials – either voluntarily or reluctantly. Thus, informal contacts and bribery practices are another widespread means of interaction between state actors and the people in addressing concerns, rather than more formal forms of political action such as the filing of a complaint at a government office. Table 9.3 summarizes Vietnam's mechanism of co-optation, within state actors and the wider society.

Table 9.3. Mechanisms of co-optation

Political institutions	Within state actors	With society
Formal	· Non-competitive election systems managed by the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF) under the leadership of the CPV · The ruling troika system and collective decision-making apparatus (the Politburo and the Central Committee) · An extensive network of CPV members and little separation of powers · Loyalty to the CPV prescribed in the law	· Laws on filing complaints and denunciations · Ordinance on grassroots participation in local decision-making
Informal	· Corruption, patronage and preferential favours for one another	· Corruption and informal contacts for problem solving in day-to-day lives

9.2 Asymmetry in the ranges of 'tolerated' and 'controlled' political action

9.2.1 A narrow range of toleration

Chapter 2 introduced the decision tree by Theocharis and van Deth (2018a: 65) for classifying five forms of political participation: (i) institutional participation within the given sphere of government or the state, (ii) participation targeting the government or the state, (iii) participation targeting specific problems or community issues, (iv) participation motivated by a circumstantial context and (v) participation that expresses a personal political aim or intention. Despite this classification not being tailored to authoritarian regimes, but rather, centred on the context of democratic rule, I employed this framework to more systematically identify the various forms of political action and

the different ranges of toleration and control in the Vietnamese setting (Table 9.4). In my argument, the dividing line between toleration and repression is not completely fixed. Therefore, the party-state's expected responses should be considered as likely rather than certain.

Table 9.4. The nexus of political action and the party-state response

Modes of political action	Examples of political action in Vietnam	Expected party-state response
Type I (within the formal locus of politics)	- Casting a vote - Filing a formal complaint to a government agency or National Assembly deputy - Submitting a formal opinion on a draft bill via the government's web portal - Attending a grassroots meeting organized by local authorities	Encourages and promotes this mode of political participation
Type II (not taken within the formal locus of politics, but targets government, politics or the state)	- Participating in a protest against a government decision on unjust land management - Releasing an online statement on social media calling for the government to strengthen law enforcement against corruption	Likely to repress when state actors perceive either or both of the following: (i) the action incites others or acquires a public character (ii) its topic or approach involves criticism, opposition or challenge to the party-state
Type III (not taken within the formal locus of politics, but aims to solve collective or community problems)	- Participating in a village initiative to clean up the river due to increased waste.	

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		(Main rationales: public disorder, distorted information and against the state's interest)
Type IV (not targeting the government, politics or the state but expresses personal concerns to raise awareness)	- Using hashtags or sharing a Facebook post supporting anti-domestic violence campaigns to raise support	
Type V (expresses personal political aims or intentions)	- Sending an email about ethnic minority issues to friends	

Note: Theocharis and van Deth (2018a) used the term 'political participation', in their decision tree, whereas I use the term 'political action' in the present study.

In addition to this conceptual decision tree, I used the 'ladder of citizen participation' by Arnstein (1969) to identify different degrees of power embodied in different forms of political action in Vietnam. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this presents eight different 'rungs' of participation according to how much power people have to influence decisions. The rungs are, from low power to high power, manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control.

Table 9.4 presents the array of forms of political action found to be available to the Vietnamese people. People can file a complaint to a People's Committee or raise their opinions at public meetings organized by local authorities. The chance of toleration is the highest in Type I, which is the institutionalized form of political action. Chapter 6 discussed the legal obligation of state agencies to establish a citizen reception office and to duly receive and respond to

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public complaints. The party-state encourages people to submit formal complaints as well as to vote, identifying these as legitimate forms of action. Availing of these as a form of political action also falls into a relatively safe scope of toleration for people. That is to say, these lower the cost of political action, as the risk of repression is relatively low.

Yet, I would argue that in the Vietnam context voting is situated on the lowest rung of Arnstein's ladder of participation; that is, manipulation. Under conditions where candidates are vetted beforehand, and only one party is printed on the ballot, casting a vote can hardly be understood as part of the repertoire of genuine political action. Indeed, it cannot be said to have the function of holding the CPV to account or demonstrating the people's confidence in the Party. From the citizens' perspective, voting is no more than a passive, manipulated form of political participation orchestrated by the party-state.

Other forms of political action in Type I, such as formally submitting an opinion to a government official or attendance at a grassroots consultative meeting, are situated on a slightly higher rung, but they remain tokenistic, somewhere in the range of informing, consultation and placation. Public consultative meetings are intended to provide people an opportunity to express their voices, but there is no guarantee that their opinions will be seriously considered by state actors at the central or local levels. As explicated in the previous section, institutional arrangements for receiving comments and opinions are oriented towards the party-state's co-optation mechanism, placating people more than maximizing the exercise of their rights to get engaged with state affairs. Moreover, Chapter 6 examined the so-called 'grassroots democracy ordinance' (the Ordinance on the Exercise of Democracy in Communes, Wards and Townships). This ordinance stratifies the extent of local people's participation into four categories: (i) 'content to be publicized', (ii) 'content to be discussed and decided by the people', (iii) 'content to be commented on by the people before being decided by competent authorities' and (iv) 'content to be supervised by the people'. In the ordinance, local people are treated either as a one-way recipient of information or as a pool from which to solicit opinions while leaving final decisions in the hands of state actors.

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Even though people voice their opinions within Type I, which seems to be the zone of toleration for political action, any subjects that touch upon the political system, disturb public order or infringe upon the party-state's interest are deemed unacceptable. The pre-structured channels and regulations thus allow people to take political action in a tightly controlled manner, limiting the scope of political action that is permissible. In this regard, Vietnam is similar to China, which similarly allows a domain of toleration, to a limited extent, and represses those who take political action outside of that domain (Cai 2008; Chen et al. 2016; Göbel 2021; Yuen and Cheng 2017). Therefore, the tolerated zone of political action cannot be construed as fully-fledged political rights but as tightly rendered with boundaries predetermined by the party-state.

9.2.2 A wide and comprehensive range of control

People bear an increased risk of repression when political action crosses beyond the line of Type I. The range of 'controlled' political action is much wider than that of 'tolerated' political action. Referring back to Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation, the rest of the types of political action (see Table 9.4) seem to be situated on a higher rung than placation, but they still do not reach the level of citizen power. Type II, III, IV and V, in Table 9.4, do bring higher cost. State actors are likely to take a repressive response when they perceive that people's action incites others or acquires a public character or that its topic or approach involves criticism, opposition or a challenge to the current political system.

In Vietnam, people have carved out an avenue on blogs and social media to more actively exchange political opinions and express their views. Thus, Internet-based political action has enriched the repertoire of political action available to the Vietnamese people, particularly in Type II, III, IV and V. Theocharis and van Deth (2018a, 2018b) argued that such online avenues have become a variant of political action in modern politics. With regard to other authoritarian regimes, scholars such as Bellin (2012), Breuer et al. (2015), Han (2018), Khondker (2011), Ruijgrok (2017), Tucker et al. (2017) and Yang

(2009) have examined the emerging role of online political action within the authoritarian context.

However, I would argue that Internet-based political action neither lowers the cost of people's action nor guarantees them more political freedom than offline. Other scholars, such as Huang and Yip (2012), Lewis (2013), Lynch (2011) and Wolfsfeld et al. (2013), presented similarly cautious interpretations of the impact of online political action in authoritarian regimes. It should also be noted that online political action still falls under the tight surveillance and control of state actors in Vietnam. Cyber welfare forces detect and silence online dissent, framing the propagators as people with 'wrong' views, criteria of which are intrinsically political. People who criticize policies or leaders on the Internet are often taken in for interrogation, intimidated and even imprisoned.

When investigating patterns of political action and state repression, I referred to the threat hypothesis on state repression, as discussed by scholars such as Davenport (2000, 2007a, 2007b), Earl (2003, 2011), Earl et al. (2003), McCarthy et al. (2007) and Lee (2013). According to these authors, regardless of regime type, state repression is more likely to occur when a state perceives an action as a threat to the regime. My cross-case analysis of protest cases, in Chapter 7, found that even public protests with the same or similar characteristics incurred different levels of repression; and vice versa, state actors repressed actions that seemed far from political criticism or causing disruption in the public space. In addition, state actors did not always respond repressively to public protests that presented one or more threat factors, though these were theoretically assumed to be a trigger for state repression. I argue that the party-state perceives not only obviously aggressive or disruptive behaviours, but also political criticism or opposition, as a threat.

On the other hand, vaguely defined terms such as 'public disorder', 'abuse of political freedom' and 'against the state's interest' offer state actors much leeway to formulate narratives of public order and the state's interest in alignment with their political goal of regime stability. Ultimately, the acceptability of political action hinges upon the interpretation and application of institutional conditions at the discretion of state actors. Supporting this reasoning,

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Edel and Josua (2018), Slantchev and Matush (2020) and Tilly (2006) suggested that politicizing these normative discourses is a property of authoritarian regimes; they frame political opposition as a threat or as a source of disorder in their own terms so as to maintain the existing political order.

As elucidated in Chapter 6, a wide array of Vietnamese laws and other legally binding documents define particular types of political action as illegitimate. Vietnam's case demonstrates the nature of authoritarian regimes in severely controlling politically critical opinions and demands in the name of national stability. The politicized criminalization of political action has been a study topic among various scholars dedicated to other authoritarian regime cases, such as Edel and Josua (2018), Ilkhamov (2005), Yan (2016) and Yuen and Cheng (2017). Albeit varying by case, the party-state's criteria of choosing repression converge into the uncompromising goal of maintaining the status quo. In this regard, repressive measures are justified by discourses of public order and the state's interest, which are shaped in alignment with the party-state's goal of regime stability.

Whereas the party-state responded to the perceived threats in a repressive manner, apparently by equating public order or the state's interest with regime stability, the findings of this study demonstrate that the politicized norms are not always invoked in a consistent way; therefore, repression does not take place in a uniform form and degree. Moreover, informal practices such as personal connections with the CPV or government officials also play a notable role beneath the surface of Vietnamese politics, albeit not always being a panacea to make a dissident or a protester free from arrest or imprisonment. As discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, some of those who critically denounce the government in public space or online have not yet faced heavy-handed detention or imprisonment. On the other hand, there were others who were arrested only for joining a street march calling for a solution to polluted water in their region. Inconsistent and discretionary enforcement of the set of rules, therefore, render people more vulnerable in exercising political action and settling on repertoires therefore.

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In Vietnamese politics, disturbing public order refers not only to unjust or physical inconvenience caused to other members of society or properties. Criticism of the government or the CPV can also be labelled as a criminal offense, under the charge of inciting public disorder, standing against the state's interest or abusing political freedom. Indeed, the unpredictability embedded in the repression of state actors serves to insert doubt about whether an action will be tolerated or not. This makes people cautious and thus serves to limit popular political action.

9.3 Limited civil society and the role of non-state actors

9.3.1 Associational activities under an asymmetrical relationship

To more specifically understand the role of Vietnamese social organizations at the institutional level, I borrowed the five stages of the state's treatment of civil society activities proposed by Hadenius and Uggla (1996). At the lowest degree of autonomy, stage 1, civil society activities are not tolerated, the state being hostile to them. Next is stage 2, indicating a condition where the state loosens its tight grip on power and allows some social, economic or political space for civil society organizations to play. I argue that Vietnam stands between stages 1 and 2. Although the party-state tolerates social organizations to a certain extent, it neither provides institutional structures nor envisages them as an independent actor engaging in policymaking or decision-making processes.

On paper, the party-state guarantees citizens the right to form an organization as codified in the Constitution. However, there is a wide discrepancy between the rights as written in legal terms and as exercised in practice. Registration applications for organizational establishment are screened by competent state agencies, and state actors monitor and intervene in such organizations' activities even after their approval. In addition, social organizations are seldom treated as a counterpart or partner in policymaking and policy implementation; they are rather a subject that is to obey. In the context of institutional restrictions and risk of repression, Vietnamese social organizations have an opportunity to choose either cooperative or confrontational relations

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with the party-state, but many of them end up on the safer path of non-confrontation. This is consistent with Wischermann et al. (2015), who found a strong influence of the party-state's institutional and discursive powers over social organizations. Previous scholars on Vietnam's civil society, such as Salemink (2006), Thayer (2009) and Wischermann et al. (2016), also observed the precarious identity of Vietnamese social organizations, due to the weakly defined boundary of Vietnamese civil society entangled with state surveillance and control.

Chapter 2 referred to a proposition by Froissart (2014), Lewis (2013) and Lorch and Bunk (2017) on authoritarian regimes' strategic use of civil society for legitimation and stability. Lorch and Bunk (2017), in particular, identified five patterns in which authoritarian regimes use civil society for legitimation purposes: civil society (i) as a façade of a pluralistic democracy, (ii) as an actor playing under limited given rules of the game, (iii) as co-opted participants, (iv) as actors contributing to socio-economic achievements and (v) as a supporter reinforcing the regime's historical or ideological legitimacy. This insight was useful for this study's understanding of the role of Vietnamese non-state actors under Vietnamese politics.

Regarding Lorch and Bunk' last pattern, civil society 'as a supporter reinforcing the regime's historical or ideological legitimacy', mass organizations play a pronounced role in relating Vietnam's historical narratives, in turn, contributing to reinforce the CPV-led single-party regime. However, identifying mass organizations as an intermediary between the party-state and the people may lead to a misperception of mass organizations as Vietnamese versions of CSOs. Indeed, even when mass organizations assert their presence in social or economic affairs, I found that they served as a vehicle for reinforcing the current single-party regime, notwithstanding their engagement in receiving people's voices and transmitting comments on policy on behalf of the people. They thus contribute little to expanding people's political rights and freedom. I would argue that mass organizations do not endeavour to bring about any change in the existing formal political order, nor to deliver people's political demands. Ultimately, mass organizations still serve the sole purpose of rein-

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forcing the current single-party regime, standing as part of the party-state machinery. In this respect, mass organizations should be recognized as the Party's grassroots foundations rather than as an agent of change creating the civil society space in terms of political commitments to greater political rights and freedom in society.

In Vietnam, there is no genuine free and independent civil society, as the boundary between the party-state and civil society is not clearly demarcated. However, I have found that the Vietnamese associational life is thriving in its own way. Registered or unregistered social organizations pursue a collective goal and make concerted efforts to be heard by government. From the expert interviews, I found Vietnamese unregistered groups and networks are vibrant today, informally conducting a wide range of activities to promote a politically more open society. This stands in alignment with the argument made by Wells-Dang (2014) that formally registered organizations and loosely connected or informal groups and networks thrive in the sphere of Vietnamese civil society.

The party-state allows social organizations to play only within the given set of institutional restrictions and bureaucratic frameworks. It selectively interacts with them as a strategic co-optation partner to create an impression of responsiveness, while not allowing them to challenge its political legitimacy. The party-state makes use of the concept of civil society by enforcing constraining rules within formal political institutions ('structural dominance') while allowing social organizations to fill gaps left by state actors having insufficient resources to meet public needs, particularly in the field of socio-economic development ('accommodation') (Koh 2006; Le Trong 2014).

My conclusion from examination of the role of social organizations corresponds to the claim by Bui (2013) that the party-state co-opts civil society by manipulating the political institutions to its advantage towards the goal of regime stability while maintaining structural hegemony in control of civil society activities. In this regard, Vietnam's case confirms the claim by Lewis (2013) that authoritarian regimes tolerate associational activities as long as they help the stability of the state, but they severely control counter-discourse activities by framing them as a threat to the existing regime. The party-state

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does not allow social organizations to enjoy a high level of autonomy, and practises structural and *de facto* control over social organizations so as to prevent the development of social organizations which, from the party-state's perspective, could be harmful or disturbing to regime stability.

9.3.2 Foreign actors expecting civil society development

Levitsky and Way (2010) suggested the concepts of 'Western leverage' and 'linkage to the West' to understand the degree of stability of authoritarian regimes and the role of Western democratic donors.[51] When applying this concept to Vietnam's case, however, caution is warranted. First, Levitsky and Way (2010) characterized 'Western leverage' as a regime's comparative vulnerability to pressures from the Western democratic regimes and the latter's influence on changes towards greater democracy. Second, 'linkage to the West' refers to a regime's social and economic interdependence and connection to the Western democratic regimes. As Vietnam has opened its social and economic doors to the international community, Vietnamese citizens and public officials are nowadays more likely to be exposed to democratic norms.

Despite increased external pressures and interactions with other liberal democracies, the Vietnamese party-state has drawn a clear demarcation between socio-economic exchanges and reform of political institutions. The party-state has benefitted from many projects built by foreign actors on liberal democratic principles. However, the single-party regime has not collapsed and indeed has proven resilient to external democracy promotion. In this regard, my argument accords with the position articulated by Nguyen (2016b), who suggested that the resilience of the Vietnamese single-party political regime overrides the commitments of foreign actors and Vietnam's linkage to them.

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[51] In 'linkage to the West', 'linkage' is multidimensional, including six dimensions: (i) economic linkage (e.g., trade, investment); (ii) intergovernmental linkage (e.g., diplomatic ties); (iii) technocratic linkage (e.g., the ruling elites studied abroad); (iv) social linkage (e.g., immigration, travel); (v) information linkage (e.g., the Internet); and (vi) civil society linkage (e.g., relationships between local and international non-governmental organizations) (Levitsky and Way 2010).

The politicized rules of public order and the state's interest which apply to Vietnamese individuals and organizations are applied to foreign actors without exception. Like domestic organizations, foreign organizations face low-intensity forms of repression such as regulations imposed on their operations, surveillance and subtle interference in their activities. The commitments of foreign actors that endeavour to promote political rights and freedom are constrained by the multiple regulations imposed on foreign actors by the party-state, which leads foreign actors to make pragmatic compromises. Hence, there remains a gap between foreign actors' desired impact on the Vietnamese political environment and the role that they can play under the restrictions imposed by the single-party regime.

Their commitments neither directly target the political legitimacy of the Vietnamese single-party regime nor contribute to institutional changes to better guarantee people's political rights and freedom. The thematic analysis in Chapter 8 demonstrated that foreign actors in Vietnam have refrained from interventionist approaches in promoting people's political rights. Foreign actors shifted their emphasis away from direct intervention for changes in the existing political structure or system. Rather, their commitments boil down to normative dissemination and awareness raising among state actors and social organizations. When applying the list of different levels of interventionist approaches in democracy promotion, presented by Schraeder (2002: 219-220), the activities of the foreign actors working for Vietnam are mainly concentrated on low-level interventions.

On the other hand, foreign actors' support for social organizations demonstrates their expectation that Vietnamese social organizations will facilitate the development of a civil society in Vietnam, functioning as a catalyst for increased public awareness of political rights and demands for a more inclusive political environment. In addition, support for social organizations by foreign actors explicitly or implicitly indicated their expected role in leading initiatives of monitoring legislative and policy implementation and conducting advocacy activities to feed into policies.

Moreover, I found from the interviews that a majority of the foreign actors invested their energy and resources in building positive working relationships

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with state actors at the central and local levels. Many held policy dialogues and conferences and invited government officials to exchange thoughts. Sometimes, their endeavours led them to, directly or indirectly, be pushed to pay bribes or give favours to officials in charge of their project. On the other hand, there were foreign actors who said they voluntarily made use of informal paths to provide financial and technical support to unregistered groups or individual activists without presenting this on the surface.

In summary, the majority of the foreign actors studied neither sought to directly force state actors to transform towards a liberal democratic regime nor incited Vietnamese citizens to challenge the current single-party rule. They want neither to endanger their operations in Vietnam nor to provoke the Vietnamese state actors. This leads them to avoid anti-state colour in their projects and mostly maintain amicable relationships with counterpart agencies. In Vietnam's case, however, I argue that the normative and non-confrontational activities of foreign actors are not the consequence of their negligence of the Vietnamese political context but of their strategically tailored commitment to compromise with the Vietnamese context.

9.4 Conclusion

In my view, the Vietnamese party-state has sufficient human resources, a staunch institutional setting and the capacity to sustain its regime because it makes strategic use of its various institutional instruments to reinforce its political legitimacy, repress political opposition, ensure intra-party cohesion and absorb public dissent into its formal political institutions. Holden (2008) claimed that a state sets the institutional boundaries of what is permissible or prohibited. Also, Franklin (2009) and Goldstone and Tilly (2001) maintained that a regime makes strategic choices by calculating the cost of either toleration or control. Figure 9.1 summarizes the triangular relationship between the three pillars of regime stability under the authoritarian regime of Vietnam.

Figure 9.1. The triangular relationship between the three pillars of regime stability
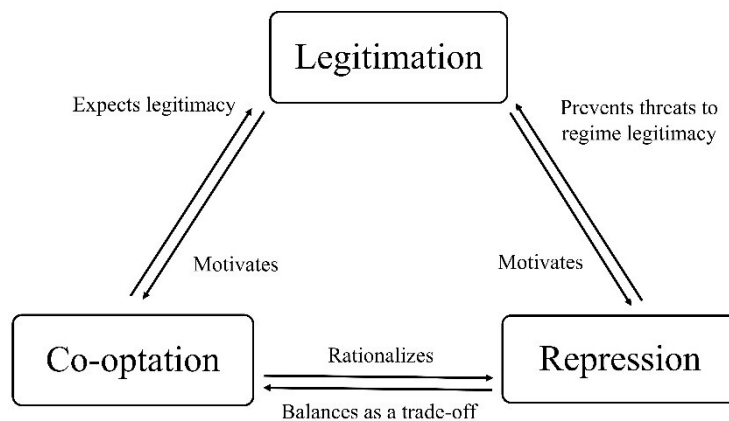
The combination of legitimation, repression and co-optation produces varying ranges of toleration and repression in regard to the party-state's response to political action, and the three pillars of regime stability are mutually reinforcing. To solicit and maintain its political legitimacy, the party-state co-opts state actors and public demands. In Vietnam, the party-state has indeed set to its own advantage the political institutions and conditions under which people are tolerated to take political action. The party-state provides nominally democratic channels and processes to listen to public voices, as a trade-off to avoid subversive movements or insurrection due to too-heavy repression.

In parallel, its commitment to legitimation drives state actors to exercise repressive measures towards political criticism or rebellion if these are deemed as contravening the legitimacy of the single-party regime. Having said that there are formal channels for the Vietnamese people to make their voices heard, these opportunities should not be misunderstood as an immediate sign of Vietnam's change towards a more pluralistic, inclusive political regime. The legal documents regarding reception of people's complaints or allowing the people's engagement in grassroots decision-making serve as a tokenistic instrument for channelling popular dissent into formal political institutions

and nipping in the bud more serious political action that would be harder to control.

Equipped with a powerful government structure and Party apparatus, with restrictive institutional instruments, Vietnamese state actors hold enough dominance to exercise control over people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action. Indeed, the party-state's influence and surveillance penetrate virtually every corner of the country. Considering a claim made by Johnston (2005), that opportunities for and repertoires of political action which people can choose are influenced by the political system, Vietnamese individuals and groups can take political action, but the bottom line is that they hold little leverage to exert influence on the CPV or other state actors.

Co-optation via the formal channels and rules for expressing opinions and demands puts the regime in a better position to legitimate its repressive responses to political action outside the established institutions. The exercise of deterrence and control can be justified by the legally binding documents which dictate that inciting regime instability or public disorder is subject to repression. The party-state's interlinking practices of legitimation, repression and co-optation leave the people with a limited scope of political action available.

On the other hand, there are discrepancies between the robust political institutional arrangements for regime stability and variations in terms of the party-state's responses to popular political action. While the pillars of regime stability appear to be firmly established in Vietnam, they often manifest in inconsistent and unpredictable directions, as state actors make discretionary interpretations and applications of the politicized norms of public order and the state's interest when they respond to popular political action. Besides, personal connections, patronage and crony networks between state actors and businesses, or incompliance of local authorities which deviate from instructions from the central level, add to unpredictability in the party-state's behaviour towards popular political action. The boundary between what is tolerated and not tolerated, as well as the intensity of a potential response, derive from choices that are ambiguous in practice, as they depend in large part on the discretion of state actors. People's intention or objective in their political action matters little; rather, the interpretation by state actors is decisive in the

choice of toleration or repression. In other words, pre-emptive and reactive responses by the party-state are mainly propelled by how state actors perceive people's political action.

My findings in the present research suggest that unpredictability is a key aspect of the party-state's practices that constrains popular political action, as it is hard for Vietnamese individuals and groups to know whether and when any particular action might lead to repression and punishment. Under such conditions, Vietnamese people who take political action walk a tightrope between being tolerated and being repressed, making both opportunities for and repertoires of political action precarious.

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10 | Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the conclusions of the present study. I answer the main research question and provide meaningful insights with regard to research in the realm of authoritarian politics. Situating Vietnam's case in the literature on authoritarian regimes, section 10.1 relates the findings of the present study to the previous literature, in addition to highlighting key aspects of this study that may contribute to future advances. Section 10.2 considers connotations of the findings of this study, presenting the limitations of this work and its implications for future research.

10.1 Reflections for the literature: Vietnam as a typical case

In the study of authoritarian regimes, Brownlee (2007) insisted that an investigation of political institutions is crucial to understand the behaviour of state actors and the substance of authoritarian regimes' survival. In agreement with this assertion, I set out to explore the relationship between political institutions in the Vietnamese single-party regime (both formal and informal) and popular opportunities for and repertoires of political action (both collective and individual). This study sought to answer the following main research question: '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 gave rise to five sub-questions (see Table 1.1).

All of the findings taken together suggest an answer to the main research question. In Vietnam, people have limited opportunities for and repertoires of individual and collective political action. Such action is tolerated within a restricted bandwidth, namely, within given formal channels and following spec-

ified rules. The scope of action which is tolerated is determined under the influence of the mutually reinforcing dynamics between the party-state's pursuit of regime stability and its institutional arrangements. The existing literature provides extensive accounts of strategically mixed presentations of toleration and repression among authoritarian regimes.

In relating the Vietnam case to the wider literature on authoritarian regimes, this study adds to the rich collection of literature on authoritarian regimes in multiple ways. First, this study found substantial evidence to support the claim that Vietnam strategically combines legitimation strategies, repression and co-optation, with each reinforcing the others to sustain the regime, as pointed out in the literature on authoritarian regimes, such as Diamond (1999), Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009), Gandhi and Przeworski (2007), Geddes (1999), Gerschewski (2013), Schedler (2002), Levitsky and Way (2010) and Linz (2000). This study did not simply test whether or not political action was allowed in Vietnam. A key insight from the literature on authoritarian regimes is that while legal instruments and formal processes may be nominally democratic, in reality they may limit available options and the means people can choose in undertaking political action.

Besides, the existing literature on authoritarian regimes points out that people's cost of political action is increased in a context where political action is more likely to incur repression. In Vietnam, the party-state provides a few channels designed to elicit the demands of people and channel them into party-state institutions. Both topic and extent of political action are clearly circumscribed, and political criticism and dissent is rarely tolerated. The tolerated range of political action is narrow due to the party-state's tactical application of the concept of 'institutional political action', within which political action is tolerated but tightly controlled. This study found a tokenistic and formalistic degree of political participation in the existing Vietnamese formal political institutions.

By investigating the relationship between political action and state response, based mainly on a qualitative study, I found that Vietnam demonstrates typical institutional arrangements and strategies of authoritarian regimes, as referenced in the existing literature. Specifically, these restrict

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popular political action in various forms and degrees in service to the goal of regime survival. Vietnam demonstrates a lack of level playing field between the regime and society. Power is concentrated within a limited ruling group of elites, and individual rights to undertake political action are curtailed by formal and informal political institutions. Given theoretical discussions and expectations of authoritarian regimes, Vietnam's case accords with the literature on authoritarian regimes.

On the other hand, a noteworthy particularity of Vietnam's case is the politicized norms of public order and the state's interest. Repression is often practiced to an unpredictable scope and degree as state actors politicize the interpretation and application of institutional norms, particularly those of public order and the state's interest, to silence political criticism and opposition. The inconsistency of repression makes it harder for people to foresee the consequences of their political action, which increases the risk of such action. Going one step further, the previous chapters demonstrated cases of repression of individuals and organizations whose actions seemed far from a challenge to the present political system. Vietnam's case illustrates that normative narratives prescribed in legal documents can lay a foundation for discretionary repressive measures against popular political action by state actors, who politicize such action to their advantage.

Another takeaway from this study concerns the mixed aspects of the Vietnamese single-party regime: (i) robustness and rigidity in legitimation, co-optation and repression in the pursuit of regime stability; and (ii) inconsistency and unpredictability in the party-state's responses to popular political action. These complex, often contradictory, dimensions inform us about the multilayered dynamics of popular political action and state response in the context of authoritarian regimes. Vietnam has maintained the single-party regime over decades, but the continued observations of popular individual and collective political action that have brought visibility to Vietnam today should not be underestimated. Regardless of the party-state's legitimation, co-optation and repression, people from a wide strata of society take courage to express their discontent, to make demands of the government and to even criticize the political system. Constant incidences of people's political action and defiance to

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rules, despite the party-state's legitimation and repression, point to challenges that the party-state will have to deal with in the years to come.

While Vietnam's case exhibits the authoritarian regime features of seeking regime stability, this study attaches particular importance to the pronounced unpredictability and inconsistency of the party-state's response to political action. Relatively little research has emphasized unpredictability and ambiguity of authoritarian regimes in the imposition of repression of popular political action. I would argue that not only rigidity in constraining popular political action but also ambiguity in authoritarian regimes' practices of repression deserve greater scholarly attention. Clearly people are not allowed to criticize or challenge the current single-party regime in Vietnam, but at the same time, it is unclear under what conditions, and for what purpose, political action would provoke repression and what intensity such repression might take.

In this sense, unpredictability and arbitrariness in state responses warrant further attention in the literature on authoritarian politics, and specifically, the influence of such unpredictability on the boundaries between toleration and repression of popular political action. Consideration of the politicization of public order and the state's interest would enhance our understanding of precariousness embedded in people's political opportunities for and repertoires of political action under authoritarian regimes. Future research might focus on how such unpredictability in state repression manifests in other authoritarian regimes.

10.2 Reflections on the study

As an exploratory study, this dissertation has focused on the relationship between various forms of popular political action and the party-state's response within the context of a single-party regime. Considering that political institutions set the rules of the game, thus shaping the behaviours and interactions of actors (state actors and the people, domestic and foreign actors) this study of formal and informal political institutions advances knowledge of how and to what extent people can take political action and how state actors respond to the people.

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That being said, this study refers to several concepts originating in the liberal democratic tradition and discourse and that may be less sensitive to variations across regime types. Examples are 'political participation' (e.g., Arnstein or Theocharis and van Deth) and 'civil society' (e.g., Hadenius and Uggla). Thus, much of the analytical framework of this study reflects inherently liberal democratic norms. Contextualization was, therefore, a significant prerequisite of this study to find answers to the research questions. While including these concepts in my analytical framework, I invested considerable effort in collecting empirical data and elucidating Vietnamese realities, to analyse how the existing concepts and theoretical discussions manifest within the Vietnamese single-party regime. By doing so, this study was able to avoid a dichotomous assessment of whether the Vietnamese people can take political action (or not) and whether Vietnam has a civil society (or not), instead providing a wide-ranging account of the nexus between popular political action and the party-state's response.

This study presents a multidimensional picture of the institutional conditions that shape and constrain political action. Yet, this study bears a few limitations in regard to its concepts and methodology. Above all, there was a relative lack of data on direct experience of people's political action. Moreover, due to data availability constraints, this study found it hard to delve into micro-level evidence of when and why the Vietnamese people have taken certain forms of action, which suggests a need for further research. This study leaves unanswered questions of comparison within the group of protesters or that of state actors. For example, this study could not provide a more articulate account of how personal ties with party or state officials affect the consequences of someone's political action. Also, different responses to political action by different local state actors went unexamined. Future research may consider focusing on toleration or repression of particular forms of political action in the context of local power dynamics.

This study also faced limitations in scope due to political sensitivities, which were a barrier to the collection of primary and secondary data. For example, the Asian Barometer Survey has a set of questions on 'political participation', but in the Vietnam version, no coded data were available on these for

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analysis, as all responses for the 1,200 Vietnamese respondents were formally coded as missing. The inability to study some politics-related questions hindered me from going deeper into the realities of political action in Vietnam. In addition, many of the interviewee candidates I contacted declined to be interviewed due to the political sensitivity of my topic.

As mentioned in previous chapters, a culture of fear is prevalent in Vietnamese society. This is invisible and unidentifiable in surveys but it might have affected survey responses, as respondents may have answered questions in such a way as to avoid unwanted scrutiny by state actors. Considering these contextual limitations, I had to compromise between the depth that I would have liked to achieve and the data I held in my hands. In this regard, I ruled out some of the survey data on which reliability was questionable (e.g., over 90% responding that they were satisfied with the current government). I highlight here that in any research on Vietnam's politics reliability of survey data is a potential problem.

Nevertheless, I obtained a vast array of high-quality materials and data which I used for the analysis, and the individual expert interviews during my fieldwork provided additional experiences and insights. Thus, I can conclude that while it was not an easy intellectual journey, my research into the subject of Vietnam's popular political action was rigorous enough to complete this project. My study contributes to identifying the dynamics of political action and the party-state's approaches at the institutional level in Vietnam, focusing on an exploration of institutional conditions. The findings of this study, overall, shed new light on the practices of authoritarian regimes, explaining their strategies towards regime stability and the uncertain boundaries of political action. I am confident in stating that I went as far as I could, but at the same time, I hope that future research can go further. The knowledge about the Vietnamese single-party regime acquired from this study, in this regard, provides a building block for future work about the nature of authoritarian regimes in the world today.

Appendix 1. Overview of Vietnam's legal documents

Major legal instruments

- Constitution: An aggregate of fundamental principles of the state, which include the duties and rights of the entities that belong to the state.
- Code/Law: A set of legal rules passed by the National Assembly and enforced through state institutions at the national level.
- Ordinance/Resolution: A set of legal rules passed by the Standing Committee of the National Assembly when the National Assembly is not in session.
- Decree: A legal document announced by the government as guidance for the implementation of a law.
- Circular: A legal document as an administrative instruction announced by a ministry or ministerial-level state agency that sets out policies and practices to enforce a law, ordinance, or decree.

Note: For much detailed information of Vietnam's structure of legal documents, see 'New Law on Promulgation' (2015).

Appendix 2. List of the interviewees

No.	Nationality[52]	Affiliation	Position[53]
1	V	External	Senior Officer
2	V	Social organization	Vice Director
3	V	Non-governmental	Associate Professor
4	F	INGO	Coordinator
5	F	External	Human rights specialist
6	V	Non-governmental	Deputy Chairman
7	V	Non-governmental	Lecturer
8	V	External	Policy Analyst
9	F	External	Representative
10	F	INGO	International Senior Advisor
11	F	External	Head of Development
12	V	External	Program manager
13	V	Research institute	Project manager
14	V	Research institute	Project manager
15	V	Non-governmental	Vice Director
16	F	INGO	Representative
17	V	External	Project manager
18	F	External	Head of Cooperation
19	F	External	Senior Development Officer
20	F	INGO	Director
21	F	INGO	Director
22	V	External	Program officer
23	V	Governmental	Director General
24	V	Social organization	Director

[52] V: Vietnamese / F: Foreigner.
[53] To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, job titles of some interviewees were simplified when they may hint who (s)he is.

25	F	Research institute	Chief researcher
26	V	Governmental	Retired official
27	F	External	Safeguards Specialist (Resettlement)
28	F	External	Director
29	V	Central ministry	Director general
30	V	External	Individual consultant
31	V	INGO	Program officer
32	F	INGO	Program Manager
33	V	INGO	Specialist in civil society and advocacy
34	V	Non-governmental	Deputy Director
35	F	External	Vice Country Director
36	V	External	Independent consultant
37	V	INGO	Governance Program Assistant
38	V	Non-governmental	Officer
39	F	External	Ambassador
40	V	Mass organization	Vice director of a department
41	V	Mass organization	Vice director of a department
42	V	External development agency	Program Officer
43	V	External development agency	Senior Officer
44	V	INGO	Northern Programme Coordinator
45	V	Social organization network	Coordinator
46	V	Non-governmental	Deputy Director
47	V	Governmental	Deputy Director General for International Cooperation
48	F	External	Chief Technical Coordinator
49	F	External	Vice Country Director
50	V	Governmental	Program Manager

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Appendix 3. Calibration result of the collected protest cases

Case no.	Scale	Topic	Means	Repression
1	3	2	3	2
2	2	2	1	1
3	2	1	1	1
4	3	2	3	2
5	1	1	1	2
6	2	2	3	3
7	2	2	3	1
8	2	2	3	2
9	3	1	3	2
10	2	2	3	2
11	2	2	2	1
12	2	2	1	1
13	2	2	3	2
14	2	1	3	2
15	3	1	3	2
16	3	2	1	1
17	2	2	3	2
18	2	1	3	1
19	2	2	3	2
20	2	3	3	3
21	2	3	3	3
22	2	1	3	3
23	1	2	1	2
24	2	3	3	3
25	3	3	3	2
26	2	3	3	3
27	2	2	3	2
28	3	3	2	3
29	2	3	3	2

30	1	3	3	1
31	2	3	3	1
32	2	3	3	3
33	1	3	1	3
34	2	3	2	3
35	3	2	3	2
36	2	3	3	3
37	2	2	1	2
38	1	1	3	3
39	2	3	3	3
40	2	3	3	3
41	1	3	3	3
42	2	3	2	1
43	3	2	2	3
44	2	3	2	3
45	3	1	3	2
46	2	3	3	3
47	2	3	1	2
48	3	2	2	2
49	1	1	1	2
50	2	1	3	1
51	2	3	1	3
52	2	3	3	3
53	3	2	2	2
54	3	2	3	3
55	3	2	3	2
56	3	3	2	3
57	3	2	1	1
58	3	3	2	1
59	2	2	1	1
60	3	3	2	3

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Appendix 4. Projects of foreign actors for thematic analysis

No.	Protect title	Main implementing/ funding partner	Period[54]
1	Advocacy Coalitions Support Programme	Oxfam/ The UK Department for International Development (DFID)	2012-2016
2	Capacity Building for the Implementation of International Human Rights Treaties in Viet Nam	Ministry of Foreign Affairs/ UNDP	2008-2011
3	Capacity Building for Viet Nam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA)	VUSTA/ UNDP	2008-2011
4	Civil Society and Grassroots Participation Project	Plan Vietnam-Plan Norway/ Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD)	2003-2007
5	Civil society program (Not a project title but refers to its overall support program)	Vietnamese CSOs/ Asia Foundation	2009-2011
6	Civil Society Empowerment in Advocacy and Policy Development in Vietnam	Research Center for Management and Sustainable Development (MSD) and 18 partner organizations/ UNDEF	2012-2014

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[54] The project period for each project may have different fiscal year criteria. This table is based on the collected data. Also, I indicate the period based on the information in the collected documents. Therefore, actual project periods may differ.

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7	The Vietnam Civil Society Facility	Irish Aid	2007-2016
8	Enhancing CSOs' Contribution to Governance and Development Process in Vietnam	The European Commission	2019-2020
9	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) Country-Based Support Scheme (CBSS) for Vietnam	The European Commission	2007 2008 2009 2011 2014-2015 2016-2017 2018-2019
10	European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)[55] Micro-projects (MP) in Vietnam	The European Commission	2005
11	Good Governance and Public Administration Reform Program-Phase I (GOPA I)	Government of Vietnam/ co-funded by the Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA) and the United Kingdom Department of International Development (DFID).	2008-2012
12	Good Governance and Public Administration Reform Programme-Phase II (GOPA)*	Government of Vietnam/ DANIDA and DFID.	2012-2015
13	Justice Partnership Programme	Denmark, European Union, and Sweden	2010-2015
14	MARD – Macro Management Introduction	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development/ UNDP	2007-2012

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[55] EIDHR consists of micro-project grant programmes in four campaign sectors, and Vietnam was selected for Campaign 2 and 4, respectively, 'fostering a culture of human rights' and 'advancing equality, tolerance and peace'.

15	Non-State Actors in Development in Vietnam	The European Union	2008-2009 2012-2013
16	Project for improving the transparency and the quality of adjudication in the Viet Nam People's Court	Korea International Cooperation Agency	2019-2022
17	Promoting Active Participation of Civil Society in Environmental Governance	Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics and Public Administration (HCMPA) and other organizations/ International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), The United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF)	2010-2012
18	Public Participation and Accountability Facilitation Fund (PARAFF)* (It is part of GOPA, project no. 12)	Government of Vietnam/ co-funded by the Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID).	2012-2015
19	Strengthening and Supporting Civil Society in Vietnam	United States Department of State	2019
20	Support for Effective Policy Making through the Development of Scientific Evidence Based Research	Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences/ UNDP	2008-2011

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Appendix 5. Chi-square test outputs (SPSS)

● The Asian Barometer Survey Wave 3 (2010)

   1. Age

1) Case processing summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
age_gr * petition_missing	1078	90.5%	113	9.5%	1191	100.0%

   2) Age_gr * petition_missing crosstabulation

			Never Done	Once	More than once	Total
age_gr	10-29	Count	200	7	19	226
		Expected Count	184.5	12.4	29.1	226.0
		% within age_gr	88.5%	3.1%	8.4%	100.0%
	30-39	Count	204	12	27	243
		Expected Count	198.4	13.3	31.3	243.0
		% within age_gr	84.0%	4.9%	11.1%	100.0%
	40-49	Count	159	11	45	215
		Expected Count	175.5	11.8	27.7	215.0
		% within age_gr	74.0%	5.1%	20.9%	100.0%
	50-59	Count	183	14	27	224
		Expected Count	182.9	12.3	28.9	224.0

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	% within age_gr	81.7%	6.3%	12.1%	100.0%
Over 60	Count	134	15	21	170
	Expected Count	138.8	9.3	21.9	170.0
	% within age_gr	78.8%	8.8%	12.4%	100.0%
Total	Count	880	59	139	1078
	Expected Count	880.0	59.0	139.0	1078.0
	% within age_gr	81.6%	5.5%	12.9%	100.0%

3) Chi-square test

	Value	DF	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	24.480[a]	8	.002
Likelihood Ratio	23.186	8	.003
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.655	1	.031
N of Valid Cases	1078		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 9.30.

2. Gender

1) Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Gender * petition_missing	1078	90.5%	113	9.5%	1191	100.0%

2) Gender * petition_missing crosstabulation

petition_missing	Total

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			.00	1.00	2.00	
Gender	Male	Count	475	26	96	597
		% within Gender	79.6%	4.4%	16.1%	100.0%
	Female	Count	405	33	43	481
		% within Gender	84.2%	6.9%	8.9%	100.0%
Total		Count	880	59	139	1078
		% within Gender	81.6%	5.5%	12.9%	100.0%

3) Chi-square test

	Value	DF	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.290[a]	2	.001
Likelihood Ratio	14.629	2	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.806	1	.005
N of Valid Cases	1078		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 26.33.

3. Education background

1) Case processing summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
education_gr * petition_missing	1046	87.8%	145	12.2%	1191	100.0%

2) Education_gr * petition_missing crosstabulation

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			petition_missing			
			Never	Once	More than Once	Total
education_gr	1	Count	54	2	4	60
		% within education_gr	90.0%	3.3%	6.7%	100.0%
	2	Count	136	10	21	167
		% within education_gr	81.4%	6.0%	12.6%	100.0%
	3	Count	265	24	50	339
		% within education_gr	78.2%	7.1%	14.7%	100.0%
	4	Count	314	17	53	384
		% within education_gr	81.8%	4.4%	13.8%	100.0%
	5	Count	83	4	9	96
		% within education_gr	86.5%	4.2%	9.4%	100.0%
Total		Count	852	57	137	1046
		% within education_gr	81.5%	5.4%	13.1%	100.0%

Note: 'education_gr' means as follows.
1: No formal primary or incomplete primary school
2: Complete primary or incomplete secondary school
3: Complete secondary school or incomplete high school
4: Complete high school or incomplete university
5: Complete university or post-graduate degree

3) Chi-square test

	Value	DF	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.345[a]	8	.401
Likelihood Ratio	8.840	8	.356
Linear-by-Linear Association	.024	1	.877
N of Valid Cases	1046		

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a. 1 cells (6.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.27.

● The Asian Barometer Survey Wave 4 (2015)

1. Age

1) Case processing summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
age_gr * petition_miss-ing	1173	97.8%	26.999	2.2%	1199.999	100.0%

2) Age_gr * petition_missing crosstabulation

			petition_missing				
			1	2	3	4	Total
age_gr	10-29	Count	28	45	211	116	400
		Expected Count	47.4	58.7	184.5	109.5	400.0
		% within age_gr	7.0%	11.3%	52.8%	29.0%	100.0%
		% within peti-tion_missing	20.1%	26.2%	39.0%	36.1%	34.1%
	30-39	Count	23	33	123	71	250
		Expected Count	29.6	36.7	115.3	68.4	250.0
		% within age_gr	9.2%	13.2%	49.2%	28.4%	100.0%
		% within peti-tion_missing	16.5%	19.2%	22.7%	22.1%	21.3%
	40-49	Count	31	42	97	57	227
		Expected Count	26.9	33.3	104.7	62.1	227.0
		% within age_gr	13.7%	18.5%	42.7%	25.1%	100.0%
		% within peti-tion_missing	22.3%	24.4%	17.9%	17.8%	19.4%
	50-59	Count	25	29	58	45	157
		Expected Count	18.6	23.0	72.4	43.0	157.0

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		% within age_gr	15.9%	18.5%	36.9%	28.7%	100.0%
		% within peti-tion_missing	18.0%	16.9%	10.7%	14.0%	13.4%
Over 60	Count	32	23	52	32	139
	Expected Count	16.5	20.4	64.1	38.0	139.0
	% within age_gr	23.0%	16.5%	37.4%	23.0%	100.0%
	% within peti-tion_missing	23.0%	13.4%	9.6%	10.0%	11.8%
Total	Count	139	172	541	321	1173
	Expected Count	139.0	172.0	541.0	321.0	1173.0
	% within age_gr	11.8%	14.7%	46.1%	27.4%	100.0%
	% within peti-tion_missing	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note: 'petition_missing' means as follows.
1: I have done this more than once
2: I have done this once
3: I have not done this, but I might do it if something important happens in the future
4: I have not done this and I would not do it regardless of the situation.

3) Chi-square test

	Value	DF	Asymptotic Signifi-cance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	46.609[a]	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	44.919	12	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	27.592	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	1173		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 16.47.

2. Gender

1) Case processing summary

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	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
se2 Gender * petition_missing	1173	97.8%	26.999	2.2%	1199.999	100.0%

2) Gender * petition_missing crosstabulation

			petition_missing				
			1	2	3	4	Total
se2 Gender	Male	Count	77	95	260	135	567
		Expected Count	66.7	83.1	262.0	155.2	567.0
		% within se2 Gender	13.6%	16.8%	45.9%	23.8%	100.0%
		% within petition_missing	55.8%	55.2%	48.0%	42.1%	48.3%
	Female	Count	61	77	282	186	606
		Expected Count	71.3	88.9	280.0	165.8	606.0
		% within se2 Gender	10.1%	12.7%	46.5%	30.7%	100.0%
		% within petition_missing	44.2%	44.8%	52.0%	57.9%	51.7%
Total		Count	138	172	542	321	1173
		Expected Count	138.0	172.0	542.0	321.0	1173.0
		% within se2 Gender	11.8%	14.7%	46.2%	27.4%	100.0%
		% within petition_missing	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

3) Chi-square test

	Value	DF	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.451[a]	3	.010
Likelihood Ratio	11.480	3	.009

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Linear-by-Linear Association	10.739	1	.001
N of Valid Cases	1173		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 66.71.

3. Educational background

1) Case processing summary

	Cases					
	\multicolumn{2}{c}{Valid}	\multicolumn{2}{c}{Missing}	\multicolumn{2}{c}{Total}
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
edu_gr * petition_miss-ing	1173	97.8%	26.999	2.2%	1199.999	100.0%

2) Edu_gr * petition_missing crosstabulation

			\multicolumn{4}{c}{petition_missing}	Total
			1	2	3	4	Total
edu_gr	1	Count	18	11	29	12	70
		Expected Count	8.3	10.3	32.3	19.1	70.0
		% within edu_gr	25.7%	15.7%	41.4%	17.1%	100.0%
		% within peti-tion_missing	12.9%	6.4%	5.4%	3.8%	6.0%
	2	Count	9	4	35	23	71
		Expected Count	8.4	10.5	32.7	19.4	71.0
		% within edu_gr	12.7%	5.6%	49.3%	32.4%	100.0%
		% within peti-tion_missing	6.5%	2.3%	6.5%	7.2%	6.1%
	3	Count	34	29	161	116	340
		Expected Count	40.3	50.1	156.8	92.8	340.0
		% within edu_gr	10.0%	8.5%	47.4%	34.1%	100.0%
		% within peti-tion_missing	24.5%	16.8%	29.8%	36.3%	29.0%
	4	Count	59	119	248	124	550
		Expected Count	65.2	81.1	253.7	150.0	550.0

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		% within edu_gr	10.7%	21.6%	45.1%	22.5%	100.0%
		% within petition_missing	42.4%	68.8%	45.8%	38.8%	46.9%
	5	Count	19	10	68	45	142
		Expected Count	16.8	20.9	65.5	38.7	142.0
		% within edu_gr	13.4%	7.0%	47.9%	31.7%	100.0%
		% within petition_missing	13.7%	5.8%	12.6%	14.1%	12.1%
Total		Count	139	173	541	320	1173
		Expected Count	139.0	173.0	541.0	320.0	1173.0
		% within edu_gr	11.8%	14.7%	46.1%	27.3%	100.0%
		% within petition_missing	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note: 'education_gr' means as follows.
1: No formal primary or incomplete primary school
2: Complete primary or incomplete secondary school
3: Complete secondary school or incomplete high school
4: Complete high school or incomplete university
5: Complete university or post-graduate degree

3) Chi-square test

	Value	DF	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	65.113[a]	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	64.467	12	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	.382	1	.537
N of Valid Cases	1173		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 8.29.

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The National Assembly's Ordinance on Exercise of Democracy in Communes, Wards, and Townships (*Pháp lệnh số 34/2007/PL-UBTVQH11 của Ủy ban Thường vụ Quốc hội: Pháp lệnh Thực hiện dân chủ ở xã, phường, thị trấn*). This was retrieved from an official website. Accessed 23 November 2020 <http://vbpl.vn/TW/Pages/vbpqen-toanvan.aspx?ItemID=3701&Keyword=PL-UBTVQH11>.

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About the author

Seohee Kwak is a PhD candidate at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR). Her current research focuses on people's opportunities for and repertoires of political action in Vietnam.

Before her PhD research, she worked as a researcher for a government-affiliated research institute, Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI) for several years. She conducted research projects and organized training programmes on gender and development for government and non-governmental organization officials in the Southeast Asian countries.

She has published several pieces of research related to public protest, authoritarian politics, and political participation in international development discourses. With a regional focus on Southeast and Northeast Asia, her academic interests include authoritarian politics, individual and collective political action, and external democracy promotion.

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CV

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EDUCATION

2016-2022	**International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam** Ph.D. Candidate
2010–2012	**Graduate School of International Studies, Yonsei University, Korea** M. A. in International Studies
2005–2010	**Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Korea** B. A. in English Linguistics

WORK EXPERIENCE

Mar. 2019- Jun. 2019	**International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Netherlands** Teaching Assistant *Assisted with the management of the master's course titled Techniques for Case Study Research); provided course related support and feedback to the students.*
Mar. 2012– Sep. 2015	**Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI), Korea** Researcher, International Development and Co-operation Center *Conducted multiple research projects on gender and development in the Southeast Asian region; organized international conferences and workshop programmes.*

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Jan. 2012– Feb. 2012	**Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), Korea** Intern, Evaluation Department
	Assisted with developing evaluation indicators for Korea's official development assistance (ODA) projects.

ACADEMIC PUBLICATIONS

Journal	Kwak, S. (2021) 'From Collective Action to Impeachment: Political Opportunities of the Candlelight Protests in South Korea', *Korea Observer* 52(1), 107-130. DOI: 10.29152/KOIKS.2021.52.1.107
Book chapter	Kwak, S. (2019) 'Constructing space for participatory governance in Vietnam: Reflections from the Hanoi tree movement', In S. Lam-Knott, C. Connolly, & K. Ho (Eds.) *Post-Politics and Civil Society in Asian Cities: Spaces of Depoliticisation* (pp. 123-139). London: Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9780429298530
Journal	Kwak, S. (2019) 'Deconstructing the multi-layered nature of citizen participation in Vietnam: Conceptual connotations, discourses of international development, and the country's institutional context', *Asian Journal of Political Science* 27(3), 257-271. DOI: 10.1080/02185377.2019.1631866.

AWARDS/CERTIFICATES

2019 **Didactical training certificate, Risbo, the Netherlands**

Completed the training on basic didactics and group dynamics.

2019 **3rd International QCA Paper Development Workshop, ETH Zurich**

Runner-up at the Best Paper Award.

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2018   **Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, University for Peace, and the United Nations University's International Institute for Global Health**

Completed the course titled 'Interactive E-Learning Module on Operationalizing the Right to Development in Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals.'

2016   **Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford**

Conference Bursary Winner for Doctoral Students and Early Career Post-doctoral Researchers.

LANGUAGES

Native in Korean
Professional proficiency in English
Beginner level in Dutch (B2).