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## PROBLEMS OF ENSURING DEMOCRACY UNDER ONE-PARTY RULE IN MODERN VIETNAM

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**Abstract.** In modern politics, democracy is always an important topic that is frequently mentioned in the development strategies of each country as well as in intergovernmental relations programs. Democracy has become a global issue, and building democracy is a goal pursued by most countries worldwide. However, in an increasingly diverse world, there exist different perspectives, approaches, and positions regarding democracy. Each country has its own direction for building its democratic system and will inevitably face certain difficulties and challenges during the implementation process. In this article, the author focuses on analyzing the issues related to building democracy in Vietnam, a developing country in Asia with a single-party political regime.

**Keywords:** Democracy, building democracy, socialist democracy, Communist Party, single-party regime, Vietnam, challenges to democracy, ensuring democracy

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Государство и гражданское общество, идеология и политика

Научная статья

## ПРОБЛЕМЫ ОБЕСПЕЧЕНИЯ ДЕМОКРАТИИ В УСЛОВИЯХ ОДНОПАРТИЙНОСТИ В СОВРЕМЕННОМ ВЬЕТНАМЕ

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**Аннотация.** В современной политике демократия всегда является важной темой, которая часто упоминается в стратегиях развития каждой страны, а также в программе межгосударственных отношений. Строительство демократии — это цель, которую преследуют большинство стран по всему миру. Однако в современном многообразном мире существуют различные точки зрения, подходы и позиции в отношении демократии. Каждая страна имеет собственное направление для построения своей демократической системы и неизбежно сталкивается с определенными трудностями и вызовами в процессе реализации. В данной статье автор фокусируется на анализе проблем, связанных с построением демократии во Вьетнаме, развивающейся стране в Азии, с политическим режимом одной партии.

**Ключевые слова:** демократия, построение демократии, социалистическая демократия, Коммунистическая партия, режим одной партии, Вьетнам, вызовы демократии, обеспечение демократии

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### Introduction

After more than 70 years since gaining power, the Communist Party of Vietnam has deeply recognized the profound importance of constructing a democratic society for the survival of the socialist regime being built in the country. Through practical experience as well as learning from the methods of democratic construction in some other countries around the world, Vietnam has learned that building a democratic society should begin with constructing democracy within the ruling party. This process has been implemented in practice; however, alongside the achieved progress, there still exist numerous limitations and weaknesses. The issue of building a democratic soci-

ety in Vietnam remains a problem that needs to be studied, discussed, and resolved.

### Formulation of the problem

Vietnam is currently facing inherent challenges of a single-party political system in building a democratic society. As an integral component of the political system and the leading force within this system, the Communist Party of Vietnam plays a decisive role in the issue of building a democratic society in Vietnam. The party consistently emphasizes that it must serve as a role model in implementing democracy; all party members, regardless of their positions in society or within the party, must exemplify the adherence to the rule of law without privileges, special benefits, or exceptions. The party sets the goal of achieving equality in rights and obligations for citi-

zens as defined by the law. This is identified by the Communist Party as an important means of realizing democracy. Clearly, a single-party regime in Vietnam brings certain advantages in terms of political stability, unity in action, and facilitation of consensus building within society. However, a single-party system also carries inherent risks and challenges for the process of building a democratic society in Vietnam today.

The Communist Party is the sole legal political party in Vietnam and enjoys the trust and support of the majority of the people. This party does not directly face the risk of losing its leadership position, which can easily lead to subjective and unilateral decision-making in determining political directions. On the other hand, the Communist Party is the only entity that sets out the guidelines for developing a democratic society. Therefore, it is concerning to consider the consequences if the political direction of this party is not rational. Although in theory, the political directions of the party, including the direction of building a democratic society, are discussed and gather opinions, the absence of competition within the political system leads to a less dynamic process of discussion and debate. The Communist Party still regularly listens to the contributions of other entities, but ultimately, the party remains the decision-making authority. As a result, the political directions are prone to subjectivity and lack of multidimensionality.

The ruling party in a single-party regime easily imposes its will on the state and society. This is not an exception in Vietnam. The mechanism of party leadership, state administration, and people's participation is the operational mechanism of Vietnam's political system. However, there is still a lack of clear differentiation between the party's leadership authority and the state's management and governance functions. In many cases, the Communist Party has justified its actions by substituting for the state. This goes against the political party's fundamental purpose of safeguarding the people's interests against the state's activities.

Moreover, Vietnam has yet to establish a mechanism for controlling power within the political system, particularly controlling power within the party. As a result, it is difficult for citizens to oversee the power of party organs and the activities of party members. With its centralized nature, the Communist Party is prone to employing directive and authoritarian leadership styles. This poses a significant obstacle to the process of building democracy in society, leading to a less dynamic and rigid civil society. The state, which was originally intended to serve the will of the people, is at risk of becoming a tool for demonstrating the party's power, especially the will of key leadership officials within the party.

In the political system of Vietnam, the Fatherland Front and other political-social organizations serve as platforms for Vietnamese citizens to express their voices through critiquing the party's ideologies, orientations, and the state's laws and policies. These organizations are also where all citizens can freely

express their opinions, provide suggestions, and convey their desires and aspirations. However, there is a reality that these agencies are also under the leadership of the ruling party - the Communist Party of Vietnam. Consequently, in many cases, these organizations tend to engage in formalistic activities and fail to reflect the people's interests, becoming mere "decorative forms" within the political system.

Furthermore, in a single-party system, the Communist Party of Vietnam has the ability to impose party members into key positions within the state apparatus and political-social organizations. This undermines the democratic nature of personnel work and leads to the fusion of the party apparatus and the state machinery, making it susceptible to authoritarianism, dictatorship, abuse of power, and manipulation of people's sovereignty.

### **Main directions for solving the problem**

#### ***The awareness of Vietnamese citizens, as well as officials and civil servants, regarding democracy remains limited***

The level of awareness of democracy depends on the level of civic education. Therefore, civic education plays a significant role in building a democratic society. Numerous studies worldwide have shown that the level of civic education is directly proportional to the ability to construct a democratic society in a country. In the study "Who votes?" by Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980), they argued that civic education has a profound impact on democratic practices because education contributes to enhancing cognitive skills, enabling citizens to articulate clear opinions on political decisions and participate in voting. Furthermore, it increases civic responsibilities, creating ethical pressures for citizens to engage more actively in political activities [1]. Sniderman et al. (1991) also noted that citizens with higher educational attainment make more informed political decisions, especially in electoral processes [2].

In Vietnam today, despite many achievements in education and raising civic awareness, the actual level of civic education for a portion of the population remains low, especially among those living in mountainous, remote, and rural areas. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam, the literacy rate for individuals aged 15 to 60 in Vietnam is 97.85% [3]. However, the proportion of the population within the working age group who have received formal training is very low, at only 22.37%. Among this working-age population in Vietnam (18 to 60 years old), only 10.82% have attained a university degree or higher. This figure is only 1/3 of that in South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore [4]. The low level of civic education results in limited understanding of the law among the population. The prevalence of "legal illiteracy" is quite common in Vietnam today. Due to a lack of legal knowledge, the rights of citizens are sometimes violated, and there are instances where state officials do not abide by the law, infringing upon the legitimate rights and interests of citizens. However, citizens are often unaware and sometimes do not know how to

use the law to demand and request that law enforcement agencies protect their rights and interests [5].

Low civic education and limited understanding of the law are the reasons behind the relatively low level of democratic consciousness among a portion of the population. Many Vietnamese citizens have a limited understanding of fundamental rights and democracy. In their relationship with the state, they tend to be passive, with little awareness of their rights to participate, to be informed, and to scrutinize and monitor the state's activities [6]. Furthermore, the majority of Vietnamese citizens are not ready to engage in public affairs. They believe that social governance is not their responsibility or right, but rather the duty of the state. As a result, they tend to rely on or participate in a formalistic manner. Consequently, when it comes to soliciting public opinion on various state matters, their participation is often lackluster.

Furthermore, in contemporary Vietnamese society, the majority of the population places significant trust in the leadership of the Communist Party. This stems from their satisfaction with the party's long-standing grip on power and the successes it has brought to Vietnam since 1945. As a result, they often have a mentality of deferring all decisions to the Party and the state apparatus, or in other words, they exhibit an apparent "indifference to politics." A considerable portion of the Vietnamese population tends to prioritize economic issues over political ones. Nowadays, with the rapid development of the internet in Vietnam, people have become more open-minded and actively participate in lively discussions on online forums. However, political matters still fail to capture the interest of the population. The indifference towards politics poses numerous challenges to the process of constructing a democratic society, particularly as it provides opportunities for many authoritarian leaders lacking in democratic values to implement measures that manipulate public opinion according to their subjective desires.

On the side of the civil service and public officials, a significant portion still lacks a deep understanding of the role of democracy. They are still influenced by the old management mechanisms based on a centralized and hierarchical model prevalent prior to the period of renovation, characterized by a mindset focused on commands and authority. Many party members exhibit tendencies towards abuse of power, justifications, and autocracy [7]. Some party members hold leadership and managerial positions, including certain high-ranking officials who have experienced ideological, ethical, and lifestyle degradation, manifested in various ways such as the fading of ideals and succumbing to selfish individualism, opportunism, and pragmatism [8]. It is precisely these factors that have created barriers to the process of building a democratic society in Vietnam.

Clearly, to build a democratic society, in addition to the political direction of the party and the state leadership, the direct subjects exercising their right to self-determination must possess the necessary awareness of their democratic rights. However, this seems to be lacking in the current social conditions of Vi-

etnam. Vietnamese citizens, on one hand, have not deeply understood democracy and their rights when participating in political activities, while on the other hand, they exhibit indifference towards politics and delegate decision-making power to the Communist Party and the State. This can be seen as a triumph of the Communist Party of Vietnam in terms of fostering people's trust, but it can also be viewed as a significant obstacle and challenge as the party strives to establish a democratic society while the citizens have limited awareness of this issue.

#### ***Imitation democracy is a threat to the building of a democratic society in modern Vietnam***

Imitative democracy is an issue that deserves attention in the process of building a democratic society in any country. It is a form of pseudo-democracy where the political participation rights of the people are exploited and controlled. The governing machinery can employ political tactics to appease the people's yearning for democracy in order to achieve their own political objectives. In this case, due to a lack of understanding of democracy, the citizens may still feel satisfied as they believe they are in control, participating in opinions and making important decisions. However, in reality, these decisions have been directed and orchestrated by the authoritarian and dictatorial nature of the ruling apparatus.

Imitation democracy can stem from the compromises made by voters during their participation in political decision-making. Voters compromise with the elected officials, expecting similar concessions in return. However, after assuming power with the majority's support, state institutions start pursuing policies to realize their interests, diverging from the common good [9]. The lack of democracy or pseudo-democracy in this case is disguised by what is called majority rule, but in reality, interest groups are trying to achieve their own goals by securing benefits and privileges from the government.

Several other methods can lead to imitation democracy, such as seeking people's opinions without providing them with complete information for making their own choices. As a result, individuals can only make random selections or follow the trend of public information; Taking public votes on unimportant matters while disregarding or cleverly seizing decision-making power for crucial issues concerning minorities or specific individuals; Organizing extensive public consultations but manipulating the process by providing incomplete or dishonest synthesis reports or excluding dissenting opinions that contradict the desired agenda of the leadership. The outcome is that political decisions are constructed and enacted under the guise of democracy, while in essence, they serve the will and desires of the leadership.

In Vietnam, the issue of imitation democracy is a concerning matter. Within its political ideology, the Communist Party of Vietnam consistently emphasizes the goal and task of building a genuinely democratic society. However, in reality, not all party members or government officials in the Vietnamese state apparatus have a clear understanding of this viewpoint. Therefore, a portion of officials has employed

imitation democracy to conceal their authoritarian and manipulative leadership and management methods. Vietnamese democrats often refer to imitation democracy as a disease, and this disease has favorable conditions for development in Vietnam due to several reasons, such as the following:

— Vietnamese people often have a communal life-style, following the village or community model. They tend to have a mentality of "respecting and avoiding conflicts." Therefore, the majority of them may not strongly defend their own opinions when participating in voting by raising their hands. Authoritarian and undemocratic leaders can exploit this psychological characteristic to manipulate the outcomes of voting processes according to their desires. This is because, according to Vietnamese laws, most voting procedures can choose between two forms: secret ballot or raising hands. It is not mandatory for all elections or votes to use secret ballots.

— The mechanism for controlling power in Vietnamese society is currently not truly strict. Although the democratic legal system has been fundamentally established, it is not yet complete, and there are still many legal loopholes that organizations and individuals can exploit to develop imitation democracy. For example, regulations regarding the disclosure of information about candidates in the electoral list are not sufficiently specific and detailed; regulations regarding contact with voters during elections are not mandatory for candidates... and so on.

— Indifference towards politics among the citizens also creates opportunities for the development of imitation democracy. This indifference stems from various reasons such as excessive trust in the leadership of the Communist Party and the state, limited awareness of people's sovereignty, and lack of encouragement from the state in exercising democratic rights... However, regardless of the reasons, a truly democratic society cannot be achieved as long as there is indifference among the people toward issues directly affecting them.

The Communist Party of Vietnam also acknowledges that the development of imitation democracy cannot be allowed in modern Vietnamese society. The party has organized numerous lively discussions and debates on this issue. However, it appears to be a difficult-to-cure ailment in the context of Vietnam, where there is only one ruling party and a lack of checks and balances in the political system. Bui Duc Lai, a senior specialist of the Central Organization Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, emphasized in a speech: "Imitation democracy is like fake medicine; it not only fails to cure the illness but also erodes trust in genuine medicine. Imitation democracy cannot address any goals or demands, but instead distorts and undermines the meaning of democracy, rendering it ineffective and destroying trust in true democracy. In this regard, imitation democracy is more harmful than the absence of democracy. The absence of democracy can still identify problems and point to the areas that need to be addressed, whereas, with imitation democracy, the situation is much more complex [10].

The problem of imitation democracy' poses a challenge to the current construction of a democratic society in Vietnam. It highlights the necessity of establishing proper mechanisms and specific, clear regulations in order to build a truly democratic society. This means that the ideals of democracy and the construction of a democratic society need to be institutionalized and codified into law, making it mandatory for party members, party organizations, and the state to strictly adhere to them. Additionally, there is a need to enhance the awareness of the people regarding the exercise of democratic rights, so that they are not deceived by the political tactics of certain authoritarian and undemocratic leaders. Vietnam needs to make greater efforts to eliminate the loopholes in the legal framework for the exercise of people's right to self-determination, while also striving to enhance transparency within the Communist Party and the State of Vietnam. Additionally, it is essential to emphasize the responsibility of officials and public servants in the current task of constructing a democratic society.

***The quality of operation of representative democratic institutions remains an issue of concern in modern Vietnam***

In Vietnam, the National Assembly and People's Councils are the representative bodies for the rights and interests of the people in the functioning of the state machinery. Among these, the National Assembly is identified as the highest legislative body of the state. The form of representative democracy in Vietnam is primarily exercised through the National Assembly; however, this is not a regular operating body. According to the regulations of Vietnamese law, the National Assembly convenes regular sessions twice a year, which are called by the Standing Committee of the National Assembly (the highest organ of the National Assembly). Additionally, the Standing Committee of the National Assembly has the authority to convene extraordinary sessions upon its own decision or when requested by the President, the Prime Minister, or at least 1/3 of the total number of National Assembly Deputies. In reality, the Vietnamese National Assembly appears to rarely organize extraordinary sessions. Therefore, the issues entrusted by the nationwide electorate have to wait until the next session of the National Assembly for discussion and resolution. This mechanism appears to be inadequate in current practice due to the ever-changing and unpredictable international and domestic contexts. These changes require the State to react promptly and make frequent decisions, in which the Vietnamese National Assembly, as the representative body of the entire Vietnamese population, should directly engage in deliberation and decision-making. The lack of regular activities has hindered the Vietnamese National Assembly from fully exercising its power as the highest authority within the state apparatus, representing the rights and interests of the entire population.

The level of professionalism in the activities of the National Assembly is not truly high. This originates from the fact that the majority of Vietnamese National Assembly delegates hold concurrent positions (on-

ly 38.6% of delegates specialize in their roles) [11]. They even juggle multiple different jobs. This has led to a concerning reality where many National Assembly delegates only attend sessions that require voting on important issues or questioning sessions. The phenomenon of proxy voting, button pressing, or abstaining from decision-making rights is prevalent in Vietnam [12]. The issue that needs to be discussed here is whether the National Assembly, as the representative body of the people's sovereignty, has fulfilled its role or not.

Currently, Vietnam still lacks any legal mechanisms to attach responsibility to National Assembly delegates for their participation in debates and reflection on social issues. Therefore, alongside the delegates who demonstrate enthusiasm, dedication, and regularly voice their opinions, there are still some delegates who choose the approach of remaining silent, listening, and participating in voting only when required. Many delegates fail to fulfill their roles and lack true courage in expressing their opinions and representing the people in state activities. The effectiveness of delegates remains a significant concern in Vietnam today. In addition to the issue of holding concurrent positions, the psychological fear of conflicts of interest has a profound impact on the participation in discussions and decision-making by delegates at National Assembly sessions.

Furthermore, within the framework of a single-party system, it can be observed that the activities of the National Assembly are significantly influenced by the Communist Party of Vietnam. By implementing the party's leadership mechanism, where the state manages and the people exercise their authority, the Communist Party has exerted its leadership over the National Assembly through party organizations within the legislature. This factor is considered one of the significant reasons that influence the decision-making freedom of the National Assembly delegates during the sessions. With over 90% of the National Assembly delegates being party members, the majority tend to vote according to the Party's resolutions, especially on issues related to tax policies, public service fees, administrative division, and so on. Thus, we can observe an "unhealthy cycle" where the people delegate their power to the delegates, and the delegates "delegate their power" to their leading body (the Party). If this cycle is not addressed, democracy in Vietnam will face challenges, particularly the chal-

lenge of having a pseudo-democratic system that infringes upon the people's right to self-governance.

#### ***The current level of corruption in Vietnam is still at an alarming level***

Nowadays, corruption is not only widespread but also a serious issue for democratic systems. The reality of corruption and its negative consequences have become topics of discussion in many research studies [13—15]. Corruption impedes economic development and stifles the formation of a true democracy [15]. Warren ME argues that corruption can erode the institutions and core foundations of democracy by generating inefficient public services. Corrupt officials can transform services meant to serve the people into services serving their own profit-making purposes. In a society with high levels of corruption, safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of citizens becomes a privilege and must be compensated with tangible rewards [16]. What is more concerning is that corruption can have a negative impact on people's trust in the democratic system, diminishing their participation in political activities - an essential component for building a democratic society [17]. Corruption can undermine people's attitudes towards the democratic system because individuals will lack the motivation to interact with local, regional, or national representatives when they display tendencies of soliciting bribes and engaging in discriminatory behavior [18]. In such a situation, citizens not only harbor suspicions towards corrupt officials but also towards the majority of officials, whether or not they are engaged in corruption. This skepticism causes people to have reduced expectations of the overall activities of the government and the specific outcomes of lawful elections. They become indifferent to political engagements. This indifference, in turn, facilitates politicians in carrying out more acts of corruption [19]. This leads nations into a vicious cycle of declining democracy and increasing corruption.

In Vietnam, the successes of the country's comprehensive reform are undeniable. However, reality also shows that the state of bureaucracy and authority, especially corruption in Vietnam, is at a high level. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) report for 2022 released by Transparency International (TI) on January 31, 2023, Vietnam's corruption index reached 42 out of 100 points (0 being the most corrupt and 100 points being the cleanest).

#### **Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) of Vietnam for the period 2020—2022**

*Индекс восприятия коррупции (ИПЦ) Вьетнама за период 2020—2022 гг.*

Year	2020	2021	2022
Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)	36/100	39/100	42/100

It can be observed that the corruption perception index of Vietnam is showing an upward trend (indicating a decrease in corruption), but it remains relatively low in terms of the cleanliness of the state machinery. It is a hindrance to the development of a democratic society and undermines the people's trust

in the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam at present.

Assessing the current situation of nepotism and corruption in Vietnam, some scholars argue that within the state apparatus of Vietnam, nepotism is most evident in the cumbersome and hierarchical nature of the state machinery, with numerous levels,

intermediaries, and too many layers of leadership. Many state officials and civil servants tend to become detached from the masses, speaking and directing in general terms, lacking responsibility and indifference to the legitimate demands of the people. The "achievement disease" remains a problem in the activities of the state administration, along with the practice of concealing the truth and reporting false information... [20]. Corruption has been and continues to cause significant and far-reaching consequences, inflicting serious harm on Vietnamese society today. The problem of corruption in Vietnam can be attributed to the inherent weaknesses in the institutional framework, the inadequate guidance and implementation, as well as the degradation and moral decay among a considerable number of officials within the government machinery. There is a presence of laws, but their effectiveness is often low or weak, and their forms are inadequate [21]. Collective action theory argues that the community is a breeding ground for corrupt practices, and a morally upright society would reduce the likelihood of corruption among officials. Conversely, if a community has a culture or tradition that normalizes corruption, the likelihood of corruption among officials will be higher. In countries where there is a cultural emphasis on relationships and strong family and friendship ties, such as Vietnam, based on personal relationships and trust in one another, individuals can make flexible decisions to resolve unusual situations in daily life, business, or office work [22]. This creates a norm, a habit in the way state affairs are handled, and provides opportunities for the development of corruption.

In assessing the current state of corruption, the Communist Party of Vietnam believes that corruption can have an impact on Vietnam's international standing and reputation, severely hamper foreign investment in the country, and cause significant damage to its national development potential. It is undermining the Communist Party, the State, and posing a threat to the survival of the political regime that Vietnam is constructing [23]. The prevalence of corruption is creating a latent risk of social instability, as societal grievances continue to escalate. Social ethics, family ethics, and personal ethics are exhibiting signs of decay. Foundational spiritual values are being increasingly undervalued, and a widespread sense of apathy is emerging. The people's trust in the party's leadership and the state's direction is diminishing. Economic growth is sluggish, with looming risks of

inflation and economic crises. Public debt and non-performing loans are on the rise, among other issues.

A democratic society contributes to curbing corruption, and a low level of corruption is an important prerequisite for the development of democracy. In the current conditions in Vietnam, although the Communist Party and the Vietnamese State have shown increased concern for prevention and anti-corruption efforts, this issue cannot be eradicated in a short period of time. The fight against bureaucracy and corruption requires resolute handling of corrupt officials and party members who are authoritarian, power-abusing, and lack respect for the people. Additionally, there is a need to further enhance government transparency to prevent state officials from using information as a tool to extract benefits from the people. By providing easy and convenient access to government information and services, unnecessary personal connections among citizens can be reduced. Moreover, citizens will be able to monitor and limit arbitrary decisions made by public officials [24 ; 25]. It can be affirmed that building open data is a useful solution to address the issue of state information monopoly, which is considered one of the causes of corruption and democratic erosion today. Furthermore, in the current context of a single ruling party in Vietnam, employing open dialogue and democratic practices is a favorable method to combat corruption and promote the development of a truly democratic society.

### Conclusion

Over nearly 40 years of implementing the comprehensive renovation campaign, Vietnam has deeply recognized the importance of building democracy. At the same time, this country affirms that democracy is the essence of the Vietnamese political system, the goal, and the driving force of the country's renovation process. However, it cannot be denied that the process of building democracy in Vietnam still faces many difficulties and challenges. These challenges have led to skepticism, especially in Western studies, regarding Vietnam's democratic system. With a strong aspiration to integrate into the world and showcase Vietnam's identity on the international stage in all areas, including democracy, this country is making efforts to overcome these limitations and push back these challenges. This will be a long and challenging process for a developing country like Vietnam today.

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