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# Vietnam and the Challenge of Political Civil Society

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CARLYLE A. THAYER

*The study of contemporary Vietnamese politics has been dominated by two main paradigms: “everyday politics” and civil society. This article argues that “everyday politics” and civil society paradigms have marginalized the study of pro-democracy groups that have contested the hegemonic role of the Vietnam Communist Party. It is argued that political change in Vietnam will be significantly determined by how Vietnam’s one-party state manages the challenges posed by political civil society. Political civil society refers to the network of political groups that coalesced into a nascent social movement known as Bloc 8406. Overseas Vietnamese groups, such as the Viet Tan party, play an increasingly important role in providing financial and moral support for political civil society. The civil society paradigm is criticized for its exclusive preoccupation with so-called “non-governmental organizations” and community-based organizations as the prime agents of political change. The article concludes with an assessment of the future impact of political civil society on Vietnam and likely future scenarios.*

**Key words:** “Everyday politics”, mono-organizational socialism, civil society, political civil society, Bloc 8406, Viet Tan, Vietnam.

This article aims to advance the discussion of Vietnamese politics beyond contemporary academic preoccupation with so-called “everyday politics” and “civil society” by promoting the concept of political civil society. Political civil society refers to non-violent political, advocacy,<sup>1</sup>

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labour and religious organizations and movements that seek to promote human rights, democratization and religious freedom in authoritarian states. The term “political” has been included to capture the activist nature of civil society in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s when citizens became active in creating organizations outside of state control in order to influence the conditions in which they lived, including political pressure on the state. The study of political civil society groups has been largely marginalized by mainstream academics who privilege the role of so-called developmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) in their writings on Vietnamese politics.<sup>2</sup>

This article will focus on the roles of nascent “political parties” and trade unions that emerged in 2006 and coalesced in a political coalition known as Bloc 8406. These groups mounted a series of challenges to the political hegemony of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) before they were repressed. This article will also analyse the role of external agents, such as the Viet Tan Party, in providing material, financial and human resource assistance to political civil society groups.

In the past, the activities of human rights, pro-democracy and religious freedom groups were relatively compartmentalized from each other.<sup>3</sup> Due to increasing networking between politically active civil society groups cross-fertilization is taking place and a nascent movement has gradually taken shape despite state repression. This development is occurring when the legitimacy of the VCP is coming under challenges due to public discontent with endemic corruption, rising inflation, environmental pollution and other social ills. The article concludes by noting that Vietnam may face the risk of domestic instability if the one-party state fails to adequately address the challenge of political civil society.

This article is divided into four parts. Part one briefly discusses key characteristics of Vietnam’s one-party system. Part two discusses the question: what is civil society in a Vietnamese context? Part three analyses the rise of political civil society primarily through a focus on the activities of Bloc 8406 and the Viet Tan. And finally, part four offers some observations on the challenge these political developments pose for Vietnam’s one-party system.

## **Vietnam’s One-Party Political System**

Prior to the era of *doi moi* (renovation), western political scientists had no difficulty in classifying Vietnam as a Leninist political

system. The term “mono-organizational socialism” has also been used to describe Vietnam’s political system.<sup>4</sup> In such a system the party exercises hegemonic control over state institutions, the armed forces and other organizations in society through the penetration of these institutions by party cells and committees. Senior party members form the leadership nucleus of the state apparatus, National Assembly, the People’s Armed Forces and the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF). These party leaders are termed “dual-role elites”.

The VFF is an umbrella organization grouping 29 registered mass organizations and special interest groups. The Vietnam Women’s Union is the largest mass organization with a membership of 12 million and a staff of 300 across the country. It is funded by the state. Other mass organizations include the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union and the Vietnam Youth Federation, with 3.5 million and 2.5 million members respectively. The leaders of these mass organizations regularly serve on the Party Central Committee.

The Vietnam Union of Friendship Associations is the official agency in charge of “people-to-people diplomacy”. It controls the People’s Aid Coordinating Committee that regulates and monitors all international non-government organizations (INGOs) working in Vietnam. INGOs work with line ministries, technical agencies, local authorities, and mass organizations of women, farmers, workers and youth to deliver various forms of development assistance.

The Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) is a semi-governmental organization that represents the private sector that emerged following the adoption of *doi moi*. The VCCI’s membership is composed of state-owned enterprises and private companies and trade associations in equal numbers. The VCCI is not funded by the state yet it is a member of the VFF. The VCCI is one example of the growth of an organization outside the confines of the Party. Nevertheless, it is policy that Party committees must be established in all private enterprises.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Party has attempted to carry out political reform through what is known as “grassroots democracy”. In 1998, in light of widespread peasant disturbances in Thai Binh province the previous year, the VCP Central Committee issued Directive 30/CT that established the policy basis for strengthening participation of communities at the local level (commune, agency and state-owned enterprises). Under the slogan “the people know, people discuss, people execute, people supervise”, Decree 29/1998/ND-CP aimed to improve transparency and accountability of local government. Article 4 directed local officials to disseminate information concerning

policies, law, long-term and annual socio-economic development plans, land-use policy and annual draft budgets.<sup>5</sup> Citizens were to be kept informed and then involved in discussing, deciding and monitoring the actions of local government. Finally, Decree 79, “On Grassroots Democracy” (2003), approved the participation of community-based organizations in development activities at the commune level.<sup>6</sup>

The term “mono-organizational socialism” merely categorizes the organizational structure of Vietnam. It does not tell us much about the dynamics of public policy formulation and implementation or about “everyday politics”. A consideration of these aspects is beyond the scope of this article. What is important to note is that the all-encompassing matrix of Party control has faced challenges to its hegemony as Vietnam has developed a market-orientated economy and integrated with the global economy. In 2006–07, Vietnam’s mono-organizational system faced its most severe challenge by politically active civil society groups.

### **What is Civil Society in the Vietnamese context?**

With the adoption of *doi moi* in the 1980s, Vietnamese society began to change and so too did state-society relations. As Vietnam opened up to the outside world, foreign donors and government aid agencies, as well as INGOs, rushed to assist Vietnam by applying their own models of development. These models incorporated the view that supporting counterpart NGOs was the best way of carving out space for civil society activity in authoritarian political systems.<sup>7</sup> In practice this meant forming partnerships with domestic NGOs and pursuing “bottom up” approaches that stressed participatory development and gender and ethnic equality.

By the early 1990s it quickly became evident that there was an explosion of organizational activity at all levels in Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> Mark Sidel developed one of the first typologies to capture the complexity of this development.<sup>9</sup> Sidel classified these groups into nine categories: (1) newer, more independent policy research and teaching groups; (2) Ho Chi Minh City and other southern social activism and social service networks; (3) quasi-public/quasi-private and private universities and other educational institutions; (4) senior leader-supported patronage groups supporting training and research projects; (5) professional and business associations; (6) peasant associations and collectives; (7) state-recognized and unrecognized religious groups, temples and churches; (8) traditional Party-led

mass organizations and trade unions; and (9) political activism groups challenging the Party and state. Sidel explicitly rejected the use of NGO as a collective term to describe these groups; instead he classified them as “newer policy- and development-orientated initiatives and groups”.<sup>10</sup>

Writing in the same year, this author developed a typology that classified Vietnamese associations into one of nine categories: political, mass organization, business, commercial and professional, science and technology, arts and culture, social welfare/NGO, religious, friendly associations and public affairs.<sup>11</sup> In 2003, two other typologies were developed. Wischermann and Vinh identified four categories (mass, professional, business and issue-orientated organizations),<sup>12</sup> while Vasavakul identified five categories (political-professional, mass, popular, non-state research institutes and centres and non-governmental organizations).<sup>13</sup>

These typologies have in many respects been overtaken by the rapid growth of non-government voluntary (or non-profit) associations at grassroots level. These groups are collectively referred to by foreign scholars as “community-based organizations” (CBOs). CBOs have taken a leading role in managing natural resources, combating environmental pollution, promoting development for a sustainable livelihood, income generation and disseminating knowledge. Examples of community-based organizations include: water users group, small savings and credit associations, user groups, farmers cooperatives, other special purpose cooperatives, medical volunteers, village development committees and committees for the protection of street children. In July 2005, it was estimated that there were 140,000 CBOs, in addition to 3,000 cooperatives (agriculture, fisheries, construction, sanitation and health care), 1,000 locally registered “NGOs” and 200 charities.

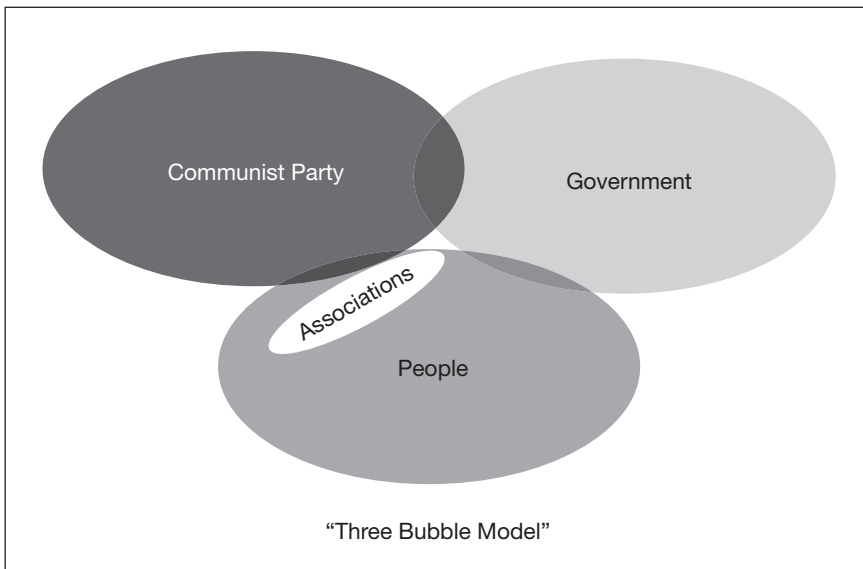
The growth of CBOs put strain on Vietnam’s legal system as it struggled to develop a regulatory framework that was relevant to such a diversity of groups. What resulted was a patchwork of ad hoc regulations and laws that did not add up to a comprehensive legal framework to govern the establishment, registration and operations of CBOs.<sup>14</sup> Some CBOs operated relatively independently of the state but their ambiguous legal status always put them at risk due to political sensitivities.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank came to Vietnam with the explicit aim of supporting civil society through partnerships with local counterparts. INGOs also included the promotion of civil society as part of their mission

statements in order to attract government funding for their overseas activities. In sum, organizations that were part of the UN system, as well as foreign aid donors and INGOs, quickly engaged at various levels with mass organizations and their affiliates even though these organizations were not true NGOs in the western sense of the term. These organizations are extensions of, if not agents of, the state. Most foreign scholars uncritically apply the terms NGO to the wide variety of groups, associations and organizations included in the above typologies and refer to this ensemble of associations and organizations as “civil society”.<sup>15</sup>

According to Joseph Hannah, the Marxist-Leninist model of society comprises three parts: party, government and the people (see Chart 1).<sup>16</sup> A well-known Vietnamese slogan states: “The party leads, the people rule/govern the government manages”. In the official view, Vietnamese citizens are permitted to form their own associations, such as home village societies, surname associations, pigeon racing

Chart 1  
Marxist-Leninist View of People's Associations



SOURCE: Joseph Hannah, *Local Non-Government Organizations in Vietnam: Development, Civil Society and State-Society Relations* (Seattle: Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 2007), p. 54.

clubs and sports teams. These groups are viewed as “of the people” and are officially termed “popular associations”. Nonetheless, both Vietnamese authorities and Vietnamese mass organizations, eager to attract funding and support from abroad, describe themselves as NGOs.<sup>17</sup> This has effectively dovetailed with the focus of foreign donors and INGOs to create civil society in Vietnam by narrowly focusing on so-called local development NGOs.

The approach adopted by UN agencies, INGOs and foreign aid donors produced a huge demand for civil society-type organizations in Vietnam. Despite the fact that Vietnamese domestic organizations are state-sponsored and funded, and formed part of the VFF organizational matrix, they were termed “non-governmental organizations” by their foreign counterparts. Vietnamese officialdom shies away from using the term NGO when addressing a domestic audience but has no such reservations when dealing with foreign counterparts. Saleminck suggests that one reason is when NGO is literally translated into Vietnamese (*to chuc phi chinh phu*) it sounds very much like the Vietnamese word for anarchy, *vo chinh phu*.<sup>18</sup> In other words, in Vietnamese the term NGO implies estrangement from, if not opposition to, the state.

Vietnamese NGOs view their role quite differently from their foreign counterparts. First, they see themselves as partners working on development projects in support of state policy. Second, they view themselves as advocates for improved state services. And finally, they view themselves as representative of marginalized groups and lobby the state for changes in policy. In this role Vietnamese NGOs attempt to negotiate and educate state officials rather than confront them as a tactic to bring about change. In other words, their activities are in direct support of existing government programmes or in support of larger state-approved policy goals (national development or poverty alleviation). For example, the leaders of Vietnamese NGOs are frequently in contact with foreign companies that operate in Vietnam, local and foreign companies that own and run factories, and the workers that are employed. Vietnamese NGOs have sought to advance the health and well being of the workers in a manner that avoided confrontation or militant tactics. As Hannah has observed, “there is no social space for anti-sweat shop movements coming from local organizations”.<sup>19</sup> Vietnamese NGOs have kept their activities within the letter of the law.

There are an estimated thirty plus centres offering their services to assist with development projects or applied research.<sup>20</sup> These research centres are formed and managed by academics who are



affiliated with universities, provincial departments or professional associations such as the Association of Ethnologists or the Association of Folk Lore Studies.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, these research centers have a weak legal status. These centres are self-contained and do not open membership to the community as do traditional NGOs.

Most centres are registered as sub-associations under Decree 35/CP (1992) which covers science and technology associations.<sup>22</sup> These centres are essentially non-profit organizations that engage broadly in socio-economic development in cooperation with foreign donors. They are able to operate because of personal relations between their leaders and government officials.<sup>23</sup> Another category of NGO comprises the local staff of international NGOs that perform services similar to a research centre.<sup>24</sup> However, because they are not officially registered they have a dubious legal status.

The Vietnamese mono-organizational state has been in retreat since the 1990s, as many state services have been commercialized. It was in this context that so-called Vietnamese NGOs began to emerge to deliver services that were no longer provided by the state. Increasingly, this space has been occupied by INGOs at the expense of local development NGOs.<sup>25</sup>

The explosion of associational activity in Vietnam in the 1990s not only quickly spilled over the confines of the mono-organizational socialist model but outpaced Vietnamese legal statutes relating to popular organizations. In 1992, at the initiative of international donors, the Ministry of Home Affairs began drafting legislation on non-profit groups to govern the rapidly expanding private associational activity that was taking place. This proved to be a vexed matter and after seven years no agreement could be reached.<sup>26</sup> In 1995, Vietnamese authorities began drafting a law on non-profit groups; by early 1996 the draft had been revised more than twenty times.<sup>27</sup>

In 2002, Vietnamese officials attempted to draft a law on NGOs. By July 2005 the draft had been revised at least ten times and re-titled Law on Associations.<sup>28</sup> This draft law does not cover so-called Vietnamese NGOs. The adoption of the Law on Associations has been delayed by spirited lobbying by national professional and business associations to amend its provisions.

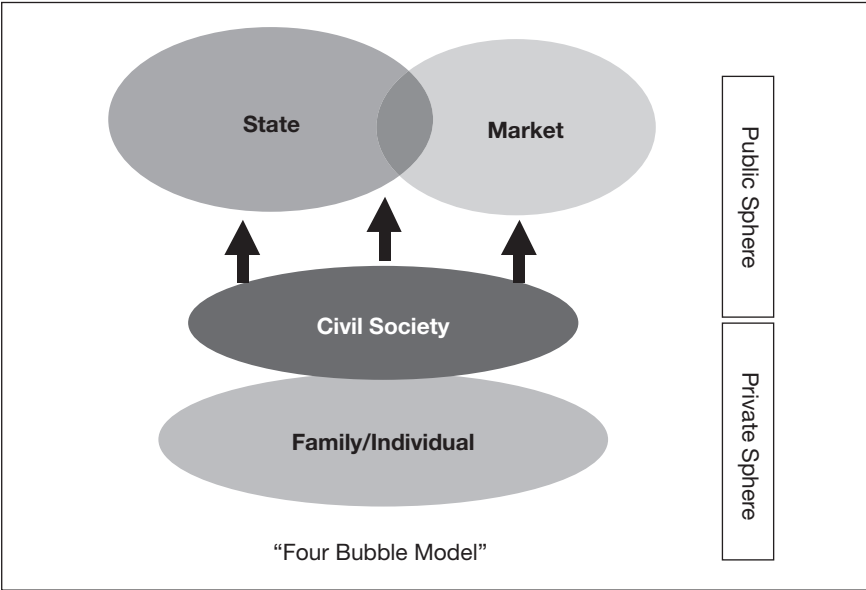
In 2002, 181 INGOs officially operated in Vietnam and through their sheer presence quickly dominated the space for civil society.<sup>29</sup> It became commonplace among foreign aid donors and INGOs to refer to "civil society" in Vietnam and to identify so-called Vietnamese NGOs as key building blocks. As noted above, this is misleading because Vietnamese groups that interacted with foreign counterparts

were invariably extensions of the state or state-run/controlled mass organizations and special interest groups.

There is no agreed definition of civil society in the academic community (see Chart 2).<sup>30</sup> Mary Kaldor has identified five different conceptions of civil society: *societas civilis*, bourgeois society, neo-liberal, activist and post-Modern version.<sup>31</sup> There is general agreement, however, that the word “civil” refers to civility or non-violence. But there is disagreement about whether non-violent activity should conform to the law because in authoritarian states, such as Vietnam, the law is explicitly used to suppress such activity. Can civil society truly exist in a country that lacks democratic structures and processes?

The activist conception of civil society emerged with the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe through the efforts of Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia and Solidarity in Poland. In this context, civil society was promoted as the means to advance democracy and freedom,

Chart 2  
Classical Depiction of Civil Society



SOURCE: Joseph Hannah, *Local Non-Government Organizations in Vietnam: Development, Civil Society and State-Society Relations* (Seattle: Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 2007), p. 53.

balance the power of the state and private sector, and enhance the efficiency, accountability and good governance of the state.<sup>32</sup> As will be noted below, overseas Vietnamese pro-democracy groups advocate the development of “civil society” as part of their strategy to end authoritarian communist one-party rule in Vietnam.

What does civil society mean in the Vietnamese context? North American scholars, members of the Vietnam Studies Group affiliated with the Association of Asian Studies, after debating how civil society should be translated into Vietnamese, concluded there was no exact equivalent. These scholars further noted that several of the approximate equivalents that were being used had quite different connotations from their western meaning.<sup>33</sup>

The term civil society is not widely used in academic and official discourse in Vietnam. Two Vietnamese expressions — *xa hoi dan su* and *xa hoi cong dan* — are commonly used as equivalents for civil society. However, the Ministry of Home Affairs is currently studying how the terms NGO and civil society should be officially translated. Neither term is used in official documents when referring to Vietnamese domestic organizations; groups that foreigners refer to as NGOs are classified as popular associations. There is evidence that grassroots Vietnamese NGOs are contesting this interpretation.

The term civil society has two distinct meanings in the current Vietnamese context.<sup>34</sup> The first is an economic meaning that views civil society in terms of service delivery by local development NGOs. In this context the promotion of civil society is viewed as being closely linked to international benefactors and their agendas. This is so because in Vietnam’s mono-organizational system there is no domestic civil society sector that is independent or autonomous from the direct control of the state.

The second meaning of civil society in a Vietnamese context is political. According to Hoang Ngoc Giao this meaning includes political associations such as those affiliated with the VFF.<sup>35</sup> Since the 1990s, civil society has taken on a new meaning in Vietnam. Dissidents have appropriated the term civil society in order to promote liberal democracy. Civil society in this context refers to the creation of public space where Vietnam’s one-party state can be challenged by the non-violent political mobilization of ordinary citizens. Political activist Lu Phuong argues, for example, “the campaign to raise a civil society will also become a campaign for law, freedom and basic human rights”.<sup>36</sup> In sum, civil society in its political sense refers to the struggle for democracy against the authoritarian Vietnamese state.

The notion of political civil society is not held widely in Vietnam.<sup>37</sup> When the term civil society is used in discussions with foreigners it generally refers to Vietnamese organizations closely linked to the state. These organizations try to pass themselves off as “genuine” civil society groups out of self-interest.

### **The Rise of Political Civil Society**

Over the past four to five years there has been a marked change in the nature of political civil society in Vietnam. Previously, political dissidents and religious activists acted individually or in small cliques isolated from each other.<sup>38</sup> But in recent years there has been a concerted effort to form explicitly political organizations dedicated to the promotion of democracy, human rights and religious freedom. An unprecedented number of political organizations have been formed.<sup>39</sup> These groups are considered illegal by the state and therefore have no standing in Vietnam’s one-party political system. Among the new political organizations are:

- People’s Democratic Party of Vietnam (PDP). It was founded in 2004 after five-years of Internet networking by Cong Thanh Do, a Vietnamese-American living in California, with like-minded Vietnamese in Vietnam. Do used the pseudonym Tran Nam. The PDP’s network included leaders of the United Workers-Farmers Association (see below). Do was arrested on 14 August 2006 in Phan Thiet and charged with plotting to blow up the US Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City. This charge was later amended to disseminating anti-government leaflets. Do served one month in jail before he was deported. Shortly after Do’s arrest, six Vietnamese-based PDP members were arrested. They were tried by the People’s Court in Ho Chi Minh City. Party Chairman, Dr Le Nguyen Sang, journalist Huynh Nguyen Dao and lawyer Nguyen Bac Truyen, were sentenced to five, four and three years respectively.
- Vietnam Populist Party (VPP, *Dang Vi Dan*).<sup>40</sup> Originally a group of Vietnamese exiles in the United States who later adopted the name VPP. The VPP was founded in Houston by Nguyen Cong Bang. During 2005 members of the VPP established contact with Vietnamese in Vietnam including the United Workers-Farmers Association (see below). Bang advised the United Workers-Farmers Association to keep a low profile while building up an underground network. Bang argued that a more proactive stance

would invite repression and dampen recruitment. The VPP attracted only a small membership in Vietnam. At least three members were arrested in 2007: Rev. Hong Tung, the party's representative in Vietnam (February); journalist Truong Minh Duc (May); and student Dang Hung (July).

- Democratic Party of Vietnam (DPV) was founded in June 2006 as a political discussion group by Hoang Minh Chinh. Also known as the Twenty-first Century Democracy Party (DP XI). The Democratic Party of Vietnam claims that it is the reactivated Vietnam Democratic Party (VDP) founded in 1944, which was one of two non-communist parties to be represented in the National Assembly until it was dissolved in 1985. Chinh was the Moscow-trained former head of the Institute of Philosophy. He was accused of being a pro-Soviet revisionist, imprisoned and then released in 1967. He continued to advocate political change and was jailed again in 1981 and 1995.

Chinh had been Secretary General of the VDP from 1951–56. He sought to revive the legacy of the VDP by appealing to Ho Chi Minh's brand of nationalism, a stance which alienated younger dissidents. The DPV may have had about a dozen members mainly in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Chinh was given permission to travel to the United States in 2005 for medical treatment. While in the US he testified before the House International Relations Committee and strongly criticized the regime's handling of religious and political dissent. On his return to Vietnam he was publicly vilified and attacked by pro-regime supporters.<sup>41</sup> Lawyer Bui Thi Kim Thanh was detained in Ho Chi Minh City in the crackdown surrounding the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit and forcibly committed to Bien Hoa Central Psychiatric Hospital.

- Committee for Human Rights in Vietnam founded by lawyer Nguyen Van Dai. In June 2007, Truong Minh Nguyet and two other activists were arrested for distributing reactionary propaganda in violation of Article 258 of the Penal Code. Nguyet was sentenced by the Dong Nai province court to two years imprisonment for spreading anti-state propaganda. Nguyet, a member of the Committee for Human Rights in Vietnam, had used the Internet to express her views on Vietnam's economic and political situation.
- Free Journalists Association of Vietnam (FJAV) was set up by a group of overseas Vietnamese and includes an underground network of bloggers and dissident journalists inside Vietnam. This network gathers and disseminates news that is censored in

Vietnam. In 2006, the FJAV attempted to establish an independent online news publication based in Vietnam with funds from the US National Endowment for Democracy. Vietnamese security officials detained and interrogated many FJAV activists and have barred at least one member from travelling abroad to attend an international conference focused on freedom of expression.

- Bloc 8406 was founded on 8 April 2006 (more later).
- Vietnam Progression Party (VPP) was founded on 8 September 2006 by Le Thi Cong Nhan, Nguyen Phong, Nguyen Binh Thanh and Hoang Thi Anh Dao. Father Nguyen Van Ly was named adviser. Le Thi Cong Nhan is an English-speaking lawyer hired by the British Embassy to defend a Vietnamese-British woman accused of drug smuggling. Cong Nhan was a signatory of the Bloc 8406 appeal. The other founders of the VPP were all based in Hue. The VPP represented a younger generation of political dissidents who rejected Ho Chi Minh's legacy. The VPP issued an Interim Political Platform on 8 September 2006 that called for a multi-party democracy, religious freedom, general elections and protection of private property. In 2007, the VPP joined with the Vietnam Populist Party/For the People Party and formed the Lac Hong Group.
- Vietnam Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights was formed on 16 October 2006 between Bloc 8406 and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. The Alliance was modelled on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy in Myanmar. This was reputedly the biggest dissident movement seen in Vietnam since the unification of the country in 1975.
- Independent Labour Union of Vietnam (ILUV) was founded on 20 October 2006 reportedly Vietnam's first independent trade union. Nguyen Khac Toan was identified as president of the interim executive committee consisting of eleven commissioners: Nguyen Cong Ly, Ngo Cong Quynh, Nguyen Thi Huong, Tran Hoang Duong, Pham Sy Thien, Nguyen Xuan Dao, Tran Huyen Thanh, Luong Hoai Nam, Le Chi Dung, Tran Khai Thanh Thuy and Tran Quoc Thu. The ILUV listed three broad purposes: to protect the legitimate rights of Vietnamese workers; to provide assistance to needy workers who become sick or disabled; and to promote solidarity among all workers.
- United Workers-Farmers Association (UWFA) was founded on 30 October 2006 by Nguyen Tan Hoanh and Tran Thi Le Hang. Both already had reputations as labour strike activists. During its organizational phase, members of what became the UWFA, had

contact with the Houston-based Vietnam Populist Party. After differences emerged over tactics, the UWFA developed ties with another US-based group, People's Democratic Party, and adopted a more proactive stance modelled on the Polish Solidarity movement. However, the tactic of going public invited repression. By mid-December 2006, after the APEC summit in Hanoi, ten of the UWFA's leading officials were placed in detention. By 2007, the UWFA had been forced to go underground.

- Lac Hong Group, formed in February 2007, was a coalition between the Vietnam Populist Party and the Vietnam Progression Party.

Generally, the political groups discussed above lacked a large geographically dispersed membership base. Their self-description as a "political party" was problematic. However, in 2006, Vietnam's network of pro-democracy activists and groups coalesced into an identifiable political movement, marking a new development in Vietnamese politics.<sup>42</sup> This political network issued a number of statements that called upon the Vietnamese state to respect basic human rights and religious freedom and to permit citizens to freely associate and form their own political parties.<sup>43</sup> On 6 April 2006, 116 persons issued an Appeal for Freedom of Political Association that they distributed throughout Vietnam via the Internet. On 8 April, 118 persons issued a Manifesto on Freedom and Democracy for Vietnam.<sup>44</sup> These pro-democracy advocates became known as Bloc 8406 after the date of their founding manifesto.

Members of Bloc 8406 produced a fortnightly publication, *Tu Do Ngon Luan* (Free Speech) that first appeared on 15 April 2006. A typical issue comprised thirty pages of text. *Tu Do Ngon Luan* was published in A4 format in both hard copy and electronically. The online version was published as a portable document file that facilitated its dissemination. *Tu Do Ngon Luan* was edited by three Catholic priests, Nguyen Van Ly, Phan Van Loi and Chan Tin.

Bloc 8406 represents a diverse network of professionals widely dispersed throughout the country. Among the signatories of the manifesto 31 per cent were teachers and lecturers, 14 per cent were Catholic priests, 13 per cent were university professors, 7 per cent were writers, 6 per cent were medical doctors with the remaining 29 per cent composed of intellectuals, engineers, nurses, Hoa Hao religious leaders, businessmen, army veterans, technicians, ordinary citizens and a lawyer.



Bloc 8406 is predominately an urban-centred network, with over half the signatories residing in Hue (38 per cent) and Ho Chi Minh City (15 per cent), with additional concentrations in Hai Phong, Hanoi, Da Nang and Can Tho. These four nodes account equally for 30 per cent of the signatories.<sup>45</sup> The remainder of Bloc 8406 members are geographically dispersed throughout Vietnam in six locations: Bac Ninh, Nha Trang, Phan Thiet, Quang Ngai, Vung Tau and Vinh Long.

The APEC summit in November 2006 included a leadership meeting of heads of state and government. Because world attention was focused on Hanoi, the response by security officials towards Bloc 8406 was initially circumspect. The police harassed several of the more prominent signatories of the 8 April manifesto. Their home phones were disconnected and they were placed under surveillance. Others were picked up for interrogation and detained for varying periods. Employers were pressured to terminate their employment. Police also raided the homes of other prominent dissidents and seized computers, cell phones and personal files.

Police actions provoked a public protest by democracy advocates. On 30 April, Bloc 8406 issued a letter condemning police actions signed by 178 supporters. By 8 May, the number of persons subscribing to the manifesto grew to 424; and by the year's end foreign observers were reporting that the support base for Bloc 8406 had expanded to over two thousand, many under the age of thirty.<sup>46</sup> Bloc 8406 members have attempted to evade detection by utilizing digital telephone and encryption technology on websites provided by Voice Over Internet Protocol providers such as PalTalk, Skype and Yahoo! Messenger.<sup>47</sup> These websites have been utilized to organize chatroom discussions within Vietnam as well as overseas.

On 22 August 2006, Bloc 8406 publicly announced a four-phase proposal for democratization including the restoration of civil liberties, establishment of political parties, drafting of a new constitution and democratic elections for a representative National Assembly.<sup>48</sup> On 12 October 2006, members of Bloc 8406 issued an open letter to the leaders of the APEC leadership summit asking their help in promoting democracy in Vietnam. Four days later, Bloc 8406 attempted to transform itself into a political movement by uniting with the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam in the Vietnam Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights mentioned earlier.

Prior to the APEC summit, police sealed off the homes of leading Bloc members and restricted their movements. At the same time, members of the United Workers-Farmers Association were arrested



and later put on trial. After the APEC summit, Vietnam began a concerted effort to repress Bloc 8406. Seven members of Bloc 8406, including lawyers Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan, were arrested, tried and convicted in March–April 2007. Their sentences were slightly reduced in December.

Other political activists were arrested and put on trial during the year, most notably Catholic priest Father Nguyen Van Ly. Bloc 8406's leadership appears to have been effectively decapitated by Vietnam's security apparatus. Many of the signatories of the Bloc 8406's appeal, manifesto and petitions have been silent in the face of regime repression. This was especially notable on the 2007 and 2008 anniversaries of Bloc 8406's founding which passed without notable incident.

In June–July 2007, farmers primarily from Tien Giang province conducted a protracted public protest over land grievances. They gathered in Ho Chi Minh City near the local offices of the National Assembly. They were joined by supporters from seven other Mekong Delta provinces. Several aspects of these events were unprecedented: the large numbers involved, the diversity of provinces represented and the length of time they were permitted to demonstrate and display their banners in public.

The Tien Giang demonstration received real time coverage through an overseas dissident network. Several of the protesters gave live interviews over their mobile phones to foreign journalists in Hanoi and New Horizon Radio operated by the Vietnam Reform Party. Photos of the banners held by the peasants were available via the Vietnam Reform Party's website. Eventually the protracted Tien Giang peasant demonstration was ended when security officials rounded up and bundled off the protesters in the middle of the night. What was new about these protests was that they attracted the moral support from Bloc 8406 and were publicly addressed by Thich Quang Do of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

On the face of it Bloc 8406 and the associated political civil society organizations that emerged in 2006 appear to have suffered the same fate as political dissidents in the 1990s. However, an additional element must be added to this analysis — the role of overseas Vietnamese pro-democracy activists who have begun to reach out to their countrymen to provide finance, political support and a range of new tactics to confront the one-party state.<sup>49</sup> The key — but by no means only — organization in this new development is the Vietnam Reform Party (*Viet Nam Canh Tan Cach Mang Dang*) or Viet Tan.<sup>50</sup>

The Viet Tan claims it seeks to promote democracy in Vietnam by non-violent means, while the Vietnamese media has depicted it as a terrorist organization.<sup>51</sup> Both the Vietnamese state-controlled media and the Viet Tan are in agreement about the basic history of the Viet Tan. The founder of the Viet Tan was Hoang Co Minh, a former Republic of Vietnam Navy Admiral. Minh founded the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (NUFLV) on 30 April 1980. He later established the Viet Tan on 10 September 1982. Both the NUFLV and the Viet Tan aimed to overthrow the Vietnamese communist government through violent means.

Both Vietnamese authorities and Hoang Co Minh supporters agree that the NUFLV carried out acts of armed subversion in Vietnam by infiltrating its members through Laos and Cambodia. A member of the Vietnam Reform Party has also indicated that during the period of clandestine activity (1982–94), members of Viet Tan living in Vietnam carried weapons.<sup>52</sup> Vietnam charges that the Viet Tan was engaged in armed violence as late as 2002 when it hired criminals to assassinate government officials.

On 19 September 2004, it was announced that the NUFLV had been disbanded and that the Viet Tan would now conduct its activities in public.<sup>53</sup> Leaders of the Viet Tan released a programme that stressed that peaceful means would be used to achieve democracy in Vietnam in cooperation with other like-minded groups. Since 2004, the Viet Tan has become active in lobbying politicians in Australia, Europe and the United States.

During the final quarter of 2006, the Viet Tan members in the United States actively lobbied the administration of President George W. Bush to raise human rights issues at the APEC summit in Hanoi in November. A member of Viet Tan addressed the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. Viet Tan also lobbied international donors to link transparency and accountability with their aid programmes in Vietnam. In March 2007, Viet Tan organized international rallies to protest the wave of political repression then underway in Vietnam.

In late March and early April 2007, a barrage of articles appeared in the Vietnamese state-controlled press that described the Viet Tan as a terrorist organization. But these articles only carried details of NUFLV activities before it was disbanded and provided no details of Viet Tan activities after September 2004. Indeed, when the Vietnamese media turned to current developments the Viet Tan was reported to have set up law firms, businesses and micro-credit programmes to generate funds to finance its activities in Vietnam.

Viet Tan was also charged with calling for a boycott of Vietnamese commodities and air services. All of these alleged activities were distinctly non-violent in nature.

Vietnamese security officials deliberately conflate all acts of political protest against the Vietnamese state, including peaceful protest and political violence, and label them terrorism. It is also unclear when Vietnamese authorities designated Viet Tan as a terrorist organization and under what legislation.

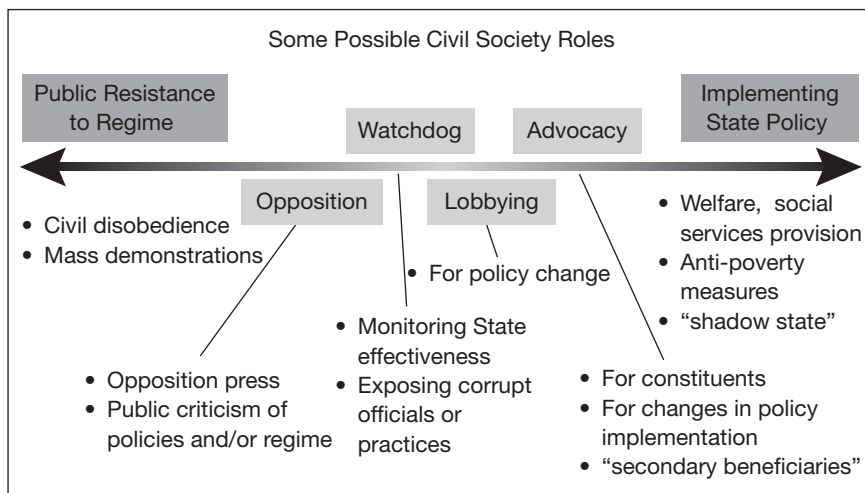
The events of 2006–07 demonstrate that political civil society groups in Vietnam are growing in size and number and are becoming increasingly networked. Political dissent is taking on a greater organizational form with the appearance of nascent political parties and trade unions as well as special interests groups representing independent journalists, human rights advocates and former political prisoners. The still born alliance between Bloc 8406 and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, and the formation of the Lac Hong Group represents evidence that the compartmentalization between dissident groups of the past is now breaking down.

However, there is no discernable evidence that the pro-democracy movement is gaining traction or coalescing into a significant force able to mount a major challenge to Vietnam's one-party state. The leadership of Bloc 8406 and associated political civil society organizations has been decapitated by Vietnam's public security apparatus and its members driven underground. Nonetheless these developments are harbingers of the future. The emergence of the Viet Tan (and other overseas-based groups), and Viet Tan's pursuit of non-violent change, has resulted in the provision of training, funds and other resources for political civil society groups in Vietnam. In December 2006 and November 2007, for example, the arrest and trial of Viet Tan activists was evidence that the Viet Tan was able to conduct activities in Vietnam.

### **Civil Society Challenges to Vietnam's One-Party System**

Chart 3 sets out a schema that identifies civil society roles for groups and organizations that are currently active in Vietnam. The vast majority of civil society groups identified in this article are clustered on the right side of the chart. Most Vietnamese groups and organizations that have been identified as forming civil society are in fact closely linked or attached to the one-party state. They work as partners in implementing state policy in the provision of welfare, social services and poverty alleviation measures. Over time these

Chart 3  
Spectrum of Civil Society Roles



SOURCE: Joseph Hannah, *Local Non-Government Organizations in Vietnam: Development, Civil Society and State-Society Relations* (Seattle: Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 2007), p. 93.

groups have also expanded their role to acting as advocates for their constituents by suggesting changes in how policy is implemented. And most recently, several of these so-called civil society groups have become active in lobbying for policy change.

Vietnam has not yet developed civil society groups that act as watchdogs to expose corruption by party cadres and government officials. The exposure of corruption has largely been in the hands of intrepid journalists who work for what might be termed progressive newspapers, such as *Thanh Nien* and *Tuoi Tre*. The Vietnamese media played a prominent role in exposing a corruption scandal by a Project Management Unit (PMU) in the Ministry of Transport on the eve of the Tenth National Party Congress in 2006. But senior officials soon intervened and called a halt to unfettered media reporting. In June 2008, after the exoneration of the Deputy Minister of Transport in March, two reporters associated with *Tuoi Tre* and *Thanh Nien* attempted to raise the PMU scandal again. In May, the two journalists and their police informants were arrested, charged and convicted of abuse of power. In August, there was a further crackdown on the press, when the credentials of seven journalists

and editors from four newspapers were revoked. In October two editors working for *Dai Doan Ket*, the official organ of the VFF, were dismissed.

Generally, foreign scholarship on Vietnam has shied away from researching the activities of civil society groups depicted on the left hand side of Chart 3.<sup>54</sup> Because Vietnam does not permit privately owned newspapers or other media, Vietnam does not have an opposition press that criticizes both government policies and the one-party political system.<sup>55</sup> Such criticism is largely confined to limited circulation news sheets distributed by pro-democracy dissidents. In recent years, the Internet has served as the most important conduit for opposition views. In addition, the Viet Tan operates New Horizon Radio that beams Vietnamese-language broadcasts into Vietnam.

This article has documented the emergence of political civil society groups that have taken up role on the left hand side of Chart 3. These groups have not yet engaged in direct civil disobedience or mass demonstrations against the government. To date these groups have confined themselves to public criticism of Vietnam's one-party state for not permitting political and religious freedom as well as human rights.

The main question for the future is what impact will the emergence of political civil society have on Vietnam's one-party state?

Vietnam's accomplishments after twenty-two years of *doi moi* are undeniable. Vietnam has achieved remarkable economic growth accompanied by notable success in reducing rates of poverty. Vietnam has maintained internal stability throughout its transition process through a stable transfer of power to a younger generation at each national party congress. The process of political change has been both gradual and measured.

Straight-line extrapolations of continued high economic growth and political stability, however, must take into account the cross currents of political dissent and economic grievance that have emerged in recent years. In addition to peasant and Catholic protests over land issues and public concern over endemic corruption, Vietnam's current inflationary spiral has generated measurable discontent among the public at large, particularly in urban areas. Vietnam's textile and garment industries have experienced a rising number of wildcat strikes.

Since the late 1980s, Vietnam has experienced an explosive growth of associational activity particularly at grassroots level by community-based organizations. In recent years, in urban areas especially, Vietnam has witnessed the creation of an increasing

number of political advocacy groups on such issues as human rights, democracy and religious freedom. These associations can be expected to play even greater roles in the coming years.

In 2006, pro-democracy groups began to coalesce into an identifiable movement known as Bloc 8406. It is evident that not only has a political network developed, but that there is growing cross-fertilization on some issues. This trend is likely to continue in the future as the pro-democracy agenda of political civil society expands to embrace peasant grievances, labour issues, human rights, religious freedom and ethnic minority rights. Vietnam's domestic activists can expect to receive increased support from their compatriots and other pro-democracy groups abroad.

Over the next few years Vietnam faces the prospects of a slowdown in growth rates after a decade of considerable success. The legitimacy of Vietnam's one-party state largely rests on performance legitimacy, that is, success in delivering economic growth and political stability to society at large. Vietnam's current economic woes as well as endemic corruption are undermining performance as the basis of regime legitimacy. Other forms of political legitimacy, such as nationalism and charismatic leadership, have receded with time. Vietnam's one-party state lacks popular sovereignty through free and fair democratic elections as the basis of its legitimacy.

Vietnam's one-party system is likely to be heavily challenged in the future to make good its goal of creating a "law-governed state". Political civil society groups will press the party-state to make good on constitutional provisions providing for "freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of the press, the right to be informed, and the right to assemble, form associations and hold demonstrations in accordance with the provisions of the law" (Article 69) as well as provisions of Article 70 that provide for freedom of religion. The future is likely to witness multiple sites of contestation — in the National Assembly, Vietnam Fatherland Front and Vietnam Communist Party itself — as political civil society groups press their agenda.

Five patterns of political change may provide useful frameworks for considering what may lie ahead:<sup>56</sup>

- Status quo: Elements of the ruling elite fight to remain in power through repressive measures and foot dragging. Maintaining the status quo appears untenable in light of socio-economic change now underway.
- Authoritarian rule: Economic downturn coupled with political instability could lead to a reversion of authoritarian rule. However,

past patterns of political and social change strongly suggest that this will be impossible and could well result in a split within the VCP.

- Replacement: Opposition groups take the lead. This pattern appears least likely because the opposition at present is miniscule and does not have widespread public support. The opposition is also vulnerable to state repression.
- Transplacement: Joint action by elements of the power elite and elements of the opposition. This pattern seems unlikely in the short-term due to the weakness of the opposition but could well be a viable pattern over the long-term.
- Transformation: The elite in power initiates change. The evidence suggests that Vietnam's leaders are negotiating among themselves the pace and scope of change. Vietnam is clearly liberalizing but not democratizing; but pressures from below could prompt some Party elites to initiate further political change.

## **Conclusion**

The central theme of this article is that the emergence of political civil society represents a major new development in Vietnamese domestic politics. Heretofore foreign academics have focused their attention on “everyday politics” and so-called civil society groups in Vietnam. This research has generated new insights into the changing nature of Vietnamese society and state-society relations during the reform period. In 2006–07 a variety of self-proclaimed political parties and nascent trade unions coalesced into a political movement, Bloc 8406, and in an unprecedented development directly confronted the hegemony of one-party rule in Vietnam. In contrast, “everyday politics” and civil society approaches focus on microscopic challenges to state authority and offer few insights into the possibilities of political change in the future.

This article has argued that the identification of Vietnamese “non-governmental organizations” with civil society is misleading for two reasons. First, Vietnamese NGOs are largely extensions of the state. Second, contemporary academic focus on popular associations and community-based organizations as constituting civil society focuses almost exclusively on developmental politics to the exclusion of groups advocating democratic political change.

This article argues that the role of political civil society in Vietnam is likely to become more important for at least two main reasons. First, despite state repression, Bloc 8406 has succeeded



in demonstrating the political efficacy of networking and cross-fertilization by like-minded groups that espouse religious freedom, human rights and liberal democracy. Second, there has been a marked rise in support for political civil society by overseas Vietnamese. They have eschewed violence and now offer financial support and political guidance.

Over the next few years Vietnam's one-party state will face major challenges to performance as the basis of its legitimacy. It is already clear that endemic corruption, environmental pollution and a decline in economic growth rates are producing strains within Vietnam's mono-organizational system and within the ruling Party itself.

This article concludes by noting that political change in Vietnam will be significantly determined by how Vietnam's one-party state manages the challenges posed by political civil society. Among the five scenarios mapped out, only two appear plausible. One possibility is transplacement, that is, joint action by members of the ruling elite acting in concert with elements of political civil society in the long term. The most likely scenario is transformation, that is, elements within the VCP leadership take the lead in initiating political change.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Such as the Association of Former Political Prisoners, Committee for Human Rights in Vietnam, Free Journalists Association of Vietnam, and Vietnam Political and Religious Prisoners Friendship Association.
- <sup>2</sup> Note the absence of any discussion of political civil society groups in *Forms of Engagement Between State Agencies & Civil Society Organizations in Vietnam: Study Report* (Hanoi: VUFO-NGO Resource Centre, December 2008). This report was prepared for the international donor community and was funded by the Finnish Department for International Development. As will become apparent in the discussion below, the term Vietnamese NGO is used advisedly. I would prefer to preface it with the words "so-called" or put NGO in quotation marks. But for stylistic reasons I have limited these descriptors.
- <sup>3</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, "Political Dissent and Political Reform in Vietnam, 1997–2002", in *The Power of Ideas: Intellectual Input and Political Change in East and Southeast Asia*, edited by Claudia Derichs and Thomas Heberer (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2006), pp. 115–32.
- <sup>4</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, "Mono-Organizational Socialism and the State", in *Vietnam's Rural Transformation*, edited by Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet and Doug J. Porter (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 39–64.
- <sup>5</sup> Bach Tan Sinh, "Civil Society and NGOs in Vietnam: Some Initial Thoughts on Developments and Obstacles", paper presented to the meeting with the



- Delegation of the Swedish Parliamentary Commission on Swedish Policy for Global Development to Vietnam, Hanoi, 2 March 2001, p. 4.
- <sup>6</sup> Gita Sabharwal and Than Thi Thien Huong, "Civil Society in Vietnam: Moving from the Margins to the Mainstream" (CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, July 2005), p. 4
- <sup>7</sup> Oscar Saleminck, "Translating, Interpreting, and Practicing Civil Society in Vietnam: A Tale of Calculated Misunderstandings", in *Development Brokers and Translators: The Ethnography of Aid and Agencies*, edited by David Lewis and David Mosse (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press Inc., 2006), p. 102.
- <sup>8</sup> An empirical survey conducted in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City recorded more than 700 "civic organizations", most of which had been established after 1986; Joerg Wischermann and Nguyen Quang Vinh, "The Relationship between Civic and Governmental Organizations in Vietnam: Selected Findings", in *Getting Organized in Vietnam: Moving in and around the Socialist State*, edited by Ben J. Tria Kerkvliet, Russell H.K. Heng, and David W.H. Koh (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), p. 186.
- <sup>9</sup> Mark Sidel, "The Emergence of a Nonprofit Sector and Philanthropy in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam", in *Emerging Civil Society in the Asia Pacific Community*, edited by Tadashi Yamamoto (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1995), pp. 294–96.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 293–94.
- <sup>11</sup> Thayer, "Mono-Organizational Socialism and the State", op. cit., p. 54.
- <sup>12</sup> Wischermann and Vinh, "The Relationship between Civic and Governmental Organizations in Vietnam", op. cit., p. 186.
- <sup>13</sup> Thaveeporn Vasavakul, "From Fence-Breaking to Networking: Interests, Popular Organizations, and Policy Influences in Post-Socialist Vietnam", in *Getting Organized in Vietnam*, edited by Kerkvliet, Heng and Koh op. cit., pp. 26–28.
- <sup>14</sup> Key legal documents included: Decree 35/CP (1992), "On Some Measures to Encourage Scientific and Technological Activities"; Decree 29/1998/ND-CP (11 May 1998); Decree 71/1998/ND-CP (8 September 1998); Decree 07/1999/ND-CP (13 February 1999); Decree 177 (1999) on charity and social funds; and Law on Science and Technology (2000).
- <sup>15</sup> Irene Norlund, "Filling the Gap: The Emerging Civil Society in Viet Nam" (CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, January 2007), p. 11.
- <sup>16</sup> Joseph Hannah, *Local Non-Government Organizations in Vietnam: Development, Civil Society and State-society Relations*, Ph.D. dissertation (Seattle: University of Washington, 2007), p. 54.
- <sup>17</sup> Saleminck, "Translating, Interpreting, and Practicing Civil Society in Vietnam", op. cit., pp. 117–18.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 106.
- <sup>19</sup> Joseph Hannah, "Civil-Society Actors and Action in Viet-Nam: Preliminary Empirical Results and Sketches from an Evolving Debate", in *Towards Good Society: Civil Society Actors, the State and the Business Class in Southeast Asia — Facilitators of or Impediments to a Strong, Democratic, and Fair Society?* (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2005), p. 105.

- <sup>20</sup> Examples include the Rural Development Services Centre established in 1994; Social Development Research and Consultancy and Research and Training Centre for Community Development formed in 1996.
- <sup>21</sup> Vasavakul, "From Fence-Breaking to Networking", op. cit., p. 28.
- <sup>22</sup> Hannah, "Civil-Society Actors and Action in Viet-Nam", op. cit., pp. 107–08. Decree 35/CP was entitled, "Some Measures to Encourage Scientific and Technological Activities".
- <sup>23</sup> Kathrin Pedersen quoted in Salemink, "Translating, Interpreting, and Practicing Civil Society in Vietnam", op. cit., p. 118.
- <sup>24</sup> Michael Gray, "Creating Civil Society? The Emergence of NGOs in Vietnam", *Development and Change* 30, no. 4 (October 1999): 698.
- <sup>25</sup> Salemink, "Translating, Interpreting, and Practicing Civil Society in Vietnam", op. cit., p. 119.
- <sup>26</sup> Hannah, "Civil-Society Actors and Action in Viet-Nam", op. cit., p. 107, writes that attempts to draft a Law on NGOs was a fifteen-year closed door effort.
- <sup>27</sup> Salemink, "Translating, Interpreting, and Practicing Civil Society in Vietnam", op. cit., p. 120.
- <sup>28</sup> Hannah, "Civil-Society Actors and Action in Viet-Nam", op. cit., p. 107 and Sabharwal and Than Thi Thien Huong, "Civil Society in Vietnam: Moving from the Margins to the Mainstream", op. cit., p. 4.
- <sup>29</sup> Salemink, "Translating, Interpreting, and Practicing Civil Society in Vietnam", op. cit., pp. 105–06.
- <sup>30</sup> There is a vast literature on this subject. For an overview see Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) and Carlyle A. Thayer, "Political Reform in Vietnam: Doi Moi and the Emergence of Civil Society", in *The Developments of Civil Society in Communist Systems*, edited by Robert F. Miller (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992), pp. 110–29.
- <sup>31</sup> Summarized in Bach Tan Sinh, "Civil Society and NGOs in Vietnam", op. cit., pp. 2–3.
- <sup>32</sup> Salemink, "Translating, Interpreting, and Practicing Civil Society in Vietnam", op. cit., pp. 102–04.
- <sup>33</sup> Salemink, "Translating, Interpreting, and Practicing Civil Society in Vietnam", op. cit., p. 105 and Hy V. Luong, "The State, Local Associations, and Alternate Civilities in Rural Northern Vietnam", in *Civil Life, Globalization, and Political Change in Asia: Organizing Between Family and State*, edited by Robert P. Weller (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 123–47.
- <sup>34</sup> This section draws on Salemink, "Translating, Interpreting, and Practicing Civil Society in Vietnam", op. cit., p. 104 and Hoang Ngoc Giao, "Association of Civil Society in Vietnam", January 2007, p. 1, paper posted on the website of the Legal Reform Assistance Project <<http://www.lerap.org/en/node/91>>.
- <sup>35</sup> Hoang Ngoc Giao, "Association of Civil Society in Vietnam", argues that although Article 69 of the state constitution permits freedom of association, the activities of such associations can be curtailed by the state. Giao does not question the hegemony of Vietnam's one-party system.

- <sup>36</sup> Lu Phuong, “Xa Hoi Cong Dan: Tu Triet Tieu Den Phuc Hoi”, paper prepared for “Vietnam: Doi Moi, the State and Civil Society”, Vietnam Update 1994 Conference, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra, 10–11 November 1994. Lu Phuong was prevented by Vietnamese authorities from attending this conference.
- <sup>37</sup> Salemlink, “Translating, Interpreting, and Practicing Civil Society in Vietnam”, op. cit., pp. 121–22.
- <sup>38</sup> Thayer, “Political Dissent and Political Reform in Vietnam, 1997–2002”, op. cit.
- <sup>39</sup> This section draws heavily on research carried out by Bill Hayton that will appear in his forthcoming book, *The New Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Hayton is the former BBC correspondent stationed in Hanoi.
- <sup>40</sup> Frequently translated as For the People’s Party (FPP).
- <sup>41</sup> Hoang Minh Chinh passed away on 7 February 2008.
- <sup>42</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam: The Tenth Party Congress and After”, in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2007*, edited by Daljit Singh and Lorraine C. Salazar (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), pp. 381–97. The discussion of Bloc 8406 that follows is drawn from this source.
- <sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Vietnam: Fledgling Democracy Movement Under Threat”, 10 May 2006.
- <sup>44</sup> “Tuyen Ngon Tu Do Dan Chu Cho Viet-Nam Nam 2006”, 8 April 2006. One signatory to the 6 April appeal withdrew, and three new signatories were added for a total of 118.
- <sup>45</sup> Fourteen Catholic priests in Hue signed the manifesto. The nine signatories from Hanoi included lawyer Nguyen Van Dai, long-time dissident Hoang Minh Chinh, three former army officers (including the former editor of the *Military History Review*), the wives of two dissidents a writer and an academic.
- <sup>46</sup> Matt Steinglass, “Dissident Numbers Grow in Vietnam”, Voice of America, 16 October 2006.
- <sup>47</sup> Kay Johnson, “Voices of Dissent”, *Time Asia*, 18 September 2006.
- <sup>48</sup> Luisetta Mudie, “Vietnam Nervous Over Emerging Pro-Democracy Voices”, Radio Free Asia, 29 September 2006.
- <sup>49</sup> The role of the PDP and VPP was discussed earlier. It might be argued that their foreign origins rule out these groups as authentic political civil society groups in Vietnam. But in an era of globalization where the role of diaspora communities has assumed increasing importance, exclusion on these grounds seems arbitrary.
- <sup>50</sup> Material on the Viet Tan is drawn from Carlyle A. Thayer, “Mot bai viet ve dang Viet Tan”, BBC World Service, Vietnamese Service, 4 May 2007.
- <sup>51</sup> Quoc Minh, “Reactionary terrorist groups casts spectral shadow over democracy”, Vietnam News Service, 30 March 2007 and Commentary, “Overseas Organizations Acts Against National Interest”, Voice of Vietnam, 2 April 2007.
- <sup>52</sup> Viet Tan Party, “Response to Attacks on Viet Tan by Communist Vietnam’s State-Run Media”, 1 April 2007.

- <sup>53</sup> On 28 October 2003, Australia's ABC TV Foreign Correspondent programme aired an interview with a member of the Viet Tan and claimed this was the first public acknowledgement of the group in Vietnam.
- <sup>54</sup> Abuza is an exception. See Zachary Abuza, "Loyal Opposition: The Rise of Vietnamese Dissidents", *Harvard Asia Quarterly* (2000), Internet edition and Zachary Abuza, *Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001).
- <sup>55</sup> Nguyen Ngoc Giao, "The Media and The Emergence of a 'Civil Society'", Paper presented to Vietnam: Doi Moi, the State and Civil Society, Vietnam Update 1994 Conference, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra, 10–11 November 1994.
- <sup>56</sup> The latter three patterns of political change have been adapted from Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), pp. 109–63.