THREATS TO THE HEGEMONY

OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF VIETNAM

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Introduction

International observers were startled by the rampant spread of 2011's so-called Arab Spring, which resulted in the ouster of several authoritarians previously considered well-entrenched, including Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. Ironically, as recently as 2010, scholars were still arguing for the relative durability of the Mubarak regime (Perkins 2010; Blaydes 2010). The fact that these predictions turned out to be incorrect gives hope to those seeking democratization in similarly repressive countries.

Just like Mubarak's Egypt, Vietnam under the Communist Party is an instance of obdurate authoritarianism that has survived the third wave of democracy. However, the similarities do not end there. In a late-2011 speech at Ohio University, Dr. Amitav Acharya, UNESCO Chair in Transitional Challenges and Governance and Chair of the Association of Southeast Nations Studies Center, suggested that there may be an Arab Spring in miniature progressing in Asia. Therefore, Vietnam superficially resembles Mubarak's former state both internally (in that the ruling party is considered entrenched) and externally (in that it faces, as of late 2011, regional pushes towards political liberalization). These similarities beg an analysis of the durability of the Asian nation's authoritarian regime.

Indeed, Vietnam's government is not as stable as it appears. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) is besieged by threats to its hegemony arising from two primary sources: within the party itself and its own citizens. This paper will analyze the durability of the Communist Party with a critical focus on both sources of instability using as a framework the theory of Gene Sharp, a political theorist "credited with the strategy behind the toppling of the Egyptian government." This acclaim stems from his

written work concerning non-violent revolution, which has "been translated into more than 30 languages" (Arrow 2011). BBC News reporter Ruaridh Arrow notes the importance of his oeuvre during the Arab Spring, in which protesters in Tahrir square "read his work by torchlight in the shadow of tanks" (2011).

In the fourth U.S. edition of his 1993 publication, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, Gene Sharp argues that authoritarian regimes can be conquered "most quickly and with least cost if their weaknesses can be identified and the attack concentrated on them." To this end, Sharp delineates seventeen specific weaknesses of authoritarian regimes that can aid opponents in engineering their downfall. Of these seventeen, fourteen are explicitly applicable to Vietnam:

> The cooperation of a multitude of people, groups, and institutions needed to operate the system may be restricted or withdrawn…
>
> The requirements and effects of the regime's past policies will somewhat limit its present ability to adopt and implement conflicting policies…
>
> The system may become routine in its operation, less able to adjust quickly to new situations…
>
> The ideology may erode, and myths and symbols of the system may become unstable…
>
> If a strong ideology is present that influences one's view of reality, firm adherence to it may cause inattention to actual conditions and needs…
>
> Deteriorating efficiency and competency of the bureaucracy, or excessive controls and regulations, may make the system's policies and operation ineffective…
>
> Internal institutional conflicts and personal rivalries and hostilities may harm, and even disrupt, the operation of the dictatorship…
>
> Intellectuals and students may become restless in response to conditions, restrictions, doctrinalism, and repression…

The general public may over time become apathetic, skeptical, and even hostile to the regime…

Regional, class, cultural, or national differences may become acute…

The power hierarchy of the dictatorship is always unstable to some degree, and at times extremely so. Individuals do not only remain in the same position in the ranking, but may rise or fall to other ranks or be removed entirely and replaced by new persons…

Sections of the police or military forces may act to achieve their own objectives, even against the will of established dictators, including by coup d'état…

With so many decisions made by so few people in the dictatorship, mistakes of judgment, policy, and action are likely to occur…

If the regime seeks to avoid these dangers and decentralizes controls and decision making, its control over the central levers of power may be further eroded. (2010, 26-7)

This thesis will group each of the above weaknesses into three categories based on what segment of the population constitutes the threat to the regime. The first subset consists of scenarios in which the government is its own worst enemy. In other words, these threats to a regime's hegemony originate within that regime itself (for example, Sharp's second weakness leaves little room for the influence of outside actors). Consequently, the first half of this thesis will be devoted to an application of these weaknesses to Vietnam. On the other hand, several of Sharp's weaknesses involve individuals who are not a part of the government (numbers ten and eleven, for instance, concern intellectuals and students, and the general public, respectively). These non-governmental groups also constitute a significant threat to the government of Vietnam, and their oppositional role will be examined in the second third of this document.

Finally, some of the delineated weaknesses are applicable to Vietnam in a broad and general manner not specific to either the government or its citizens. These

overlapping threats to the CPV will be the theme for the third segment of this paper.

Taken as a whole, this thesis will attempt to prove that most of Sharp's weaknesses are applicable to Vietnam, resulting in a continually escalating war for dominance on the part of the Communist Party. In other words, as the party restricts the freedom of its citizens, the populace finds new and innovative manners of expressing their dissidence. In response, the CPV is forced to enact increasingly harsh measures to maintain the level of societal control with which it has historically enjoyed. However, a central theme of this thesis concerns the difficulty of maintaining this level of control. In general, this conflict has grave consequences for the durability of the regime, since its authority is becoming increasingly threatened by many segments of Vietnamese society.

An introduction to dissent within the CPV

The first subset of Sharp's weaknesses – threats to an authoritarian regime originating within the regime itself – is perhaps the biggest cause of concern for a repressive government. O'Donnell and Schmitter suggest that "there is no [democratic] transition [from authoritarianism] whose beginning is not the consequence – direct or indirect – of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself" (1986a 19). If such a regime can only be brought down by pre-existing tensions within, it logically follows that the internally-splintered Communist Party is its own worst enemy.

Rival internal ideology

Sharp notes that "internal conflicts and personal rivalries and hostilities may harm, and even disrupt, the operation of the dictatorship." Elaborating on this concept, O'Donnell and Schmitter make a distinction "between two groups typically present in such regimes": "hard-liners" and "soft-liners." Hard-liners "believe that the perpetuation of authoritarian rule is possible *and* desirable, if not by rejecting outright all democratic forms, then by erecting some façade behind which they can maintain inviolate the hierarchical and authoritarian nature of their power." On the other hand, soft-liners are distinguished by "an increasing awareness that the regime they helped to implant, and in which they usually occupy important positions, will have to make use, in the foreseeable future, of some degree or some form of electoral legitimization" (1986a, 15-6). In other words, the soft-liners believe that, "at some time in the future, some kind of political 'opening' will be necessary" (17). In summary, O'Donnell and Schmitter assert that cleavages between hard-liners and soft-liners are the "principal" cause of democratic transitions (19).

The Communist Party of Vietnam has much to fear from this claim, as the party does indeed contain both hard- and soft-liners. However, observers generally associate different terminology to the two factions. On the one hand, there is the "conservative wing," also known as the "anti-imperialists" (Hayton 2010, 194; Thayer 2009a, 62). This faction

> …tends not to give interviews to journalists. Its supporters hide away in the security establishment, nurturing their suspicion of the outside world and their paranoia about imperialist plots. They see plots everywhere, in particular the threat of 'peaceful evolution' – nefarious plans by 'hostile forces' to undermine communism through 'soft' power and pressure to respect human rights. (Hayton

2010, 194)

The conservatives "remain deeply suspicious about the United States." The bloc fears that the Western nation seeks to "overthrow Vietnam's socialist regime though 'peaceful evolution' by the promotion of democracy and religious freedom" (Thayer 2009a, 62). Conversely, there are "integrationists," "reformers," or "modernizers," who support Vietnam's integration into the global economy" (Hayton 2010, 202; Pham 2008a; Thayer 2009a, 62). This integration began in the 1980s with reforms termed *doi moi* ("renovation"). During the central committee's sixth session in 1989, the nation took a dramatic step away from its original socialist ideology, espousing a "'planned commodity economy' [which] would operate on market principles: ending subsidies, reforming the tax system, introducing tuition fees in schools, charging for hospitals and medical care, and the like" (Kolko 1997, 35).

The reformers played key roles in the implementation of *doi moi*. Within this group, Carlyle Thayer identifies a subset, which he terms "establishment critics," consisting of "very senior party, army, and non-party state officials who have communicated their demands for political reform through approved channels" (2006, 118). In voicing these opinions, "approved channels" refer to letters circulated amongst policy-makers within the Communist Party, as opposed to among the broader society or overseas. Furthermore,

> Individuals in this group would like to reform the Vietnam Communist Party in order to bring it back into accord with an imagined past when there was national unity in the struggle against foreign aggression and when the party and society were perceived as being one. Individual establishment critics generally argue that a conservative ageing leadership, fixated by outmoded ideology, is largely to blame for what they perceive as Vietnam's current predicament. How was it possible, they asked rhetorically, to defeat the United States, yet decades later

still remain mired in poverty and inequality? (Thayer 2006, 118)

Vo Van Kiet fits this definition. Writing Kiet's obituary in 2008, BBC reporter Nga Pham suggested that "some see [his] illustrious career as an indication of the struggle between the reformer and conservative factions inside the Communist Party. After the Vietnam War, "he became party secretary of Saigon, and quietly defied hard-line official policy by trying to work with officials and businesses associated with the defeated government" (BBC 2008). Kiet served as Prime Minister from 1991 to 1997, a period of time which saw dramatic reforms in both domestic and foreign policy. Kiet was "credited as the author" of the reforms known as *doi moi*, which resulted in the nation's 1990s "economic miracle" (BBC 2008; Pham 2008a). Furthermore, Kiet's personal views on America "were believed to be considerably warmer than those of the previous generation of party cadres." During his leadership, "the US lifted embargos against Vietnam and the two countries finally normalized their relationship" (Pham 2008a).

As per Thayer's criteria, Kiet pressed for his reformist policies – at least until the final years of his life – through "approved channels." In 2005, he "reportedly" advocated reform within the party via a letter to the Politburo and Central Committee (Pham 2008a). However, in 2007, the former Prime Minister circumvented the "approved channels" in granting an interview to the BBC. Kiet expressed views "at odds with the government's tough policies toward a number of dissidents" amongst a slew of arrests of individuals "advocating non-violent changes to Vietnam's mono-party system." Kiet "said the authorities must not avoid 'talking to those who have a different view' on Vietnamese politics, and he added that 'the dialogue should be honest'. He

warned the government 'not to execute administrative measures' in its dealings with the dissidents" (Hong and Nguyen 2007).

Vo Van Kiet is not the only prominent party member to toe the line between approved and deviant dissidence. Tran Do, "a life-long member of the Vietnam Communist Party" who "served for a term as Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly," is considered by Thayer to be Vietnam's "most prominent establishment critic to emerge in 1997-1998" (Thayer 2006, 124-5; 116). His actions in opposition to the CPV are very similar to those of Kiet. In 1997, he submitted a thirteen-page open letter to "the party, National Assembly, Government and concerned friends" (Thayer 2006, 126). In the document, Do "railed against the party's monopoly of power that invariably led it reject alternate views. The former Deputy Chairman expressed his opinion that "the party would continue to abuse power until independent institutions or groups could modify its behaviour" (127).

Like Kiet, Do made his controversial statements regarding the CPV through approved channels, at least initially. However, the

> …open letter was broadcast by Radio Free Asia in February 1998 and soon appeared on the Internet. Tran Do was then subject to a campaign of indirect vilification in the party press and direct attack by party cadres at private meetings… In July 1998, the VCP Central Committee passed a confidential resolution condemning Tran Do, and on 4 January 1999, Do was expelled from the Vietnam Communist Party. This action triggered an unprecedented outpouring of outrage. (Thayer 2006, 128-9)

Two members resigned. Furthermore, "eleven retied party cadres jointly signed a letter of protest," in addition to individual letters by "a retired lieutenant general" and "the former Haiphong party secretary" (128-9).

The internal stir prompted by Tran Do's removal reinforces the differences

between the conservatives and the reformers. Even more illuminating were several official papers that Do referenced in his letter: "He noted that in the recent past, several party policy documents had mentioned the need to separate the party from the state… Other policy documents had discussed the need to conduct political reform in parallel with economic reform" (Thayer 2006, 127). Indeed, one of Sharp's weaknesses states that "the power hierarchy" of an authoritarian regime "is always unstable to some degree" as "individuals do not… remain in the same position in the ranking." The strength of the reformers is in constant flux. This is true not just among the top leaders of the CPV, but within the party in general.

Cooperation withdrawn

The National Assembly (NA) exemplifies this vacillation between party line and autonomy. The organization– which consists of "493 representatives from all 64 provinces, the military, mass organizations, ethnic groups, and educational institutions" – "is the only body that represents a broad sector of the Vietnamese population" (Lucius 2009, 9). Nguyen Dan Que asserts that, "to create a deceptive picture of people's support, the party intends to have the National Assembly approve the policies of the party itself" (2005). Initially, it seems that the CPV has crafted a system that increases its legitimacy: by using the NA to ostensibly solicit the opinion of the populace, while ultimately retaining complete control over who joins the body, the government can legitimize its policies as having passed scrutiny from representatives of the population at large. In effect, the CPV needs the NA to continue the façade of popular approval which eliminates potential threats to party hegemony.

However, this is a dangerous gambit. When the barriers to entry into the NA occlude the entry of potential dissidents, the CPV faces no threat. As evidenced above, however, these barriers occasionally permit candidates without complete subservience. When the party has to overtly remind the population that their only recourse for civic participation is a sham, the result produced is the opposite of that which is intended: the government actually loses popular legitimacy, and one of Sharp's weaknesses is realized: the withdrawal or restriction of "cooperation of a multitude of people, groups, and institutions needed to operate the system" threatens the authoritarian regime. Indeed, Nguyen Dan Que warns "the National Assembly Deputies, in principle, represent the Vietnamese people. They are not constitutionally vested to approve the CPV's platforms" (2005).

In keeping with Nguyen's appraisal, the NA has, in recent years, attempted to exert a degree of autonomy. Lucius relates that "some Vietnamese scholars contend that the once 'rubber stamp' [Assembly] is now becoming a legitimate political body with real authority and responsibilities," with "increasing authority to amend the Constitution, pass Codes, Laws and Acts, and approve Decisions and Decrees [*sic*]" (2009, 11). Lucius notes an 2002 incident in which the Assembly rejected the then-Prime Minister's nomination for Minister of Public Security, citing an "overlap in the duties of existing ministries" which, led to relief for many Vietnamese citizens and foreigners "to see that the National Assembly was not afraid to make the Prime Minister lose face in order to make necessary but unpopular decisions" (11).

Furthermore, in 2007, the BBC reported that the country was "gripped" by televised sessions in which members of the NA grilled "officials seen to have failed in their

jobs." The news outlet considered this excoriation to be a major factor in the ouster of the "former minister of transport and the seemingly complacent head of the Supreme Court." After this show of effrontery, the party soon made overtures to bring the NA back into line. Later in 2007, the vice-chairman of parliament, Nguyen Van Yeu, reminded the press that the upcoming elections to the body were "not about 'competing for seats', adding that the National Assembly 'must always follow the party's leadership'" (Hong and Nguyen 2007). Also in regards to that year's elections, the BBC wrote that "only the Communist Party is allowed to field candidates [so] the outcome is not in much doubt… Ninety per cent of the members in the last session were members of the Communist Party and the 10% that were not all had to be approved by the party in order to stand for election" (2007). Therefore, what seems in theory to be, as Nguyen suggests, an outlet for public representation, in actuality is just another area of Vietnamese politics under CPV control.

Indeed, the brevity of the NA's flirtation with autonomy in the 2000s is unsurprising. A central theme demonstrated by this paper is that acts of rebellion against the will of the Communist Party are often met with swift reprisal and quickly ended. Nevertheless, the important aspect is that, knowing the futility of their actions, dissidents continue to act. Therefore, Vietnam's democracy activists surely embrace the fact that the National Assembly has taken tentative steps towards fulfilling Nguyen Dan Que's predictions. This must be refreshing for democratic activists within the nation, as they can now see their own struggle reflected in Vietnam's government. Consequently, the future will certainly see more emboldened acts of defiance in favor of democracy.

The inefficient bureaucracy

The prospect of democratization is perhaps most worrisome to the CPV's Polit-buro, "an elite of fifteen to twenty men seeking to retain absolute control" (Kolko 1997, 27). This group has been called "aged" and even "crusty" by various outside observers (Kolko 1997, 27; Shenon 1991; Crispin 2006). Furthermore, in his book, *Vietnam: Anatomy of a Peace*, Gabriel Kolko suggests that, "since 1980, all of [the Politburo's] economic policies have been vague and usually contradictory." He continues:

> The Politburo strives, above all, to maintain the internal cohesion within its own ranks which is the precondition of its putative mastery over the party and state. It places a greater priority on its own unity than on making difficult or coherent choices that might endanger its corporate identity and role. To maintain it requires compromises that repeatedly produce the lowest common denominator in economic policy, which invariably leas to indecision and an openly incongruous quality in many of its plans. (1997, 27-28)

The poor quality of its policy causes the Politburo to conform to another of Sharp's weaknesses: "with so many decisions made by so few people… mistakes of judgment, policy, and action are likely to occur." Additionally, Sharp suggests that an authorization regime may degrade when "the system may become routine in its operation," the competency of the bureaucracy may deteriorate, and "excessive controls and regulations… [makes] the system's policies and operation ineffective." Propagating "lowest common denominator" policy that seeks, above all else, to limit threats to the power of a handful of men is certainly not an efficient manner of governing a country.

Indeed, policy incongruity has been blatant in the past several decades. During that time, Vietnamese officials have made public statements touting the democratic freedom granted to its citizens and refusing to relinquish Communist Party control. All

the while, the only *consistent* official rhetoric has proclaimed the nation a beacon of

socialist efficiency; during the same year that International Monetary Fund publically

applauded Vietnam's progress toward a market-based economy, "the party was

renewing its devotion to Marxist-Leninist-Ho Chi Minh thought" (Kolko 1997, 34).

Gabriel Kolko expands upon this disconnect:

> The party officially urges that 'all people in society and all party members
> should strive to amass wealth for themselves and for the nation as a whole,' the-
> reby 'promoting economic growth,' but it acknowledges that 'it will be difficult
> to avoid gaps between rich and poor,' which, if not controlled 'will lead to dan-
> ger and social turmoil' – thereby threatening 'social safety.' It has become hope-
> lessly entangled in the contradictions between its ideological image of itself and
> its practice. Ironically, as if its original ideas will not be taken seriously by oth-
> ers and have no potential consequences, it continues to articulate those socialist
> values essential for mass resistance to the very society it is now constructing.
> (1997, 102)

The ridiculousness of these contradictions is one issue on which many Vietnam-

ese agree. Nguyen Dan Que asserted in 2005 that Vietnam "is a backward country in a

dynamic world of progress and this reality has shamed the Politburo's fictitious propa-

ganda… The monopoly of political thought has paralyzed the thinking and responding

ability of the Politburo." The Vietnamese physician is not alone in his indignation;

Thayer contends that even many party members "generally argue that a conservative

ageing leadership, fixated by outmoded ideology, is largely to blame for what they

perceive as Vietnam's current predicament" (2006, 125; 118).

Therefore, while the Politburo has successfully maintained its power, its compe-

tency is questioned by many observers. This condemnation is not limited to the elite of

the CPV, however; there are many issues within the Vietnamese government that have

aroused opprobrium. For instance, corruption is a widespread concern. Kolko suggests

that "a very significant number of the party's members are corrupt – only a tenth of them, and it is certainly higher than that, would amount to 220,000 – but also their families are often decisively linked to their peculations, and purging them would destabilize the increasingly delicate political balance within the entire party" (123). Kolko describes Vietnam's bureaucracies as a system that as giving "mediocrity and nepotism a decisive preference over talent" (121-2). He continues:

> This favoritism is very blatant and inevitably became a source of great tension within the party, and about 1994 the Politburo commissioned a study of how to reconcile it with socialist principles. In the spring of 1996, before the party congress, the delicate problem was still unresolved, and those hostile to the market line focused repeatedly on party members, but especially their wives and children, who have become capitalists. If they were forbidden to do so, there would be a profound alteration in the nation's economic elite, and there was simply no way this could occur without a very serious split in the party. (122-3)

In the short term, the relative economic success of the *doi moi* reforms will likely be sufficient to distract the citizens of Vietnam from their lack of democratic rights. Indeed, nearby China has a similar history of demonstrating the ability to mix socialist propaganda with a market economy, all while retaining the hegemony of the ruling party. However, allegations of Politburo incompetency, party corruption, and the general confusion of the nation's ideological message all contribute to the alienation of Vietnam's population from their government. This represents a threat to the stability of the regime. The Vietnam War itself illustrated the danger of a public complacent with their government: as the war progressed, the inhabitants of South Vietnam began to harbor and aid the Viet Cong insurgents. The current Communist Party might soon see a similar phenomenon. As the public becomes unhappy with the efficiency of their government, for whom the possibility of regime change becomes increasingly desirable.

The military

Just like the public, the military has also reacted wearily to the market socialist reforms of the government. Since *doi moi*, Vietnam's armed forces have indeed been a great source of tension within the government. In the aftermath of *doi moi*, the military felt as if its prominence within society was in jeopardy. During this time, Vo Van Kiet was working with the IMF and the World Bank to move Vietnam further away from the socialist extreme that nurtured the army in the post war years. Amongst the top leadership of the CPV, rumors abounded that the "army was reaching the limits of its patience and might become more, even openly, aggressive" (Kolko 1997, 138). In late 1995, one "informed party member" reported that "the internal contradictions inside the party are becoming more acute" and that the "battle will get worse" (138). Indeed,

> For the next half-year [the army] continued to focus on 'the seamy side of the market economy'; in early June 1996, [the military's] daily paper deplored an alleged plot by Vietnamese exiles to drive a wedge between the army and the party, which only served to remind the party that such a split indeed might exist. As if to confirm it, the day after this article appeared an official army 'commentator' issued a widely circulated attack that went beyond all previous criticism. He reiterated the earlier theme that the army's mandate includes not just the defense of Vietnam's territorial integrity but also of "Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Thought,' toward which 'some [party members] have shown their vacillating and suspicious attitude…' (Kolko 1997, 138)

The same article characterized the IMF, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank as "foreign enemies" to Vietnam. The rationale was that all of these organizations imposed "conditions [that] do not have a purely economic character only" (1997, 138).

In other words, the military felt as if traditional, socialist ideals would be compromised by allowing international banks to have a hand in matters of Vietnamese sovereignty.

At the time of Kolko's writing in 1997, "the army had unmistakably flexed its muscles," necessitating the question of whether, in the future, it would play a role more independent of the Communist Party (139). Kolko suggested that the Vietnamese military has not made more threatening overtures to control the government because it does not have a viable alternative to the hybrid market system towards which the nation was heading, and was painfully aware of this: "regardless of how it obtains power or on what conditions, it does not know what to do with it" (142). The military leadership acknowledged that it did not have a better direction in which to lead the country and therefore did not attempt a coup d'état.

Since these observations in 1997, there have not been any prominent sources indicating a worsening of the rift between the Vietnam's military and its government. However, it is unlikely that the clash between the party and its military has ceased to be a concern to the stability of the regime. Principally, the underlying conditions that motivated the original tension – the steps taken in the opposite direction of the socialist ideology on which the nation was founded – have not subsided. On the contrary, these tensions have actually *increased*. Similarly, government mistreatment of groups with which the military sympathizes (e.g., rural peasants) has also increased since 1997 (this will be further discussed below) (Kolko 1997, 155). Indeed, these two developments support the claim that the disconnect between the party and its military has almost certainly not abated, and, in fact, may have worsened.

Decentralization and provincial infighting

In addition to the conflict between the Communist Party and the military of Vietnam, there is a similar divide between the nation's central and periphery political structures.). In 1969, near the beginning of the Vietnam War, Western analysis of Vietnam noted that "there were two political systems, one at the national level and one in the village, and each carried out an independent political process" (Lucius 2009, 8). Decades later, this has not changed. This dichotomy invites another of Sharp's weaknesses: "if the regime… decentralizes controls and decision making, its control over the central levers of power may be further eroded."

Kolko contends that "it is inherently impossible to govern a nation as large and diverse as Vietnam in a highly centralized manner" and "the provincial political and administrative structure has therefore become increasingly autonomous, creating a fundamental challenge to the Politburo's authority" (1997, 152). Indeed, Kolko further suggests that "the provincial parties frequently ignore [the Politburo, which] cannot impose control on many party members," and whose "most serious challenge today comes not from outside the party but from the lower organizations within it." In general, "significant power groups operate independently of each other… for wealth and power translated into both material gains and autonomy for their regions" (125). Lucius concurs: "unless local officials move too far from the Party line, their transgression can go unnoticed by the central authorities, as long as the nation or the Party is not at risk" (2009, 9).

The disconnect between the top leadership of the CPV and lower-level members, previously addressed, is such that the Politburo's "most important statements are usually obviously inconsistent and offer no coherent guidelines, so that local and provincial parties can interpret them as they wish" (Kolko 1997, 125). In 1997, Kolko wrote that "party cells now meet much less frequently, and the party's political report to the June 1996 congress admitted that the 'grassroots party organizations are weak in many localities. Some are even paralyzed. Leaders often detail the innumerable weaknesses among the membership: 'many cadres are losing their revolutionary ideals and becoming alienated…'" (73). If local party members do not feel inspired by the rhetoric coming from the top, the apathy is certainly reciprocated: "The Politburo as a body regards the party organizations at the local and provincial levels rather than its own role as a principal source of the nation's problems" (Kolko 1997, 87).

Summarizing dissent within the CPV

All of the internal problems listed above are the result of the assertion of reformist ideology. This phenomenon manifests itself in top politicians in the Communist Party such as Vo Van Kiet, and Tran Do, as well as within the party in general. Additionally, the concept of liberalization has resulted in strife within the National Assembly and military. Finally, despite the fact that the party has made small concessions to its power – for example, by permitting a degree of independence to regional administrations (the latter of whom are becoming "alienated" from socialist ideals) – the Politburo, and the CPV in general, adamantly refuse to relinquish its political power.

An introduction to dissent external to the CPV

This stubbornness may prove to be the party's eventual undoing. Sharp states that, "if a strong ideology is present that influences one's view of reality, firm adherence to it may cause inattention to actual conditions and needs." Whether conservative or reformer, members of the Communist Party of Vietnam share one overriding ideology: they generally believe that only the party is fit to guide the country, and this is certainly causing inattention to a significant portion of alienated constituents. According to Bill Hayton, author of 2010's *Vietnam: Rising Dragon*, the Communist Party's hegemony is the source of "all the grievances of the contemporary dissident movement in Vietnam" (2010, 114-5). Consequently, another of Sharp's weaknesses is verified: "the general public may over time become apathetic, skeptical, and even hostile to the regime" (2010, 27).

On the Vietnamese flag, the "five-pointed star represents the five elements of the populace — peasants, workers, intellectuals, traders, and soldiers — that unite to build socialism" (Central Intelligence Agency 2011). Ironically, each of these groups has suffered in order to achieve the CPV's vision of market socialism. With so much of the population at odds with their government, it is impossible to generalize the characteristics of a political dissident in Vietnam. However, dissidents often have things in common, such as the specific reason for their grievance (i.e., to what particular government policy they object), the manifestation of their grievances (an online harangue or a public protest), their religion or their occupation. Consequently, it is possible to ca-

tegorize large groups of dissidents based on these traits. This section will attempt to do just that, using the work of Carlyle Thayer as a point from which to begin.

In 2006, Thayer's essay "Political Dissent and Political Reform in Vietnam 1997-2002" was published in *The Power of Ideas: Intellectual Input and Political Change in East and Southeast Asia*. This analysis provided four categories of political dissident in Vietnam during the time period between 1997 and 2002 (125). One of these four, the "establishment critic," is, by definition, a member of the CPV. Conversely, the other three groups identified by Thayer – "intellectual dissidents," "cyber-dissidents," and "networked dissidents" – have either severed, or never possessed, ties to the CPV. These three groups will be addressed in this section.

It is important to note that there have been many developments within Vietnam's political culture since 2002. Therefore, this thesis will expand upon Thayer's 2006 contribution to develop a more complete typology of modern Vietnamese dissidents. This expansion will begin with an analysis of the role of the intellectual dissident. In the past few years, the role of the educated Vietnamese dissident has significantly increased. As such, other definitions of "intellectual" will be folded into Thayer's term, including college-educated professionals, journalists, and students.

Thayer's term "cyber-dissidents" also warrants revision. In 2006, Thayer considered the group to be distinct from intellectual dissidents. However, since the majority of document cases of individuals expressing seditious views on the internet involve educated professionals and students, cyber-dissidents are now effectively a subset of intellectual dissidents. Thayer's final category, networked dissidents, will also receive a

substantial overhaul, emphasizing the rise, in recent years, of interconnected groups of dissidents. These groups take many forms, including self-described "political parties," organized religion, workers, and farmers. However, "networked dissidents" have several traits in common: they constitute a significant threat to the CPV and they often intermingle with other groups, enhancing the pro-democracy network.

Intellectual dissidents

The role of the intellectual in a repressive society is significant. Gene Sharp considers them a potential weakness to authoritarian regimes, suggesting that "intellectuals and students may become restless in response to conditions, restrictions, doctrinalism, and repression" (2010, 26-7). During the time period in which Thayer conducted his research – 1997-2002 – the intellectual dissidents consisted solely of five people, "dubbed the Dalat Group because of their residence in that city in Vietnam's Central Highlands." This group consisted of "Nguyen Xuan Tu, a professor of biology; Nguyen Thanh Gang, a geologist; Mai Thai Linh, a former Deputy Chairman of the Dalat City People's Council; and Bui Minh Quoc and Tieu Dao Bao Cu, two provincial party journalists" (122). As mentioned above, however, in the years since 2002, Vietnam has produced a significant number of dissidents of intellectual background that are not part of the Dalat Group.

College-educated academics and professionals, who participate in activities as innocuous as publically calling for democracy, are frequently harassed and imprisoned on charges such as "breaching 'national security'" and "conducting anti-government propaganda" (Federation Internationale des… 2009, 6; The English Centre… 2009). In

many instances, cases such as these are so common that individual names and circumstances become unremarkable (Ruimy 2002; International Federation for… 2007, 25; Amnesty International 2005). However, in the past decade, the cases of two physicians, Pham Hong Son and Nguyen Dan Que, and one lawyer, Dr. Cu Huy Ha Vu, *have* been relative unique in the amount of international press coverage they have received. Each of the three activists is noteworthy in that they have managed to equate their names, both in their homeland and abroad, with their goal to democratize Vietnam.

Pham's crimes consisted of posting written material, in favor of democratic liberalization, to online forums. He both "wrote articles himself, and translated articles written by others" (Amnesty International 2003, 1). The former include "'Democracy promotion: a key focus in a new world order' and 'Sovereignty and human rights: the search for reconciliation', published on the Internet forums Danchu.net and Ykien.net, both dedicated to promoting democracy" (Reporters without Borders… 2002). The doctor posted additional material online: *"The Promotion of Democracy: a Key Focus in a New World Order* and *Sovereignty and Human rights: The Search for Reconciliation"* (Amnesty International 2003, 1). However, his 2002 arrest was the result of "having translated an article entitled 'What is Democracy?' from the United States embassy in Viet Nam website, and sending it to both friends and senior party officials. He also wrote an article, 'Hopeful Signs for Democracy in Viet Nam,' which was again sent to senior party officials (2).

Nguyen Dan Que, an endocrinologist by trade, is described by Reporters without Borders as a "committed free expression campaigner" who has spent "18 years in prison between 1980 and 1998" (2005). In 2011, Nguyen made several public statements in defiance of the CPV. Early that year, he "released a statement in which he condemned the lack of press freedom in the country" (Reporters without Borders… 2005)

Subsequently, Nguyen "was quoted by U.S. government-funded Voice of America as saying that the Middle East uprisings were motivating Vietnamese to follow" (Fox News 2011). To further that end, the endocrinologist made a personal appeal to his fellow Vietnamese citizens, calling on "young people to use the Internet and mobile phones to spread the word for millions to take to the streets and demand an end to Vietnam's one-party rule." Nguyen suggested "an uprising to make a 'clean sweep of Communist dictatorship and build a new, free, democratic, humane and progressive Vietnam.'" He was promptly arrested, and, after searching his house, "police found 60,000 documents on his computer calling for a revolution" (Fox News 2011).

Finally, lawyer Cu Huy Ha Vu, whose father was an acquaintance of Ho Chi Minh, is described by the *New York Times* as "an irrepressible commentator and irritant to the government on social issues and questions of human rights" (Mydans 2011). Protesting a government project to mine the Central Highlands for Bauxite, in 2009 Minh sued the Prime Minister "on the grounds of environmental damage, national security and cultural heritage" (Mydans 2011). Vietnamese courts quickly dismissed the case. However Vu did not temper his dissidence.

In 2010, the lawyer was arrested "for posting comments online in support of a multi-party system and giving interviews to the websites of Voice of America and Radio Free Asia." His trial prompted a "demonstration outside the court [which] was broken up by the police" (Reporters without Borders… 2011). Human Rights Watch asserts that "the arrest and detention of Dr. Cu Huy Ha Vu… has attracted more media coverage than any other dissident case in recent memory in Vietnam. There is little doubt it will have a lasting impact on the ongoing struggle between the Vietnamese

government and its critics ("Vietnam: The Party…" 2011, 1). The organization further

comments that

> … unprecedented popular support for Dr. Vu has emerged and continues to
> grow online from diverse sectors of Vietnamese society, including Catholic
> parishioners from Hanoi and Nam Dinh; urban bloggers, academics, writers,
> journalists, and dissidents; senior Vietnamese Communist Party members;
> technocrats, land rights petitioners, and ordinary citizens such as teachers, small
> business owners, workers, farmers, and taxi drivers. ("Vietnam: The Party…"
> 2011, 1)

Indeed, Human Rights Watch asserts that "an unprecedented movement of popular

support… has emerged and continues to grow on the Internet" (Mydans 2011).

Pham Hong Son and Nguyen Dan Que share such support as well. The

international coverage received by these three has been far more damaging to the CPV

than any of their individual actions. Pham garnered attention from the Committee on

Human Rights of the National Academies (Committee on Human… 2006). Both he and

Cu Huy Ha Vu have been recognized by United States Rep. Loretta Sanchez, who used

their plights to lobby Washington to adopt a relationship with Vietnam less permissive

of human rights abuse (Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez… 2011). Nguyen's 2011

arrest prompted an official within the US State Department to express concern "about

Vietnam's increasing clampdowns" (Fox News 2011). The situation of Vu has prompted

action by Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch, "Vietnam: Free Maverick…"

2011). All three dissidents have received prolonged and widespread international press

coverage and public inquiries from Reporters without Borders, Amnesty International,

Human Rights Watch, and the International Federation for Human Rights (Amnesty

International 2011; Human Rights Watch 2003; International Federation for… 2011).

Thus, the three cases are evidence of the decreasing ability of the CPV to keep matters

relating to the punishment of dissidents internal to Vietnam. As more international organizations begin protesting the treatment of political dissenters, the Communist Party will find it increasingly difficult to eradicate opposition to their complete power.

Journalism

Pham Hong Son and Nguyen Dan Que were certainly not alone in choosing to express their exasperation in written format. It is a novel manner of conveying seditious content, as the nation does not tolerate publications beyond its direct control. Indeed, "Vietnam does not permit privately owned newspapers or other media" (Thayer 2009b, 54-5). According to the International Federation for Human Rights, "the Communist Party of Vietnam…mobilization and propaganda department controls all media and sets press guidelines." Furthermore, the organization notes that "editors meet regularly with representatives of the state's Ideology Committee to discuss which stories the government wants emphasized and which are off-limits."

Nevertheless, the Vietnamese press made its first significant challenges to government authority in 2006, condemning a scandal concerning "a transport ministry project management bureau known as PMU-18 - the government's richest state agency" (Harkey 2006). According to the BBC,

> The first sign that something was seriously wrong in PMU-18 came when the head of the bureau was arrested in January and accused of taking around $7m of the unit's budget for gambling on European football matches… He [was] also under investigation over the procurement of luxury cars for other government officials… Deputy Transport Minister Nguyen Viet Tien - a former head of PMU-18 and also a member of the ruling Communist Party's Central Committee - was next to be detained. And earlier this month, the transport minister himself, Dao Dinh Binh, resigned." (Harkey 2006)

At first, "newspapers were praised by the authorities at the time for their detailed coverage of the scandal" (Pham 2008b). In sharp contrast to the close restriction to which it had previously been subjected, this investigative reporting was often openly critical of corruption within the CPV. In general, "online news services and newspapers [ran] discussion forums and printed articles containing questions which were impossible to ask a few years" prior (Nguyen 2006). In April of 2006, the BBC relayed that the Vietnamese press were alleging that the corruption "network [extended] into the office of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, and into senior police ranks" (Harkey 2006). After this audacious implication, Communist Party praise for the intrepid journalism evaporated. Soon, two reporters who had played prominent roles in uncovering the scandal, Nguyen Van Hai and Nguyen Viet Chien, "from Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien newspapers respectively, were arrested for 'inaccurate reporting and abuse of power'" (Pham 2008b). The BBC reported that official indictment as stating "[They] exploited their position as journalists to write sensitive, false information." The document revealed the fact that

> Prosecutors accused the two reporters of 'abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the state'. This had 'serious consequences, negatively affecting the ideology, morale and psychology of the public at a sensitive point of time" - a reference to the 10th Vietnamese Communist Party Congress in April 2006, where new leaders were being elected. [The two reporters] 'exploited their position as journalists to write sensitive, false information… Hostile forces took advantage to attack and distort the Party Congress, negatively affecting the preparation of the congress'. (BBC News 2008)

Afterwards, their newspapers' deputy editors were also suspended and "at least seven journalists had their press cards revoked as part of a wider pattern of the government's use of criminal law to muzzle free expression" (Federation Internationale des… 2009,

6).

At first, these government reprisals were met with resistance by the public. The office of one of the newspapers claimed it was "inundated by phone calls, e-mails and letters from angry citizens protesting the government's move—the most it had received in 33 years of publication" (Stocking 2008a). Furthermore, the press, emboldened by the latitude they had, until recently, received, began to draw attention to their colleagues' harassment at the hands of the government. This did not last long, however:

> Local media, which devoted detailed coverage to the journalists' detention, fell silent after three days. It is thought that the powerful ideological department of the Communist Party has ordered newspaper editors not to write [any more] about the topic. Two newspapers that continued reporting on the subject reportedly received a warning from the authorities. Even when visiting US Assistant Secretary of State David Kramer raised concerns over the arrests, his words were omitted in the local press. (Pham 2008b)

In August of 2008, "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" (Thayer 2009b, 53). During a spate of "at least six" arrests between July and September 2009, the common charge was "'conducting anti-government propaganda', under Article 88 of the Vietnamese Criminal Code" (The English Centre… 2009).

Cyber dissidents

After 2006, debate over the circumstances surrounding the crackdown on newspapers "exploded" onto the internet, becoming "one of the hottest topics of discussion

on online forums" (Stocking 2008a; Pham 2008b). Indeed, recent years have proven the internet to be one of the greatest tools utilized by Vietnamese citizens who want to speak out against their government. As such, Thayer considers "cyber dissidents" a category of distinction (Thayer 2006, 125).

As with individual intellectual dissidents, there are vast numbers of persecutions for having used the internet to advocate democracy. In 2009, Vietnam renewed its crackdown on political dissent by arresting an estimated twenty-six to thirty political dissidents and detaining four well-known bloggers (Thayer 2009a, 55). Similarly, in 2010, the International Federation for Human Rights reported that "hundreds of blogs and websites have been shut down over the past year." Authorities routinely used "charges of 'espionage' (Article 80) to detain 'cyber-dissidents' for peacefully circulating their views" (Federation Internationale des… 2009, 5). Often, only the names of the accused distinguish individual cases (Thayer 2006, 123; International Federation for… 2007, 26; Thayer 2009a, 14-5; Fox News 2011). Nevertheless, the rise of cyber dissidence as a whole can be considered a potentially large threat to the Communist Party. OpenNet Initiative, an organization aiming to "investigate, expose and analyze Internet filtering and surveillance practices," assessed Vietnam in 2007. The organization noted that, "after a period of relative openness and tolerance of independent voices and criticism in 2006, where liberal publications were established, the government clamped down and launched a crackdown on what it considers unlawful usage of the Internet."

This "unlawful usage" is increasingly becoming more narrowly defined. In 2009, after "a group of seven hundred individuals signed up to a Facebook site to promote their opposition to bauxite mining… the Ministry of Public Security issued instructions

proscribing political commentary and limiting blogs to personal matters." Later that

year, "security officials moved more aggressively to interfere with if not shut down

Facebook" (Thayer 2009a, 14). Also in 2009, "a purported order by Vietnam's Ministry

of Public Security to block access to Facebook and other external websites began to

circulate on the Internet… While the Hanoi government has never confirmed issuing

this decree, in November 2009 Internet users in Vietnam began reporting widespread

Facebook outages" (Viet Tan 2011). Consequently, is generally accepted that the

government did indeed make the order (Viet Tan 2011; Chip 2011; Hoang 2011a;

International Federation for… 2010).

Whereas the government is clearly fearful of the possibilities afforded by

increased connectivity, others are more optimistic. For example, the website of the

dissident group Viet Tan welcomes social media into Vietnam:

> As witnessed in the Middle East and North Africa, social networks offer a space
> for civil society to grow, where individuals and groups can freely share opinions
> and express dissent. By providing citizens with tools for communication and
> mobilization, Facebook and other social media are also transforming Vietnam.
> (2011)

Despite the restrictions applied by the CPV, blogger Huyen Chip points out that

"Vietnam remain[s] on the list of 10 countries with the fastest growth of Facebook

users" (2011). This expansion is reflected in the online community:

> A Facebook group called 'A million signatures to protest Vietnamese ISPs
> blocking FB' has attracted nearly 50,000 members. The group proclaims:
> 'Everybody has the right to choose the social networks that they want to use.
> Join us in supporting Vietnam's Facebook community!' Another group with
> around 4,500 members takes the name 'If you elders block FB, we youths will
> climb over the walls and create cracks to enter.' The comments posted on this
> group's discussion board contain indignation and tips on circumvention.
> According to a local participant with the alias Losgi Athenford: 'Keep on

blocking Facebook and more people will want the pleasure of circumventing the block.' (Hoang 2011a)

Indeed, blogger Duy Hoang suggests that, by "filtering access to Facebook, it appears the Vietnamese government has confirmed the law of unintended consequences: Tens of thousands of Vietnamese have gathered in public squares online to demonstrate against government censorship." He observes that "a cursory examination of the profile pictures of people belonging to Facebook protest groups in Vietnam indicates a very youthful demographic. This is not surprising given Vietnam's young population in general and the typical age of social network aficionados" (Hoang 2011a).

Students and youth

Dissident Nguyen Dan Que predicts that rebellion of this nature will escalate. He characterizes the youth of his country as "internet savvy, favoring progress and they have been active in Internet forums on issues such as demand for a progressive and liberal education, human rights, multiparty democracy, etc." Additionally, Nguyen applauds the youth of his nation taking a stance "against Hanoi's kowtowing and obsequious attitude [with] the Chinese" (Admin1 2007). With this statement, Nugyen refers to two situations: "the decade-long demarcation of the China-Vietnam land boundary… completed in 2009," and the Chinese occupation of "the Paracel Islands also claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan" (Central Intelligence Agency 2011). In December 2007, there were "widespread demonstrations staged by students and young people in Vietnam protesting China's claims of sovereignty on the disputed Spratly and Paracel archipelagos" (Que Me: Action… n.d.). Protests of this nature continued. In 2011, Bloomberg News reported another protest over the disputed territory, "spurred on by

calls on Facebook and other social media."

Despite the fact that their primary tool is the internet, Vietnamese youth have the potential to become a much larger threat than recent cyber dissidents. Nguyen Dan Que considers the demographic to be a "seed of social upheaval" that will grow into future opposition to the CPV. His rationale concerns the degree to which traditional socialist ideology is being overshadowed in their minds by outside, global forces. Goaded by Western culture, the youth have "become hedonists with a vengeance: conspicuous consumers of Coca-Cola and Honda racing motorcycles, who have no values to inhibit them from a riotous lifestyle that has imposed cacophony on life in the cities" (Kolko 1997, 129). Nguyen Dan Que further suggests that many youth actively circumvent party propaganda, noting their behavior: "Watch TV only for movies; surf the Internet for accurate news!"

The activist predicted that, ironically, the CPV engineered its eventual disconnect with Vietnamese youth with its own efforts to integrate the nation with the rest of the world. "Educational and cultural exchanges, which have taken place in the last few years with many countries, including with the U.S., have been chiefly one-way from Vietnam outward. The reverse is still being negotiated, but most likely, Hanoi will have to succumb." The dissident endocrinologist cites "Hanoi [having] allowed foreigners to open schools in Vietnam" as an example. He continues:

> An educational system which is humanistic and multicultural will be welcomed, especially by the youth. Hanoi rulers will have to abandon the indoctrinating, obsolete approach and stop the teaching of Marxism-Leninism in Vietnamese schools in the near future… Young Vietnamese, up to 70% of the population, absorb very quickly the universal values of democracy and human rights and have become the catalysts in the struggle for democracy and human rights in the entire country. (2005)

"Encouraging students to study abroad and to welcome scholarships in technologies and cultural exchanges worldwide… is the best way to help them get rid of the obsolete and erroneous ideology and build a brighter future for themselves" (2005). Therefore, just as Hayton predicted the inevitable dominance of the reformers in their war with the conservatives to determine party policy, Nguyen argues that the same developments are happening outside of the CPV as well amongst students. If these predictions are true, it would indicate the futility of the Communist Party's increasingly desperate attempts to stifle political dissidence.

Networked Dissidents

It is not just individuals and unorganized groups of students that constitute a threat to the CPV. On the contrary, there are many groups of like-minded dissidents working against the government of Vietnam. These groups pose a significant threat to the hegemony of the Communist Party of Vietnam. In contrast to "isolated individuals… [who] are unable to make a significant impact on the rest of the society, much less a government," Gene Sharp suggests that groups form a far more important base from which political dissent against a repressive regime thrives (2010, 22).

Indeed, Thayer identifies these groups as "networked dissidents," and characterizes them as being in "a state of more or less permanent dissidence." Despite the fact that Thayer restricts his definition to "party and army veterans who have moved beyond loyal opposition," this thesis will account for individuals both affiliated and unaffiliated with the government, while retaining Thayer's fundamental classification: networked dissidents "operate in loose groups or networks, and not as individuals"

(Thayer 2006, 119). There are three subgroups of note in this thesis's expanded definition of networked dissidents: political parties, organized religion, and workers and farmers.

Political parties

The first group is consistent with Thayer's original definition of networked dissidents: "They are active in publishing and distributing their anti-socialist tracts among a wider circle of intellectuals at home and overseas" (Thayer 2006, 119). These organizations refer to themselves as "political parties" because of their opposition to the government. In reality, however, these parties are merely resistance cells, since public campaigning in opposition to the CPV would result in swift reprisal and almost certain imprisonment. While there are many such groups based outside of Vietnam, whose efforts consist of little more than lobbying Western governments to take a harsher stance towards communist Hanoi, this section will focus on those groups with significant operations based within the nation (Thayer 2009b, 39-40).

The People's Democratic Party of Vietnam was founded in 2004 as a result of extensive internet networking between "Cong Thanh Do, a Vietnamese-American living in California," and Vietnamese citizens with similar ideology. The group was short-lived, however:

> 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… [and] sentenced to five, four and three years respectively. (Thayer 2009b, 39)

The Democratic Party of Vietnam (DPV) was "founded in June 2006 as a political discussion group by Hoang Minh Chinh." The DPV claims it is the successor to a nominally-similar party, Vietnam Democratic Party (VDP), which was "founded in 1944," and remained "one of two non-communist parties to be represented in the National Assembly until it was dissolved in 1985.

> Chinh… 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. (Thayer 2009b, 40)

However, there is another organization with a much broader scope than either of the aforementioned two. Viet Tan is a prominent group which is extensively active both within Vietnam and abroad. Since its inception, the party "evolved from an underground operation working mainly within Vietnam to an international group with tens of thousands of members in the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Norway, Australia and other Asian countries" (Bharath 2007). In 2004, the organization announced that its predecessor, the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam – which "aimed to overthrow the Vietnamese communist government through violent means" – "had been disbanded and that the Viet Tan would now conduct its activities in public" (Thayer 2009b, 52-3).

> 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. (Thayer 2009b, 52-3)

According to "Diem Do, Chairman of Viet Tan worldwide," the organization's

method prioritizes arming people with the information they lack.

'It's sowing the seeds of democracy,' he said. Members do it by downloading copies of the U.S. Constitution onto the computers of dissidents in Vietnam, who then share that information with the locals. Members use e-mail and cell-phone text chats to issue alerts. They put up videos on the Internet's YouTube and conduct international dialog through Paltalk [an internet chat program]. Every time the Vietnamese government erects a firewall, 'we find a way to break it down,' Do said. 'This is a battle without boundaries.' (Bharath 2007)

Viet Tan's website (http://viettan.org/), available in Vietnamese, French, and

English, is quite robust. As of late 2011, the English website contained links that

included a letter from United States Members of Congress to then-Prime Minister Dung,

protesting the detention of youth activists, a video speech on the topic of

"circumventing the firewall and how Vietnamese netizens [*sic*] are using digital tools to

amplify voices of dissent," and detailed (twenty pages, including images) instructions

detailing how to access Facebook in the nation. An application to receive Viet Tan news

(again in Vietnamese, French, and English) via iPhone, iPod touch, and iPad is even

available for download. Perhaps most relevant to this particular essay, however, is the

link to a Vietnamese translation of Gene Sharp's *From Dictatorship to Democracy*,

which is dedicated – in both English and Vietnamese – "to the courageous democracy

advocates in Vietnam, especially the founders of the Bloc 8406 and all its members"

(Viet Nam Canh… 2006).

While the achievements of Viet Tan are impressive, an organization called Bloc

8406 is undoubtedly the centerpiece for Vietnam's organized democracy movement. In

April 2006, "116 persons issued an Appeal for Freedom of Political Association that they distributed throughout Vietnam via the Internet." Later that same month, "118 persons issued a Manifesto on Freedom and Democracy for Vietnam… These pro-democracy advocates became known as Bloc 8406 after the date of their founding manifesto" (Thayer 2009b, 43-4). Shortly thereafter, in August of 2007,

> Bloc 8406 publicly declared its four-phase proposal for Vietnam's democratization, including demands for the restoration of civil liberties, the establishment of political parties, the drafting of a new constitution and, finally, democratic elections for a new representative National Assembly that would be charged with choosing a new national name, flag and anthem. The petition was publicly disseminated and signed by representatives from all three of the country's main regions, including former Vietnam People's Army officer Tran Anh Kim and prominent Catholic priest Nguyen Van Ly. (Crispin 2006)

By the end of 2006,

> [F]oreign observers were reporting that the support base for Bloc 8406 had expanded to over two thousand, many under the age of thirty… 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… These websites have been utilized to organize chatroom discussions within Vietnam as well as overseas. (Thayer 2009b, 45-7)

"One of the principal architects of the democracy movement" was Father Nguyen Van Ly, who "has spent a total of 15 years in prison since 1977 for his peaceful campaigning for religious freedom, democracy, and human rights." In 2007, Ly was "arrested and sentenced to eight years in prison" for these activities (Human Rights Watch, "Vietnam: Father Nguyen…" 2011).

Despite many instances of this manner of swift and severe harassment and arrests of Bloc 8406 supporters, similar organizations began to emerge. Two weeks

after lawyer Cong Nhan became a supporter of the movement, "she became one of the founding members of the second political party to declare itself during 2006, the 'Viet Nam Progression Party'" (VPP) (Hayton 123). "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" (the latter of which "attracted only a small membership in Vietnam") and formed the Lac Hong Group. (Thayer 2009b, 41; 39-40). Currently, the VPP operates a website (www.vnpp.net) of comparable depth to that of Viet Tan.

Smaller organizations emerged as well. Founded by lawyer Nguyen Van Dai, the Committee for Human Rights in Vietnam used "the Internet to express… views on Vietnam's economic and political situation." Soon after the group's formation, however, Nguyet and two other activists were arrested "for distributing reactionary propaganda" (Thayer 2009b, 41). Indeed, the government repression that followed this surge of democratic advocacy was widespread. In 2009, Thayer wrote that "there is no… 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" (Thayer 2009b, 53).

The existence of the aforementioned groups – including the People's Democratic Party, the Democratic Party of Vietnam, Viet Tan, and Bloc 8406 – prove that, in accordance with Sharp's theory, there are large segments of the population that

are hostile to the CPV. The fact that the individuals constituting these groups are willing to risk severe punishment for their sedition – including prisons with "poor food and limited health care" – speaks to the resolution of these activists to bring about the end of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VietCatholic News 2011).

Despite their zeal, political parties are not widely supported by the population. Nevertheless, they are not the only groups of networked dissidents in opposition to the government. Since at least the economic reforms of the 1980s, there have been three evolving sources of dissent not addressed within Thayer's 1997-2002 categorizations. Broadly defined, they are organized religion, farmers, and workers.

Organized religion

Zachary Abuza, author of *Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam*, suggests that "it is possible to argue that there are more religious worshippers in Vietnam today than at any other time in the country's modern history" (2001, 184). Certainly contributing to this is the conflicting ideology and rhetoric of the CPV. Indeed, "[p]arty writers admit that the massive resurgence since 1990 of superstition, Buddhism, and Christianity, especially among young people, is due to the disorientation its own policies and behavior have engendered" (Kolko 1997, 79). Indeed, Kolko observes that, since the reforms of *doi moi*:

> [Religion]… has flourished in the moral and ideological vacuum the party has produced. Religion has the ability to reach the masses in a way that more elegant, formal ideas cannot. It could eventually confront the party with a very serious opposition, but this will depend largely on the success of its reforms and especially employment opportunities for young people. (1997, 129)

Considering the insecurities of the Communist Party, it is unsurprising that

Vietnam's leaders should see organized religion as potential enemies. The CPV "will not countenance the growth of any autonomous organizations that can potentially challenge the authority of the party. Religion-based organizations are a considerable threat to the regime" and "the party believes that the churches must be rigidly controlled" (2001, 185). However, Abuza states that these efforts are "inordinate": "the small dissident movement, without links to broader socially autonomous organizations, is a minimal threat to the regime" (2001, 7). Despite this appraisal, dissent from religious organizations has dramatically increased in the past several decades. This section will examine three frequent opponents of government repression: Buddhists, Catholics, and Montagnards.

Buddhism

According to the US Department of State, "most estimates suggest more than half of the population is at least nominally Buddhist" (2011, 2). Within the denomination, one sect is a frequent enemy of the CPV. The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), borne in 1964 out of "eleven out of South Vietnam's fourteen separate Buddhist churches and sects," "continued to operate following the reunification of the country [in 1975], but immediately faced problems with the communist regime" over matters such as the confiscation of church property (Abuza 2001, 191-2). This conflict progressed until 1981, when Communist Party official "Nguyen Van Linh announced that the church was a function of the party," implying an impending loss of autonomy for the UBCV. After protests by the church, "the UBCV was banned outright by the party and replaced by the state-sponsored and submissive

Vietnamese Buddhist Church" (VBC), whose "charter declares that it is the 'sole representative of Vietnamese Buddhism in all of its relations both within and outside the country'" (192).

Increased protesting led to more arrests of UBCV leaders and a sharp decline in the organization's opposition to the CPV. In the 1980s, for example, "the UBCV was all but dormant" (193). Following the "promulgation of the 1992 constitution, restriction of religious activities, such as meetings and worship, were eased," and the new leader of the UBCV, Thich Huyen Quang, began to dissent in earnest. He "issued an open letter in which he accused Hanoi of persecution and demanded legalization and recognition of the UBCV, the return of its properties and institutions, and the release of its members." Relations between the Buddhist sect and their Vietnamese government were so tense that, during Tet in 1993, General Secretary Do Muoi actually gave a speech at Tran Quoc Pagoda in Hanoi, "equating the ideals of religion to socialism," in an attempt to placate potential dissidents (193-4). Additionally, in 1994, the people's committee of his local province sent a letter to Thich Huyen Quang "ordering him to stop acting in the name of the outlawed UBCV" (195). The choice to send a letter implied a gesture of restraint on the part of authorities, given their propensity for mass arrests with little warning.

However, despite these overtures, tensions did indeed increase. Later in 1994, Thich Quang Do, then-deputy to Thich Huyen Quang, oriented UBCV efforts towards "a rescue mission for victims of disastrous floods in the Mekong Delta which had left 500,000 people homeless." Police "intercepted the UBCV convoy as it prepared to leave Saigon… confiscated all relief aid and arrested the organizers" (Que Me:

Action… n.d.). In the words of Abuza,

> This humanitarian act was seen as an affront by the party and an explicit
> challenge to the government's handling of its own relief operation, and hence its
> policies. Never mind that the government had made an international appeal for
> help in relief efforts, collecting $1.9 million from twenty-one countries, the
> UBCV was accused of 'sow[ing] disunity an insecurity in Vietnamese
> society.'(2001, 195)

For these ostensible crimes, Thich Quang Do "was sentenced to 5 years in

prison and 5 years house arrest on charges of 'sabotaging national solidarity' and

'taking advantage of democratic freedoms to violate the interests of the State and social

organizations.'" In 1998, he was released in a governmental amnesty after international

pressure from "four Nobel Prize winners" and then-Secretary of State Madeleine

Albright (Que Me: Action… n.d.).

In 2001, Thich Quang Do "launched an 'Appeal for Democracy in Vietnam', a

radical transition plan for democratic change, which received overwhelming support

from over 300 000 Vietnamese and hundreds of international personalities" (Rafto

Foundation for… 2009). The document contained an "8-point transition plan for

democratic change" that outlined reforms to be made by the ruling party. Consequently,

"he was sentenced to 2 years administrative detention and placed under detention

incommunicado" (International Buddhist Information... 2005). However, this did not

deter the monk. In 2005 he reiterated his commitment to democracy:

> In an 'Open Letter to Vietnamese personalities, intellectuals, writers, artists and
> all compatriots at home and abroad', sent via the International Buddhist
> Information Bureau, Thich Quang Do called upon all Vietnamese to engage
> together to 'fray a Path of Peace for Vietnam in the year 2005… a path of
> democracy and pluralism that will bring true stability, development and well-
> being to the Vietnamese people', and build a society in which 'the people have
> the right to [choose] their own political system and enjoy full democratic

freedoms and rights…' (International Buddhist Information... 2005)

In the document, Thich Quang Do called on his Buddhist followers to oppose and criticize the ruling powers in support of political freedoms:

> 'The UBCV… can, and should, support genuine political efforts aimed at defending the nation, upholding our culture and identity, promoting the social and economic welfare of the people, and protecting the human rights enshrined in the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Vietnam acceded in 1982'. The UBCV would lend its support to any valid, non-violent initiatives launched by Vietnamese democrats, dissidents and human rights defenders from different walks of life. (International Buddhist Information... 2005)

After his 2007 speech to an assembly of disgruntled farmers and peasants (mentioned in the previous section), Thich Quang Do "was summoned for interrogations and subjected to a widespread vilification campaign in the state-controlled press," "accusing him of 'inciting people to oppose the government', being a 'gang leader with wicked designs', seeking to 'disturb public order' and oppose the Communist Party" (International Federation for... 2010, 2; (Que Me: Action… n.d.). Later in 2007, Thich Quang Do once again came into conflict with CPV. The previous year, he was nominated to "receive the 2006 Professor Thorolf Rafto Memorial Prize for his contribution to human rights and as a 'unifying force' and a 'symbol for the growing democracy movement in Vietnam'" (International Buddhist Information … 2006). Currently, "Thich Quang Do is still held under effective house arrest," and has spent over 26 years in detention for his instigation of the Communist Party (Que Me: Action… n.d.). Nevertheless, in late 2006 he was able to formally unite the UBCV with Bloc 8406 to create the "Vietnam Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights," "reputedly the biggest dissident movement seen in Vietnam since the unification of the

country in 1975" (Thayer 2009b, 41).

Within Vietnamese Buddhism, this type of activism is not limited to Thich Quang Do or the UBCV. In 2006, there was a separate instance of Buddhist-related violence. According to a writer for the *Associated Press*, the abbot in charge of Bat Nha monastery – which belongs to the official Buddhist Church of Vietnam – invited to the site the "disciples of Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the world's most famous Zen masters" "to train monks in their brand of Buddhism." In 2008, "the chairman of Vietnam's national Committee on Religious Affairs wrote a letter accusing [Hanh's monastery in France] of publishing false information about Vietnam on its Web site. Without mentioning specifics, the letter said the information distorted Vietnam's policies on religion and could undermine national unity. The letter also said that Hanh's followers should leave Bat Nha," and that monastery's abbot concurred with this recommendation. Monks and nuns at Bat Nha were soon subjugated to mob attacks and forced removal (Stocking 2009a). The dissidents asserted that their persecution came as a result of Hanh's call for "an end to religious persecution and the disbandment of Vietnam's religious police" (McCurry 2009). Hanh's followers cite other motivations on the part of the CPV as well: "Chinese officials were upset about published comments [Hanh] made in support of the Dalai Lama" and consequently pressured Hanoi to censure the Zen master (Stocking 2009a).

The populace is confronted with the apparently selfless, benevolent, and focused work of religion – which "provides social services that the state is unable or unwilling to" – and the inconsistent and seemingly-arbitrary efforts of self-serving politicians.

Buddhists, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Catholics, and Protestant churches [have

conducted] joint work in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The Hoa Hao Executive Council [has also been] very active in local charitable and development projects, including building upwards of 800 houses for impoverished families regardless of religious affiliation. The Hoa Hao [has] also spent significant resources on managing local health clinics, and in 2009 spent more than 39 billion VND ($ 2 million) on charitable activities. During the year they spent approximately 29 billion VND ($1.5 million) on similar efforts. ("Vietnam" 2011, 17-18)

Catholics

Catholics also constitute a threat to the CPV. In 2010, adherents to the Roman Catholic Church constituted "7 percent" of Vietnamese population (US Department of… 2011, 2). Thayer estimates the country's total Catholic community to number "approximately six million" (Thayer 2009a, 6). In contrast, the State Department suggests that, although "government statistics indicate there are 6.28 million Catholics, other estimates place the number at eight million. Catholicism has revived in recent years with newly rebuilt or renovated churches and a growing number of persons who want to be religious workers" (US Department of… 2011, 2).

As with the Buddhists, land that previously belonged to the church subsequently appropriated by the state is a major cause for uprisings within Vietnam's Catholic community. Various church leaders have estimated that "Vietnam's communist regime confiscated 2,250 properties since 1954" and highlight that, "in recent years friction has arisen between church and state over land ownership of confiscated property." (Thayer 2009a, 6-7). Recent years have seen several significant clashes.

In September 2008, Vietnam used tear gas and electric batons to disband peaceful Catholic prayer vigils in Hanoi to call for the return of Church properties confiscated by the State, and bulldozed Catholic properties. During a series of massive peaceful rallies, including one of 10,000 people, protesters were hospitalized and many

arrested in grave violation of the right to peaceful assembly guaranteed in the Vietnamese Constitution and in the ICCPR (Federation Internationale des… 2009, 7-8).

The following year, disputes arose over Tam Toa – a cathedral that was bombed by the United States during the Vietnam War that the government subsequently considered "an American War Crimes Memorial Site" (Thayer 2009a, 7). In May of 2009, "the deputy head of the official Commission on Religion declared in an interview that the government 'has no intention of returning any property or goods to the Catholic Church or any other religious organization' that was confiscated by the state." Local Catholics responded by occupying the grounds with tents, and they were "confronted by police who evicted them using tear gas and electric stun guns" (7). As a rationale, "state media reported that the police charged those arrested with "counter-revolutionary crimes, violating state policies on American War Crimes Memorial Sites, disturbing public order, and attacking officials on duty."

The Catholics responded with several more protests in August. Early that month, "Catholic media reported that the entire diocese of Vinh, numbering up to half a million persons from 178 parishes, rallied to protest police violence." Furthermore, on August 15, during "the Feast of the Assumption, the Catholic Church held another show of force by staging a rally of 200,000" which Thayer considers "probably the largest religious protest in Vietnam's history" (8). Again, the Catholic media carried accusations of police brutality. Eventually, the state put an end to the issue by bulldozing the land around the Tam Toa site. However, the incident underscored the profound dissonance between the CPV and Vietnamese Catholics. In summary of the events, Thayer considers the government response "an unprecedented campaign of vilification in the state

media, gang assaults on priests and Catholic parishioners and by blocking Catholic websites" (9).

Montagnards

Montagnards ("mountain people" in French) are an ethnic group "made up of different tribes, with many overlapping customs, social interactions, and language patterns (Cultural Orientation Resource… n.d.). They began to convert to Christianity in the 1950s and 1960s (Human Rights Watch 2011a, 3). In contemporary Vietnam, "the population is approximately 4 million, of whom about 1 million are Montagnard. Of these, between 229,000 to 400,000 are thought to follow evangelical Protestantism. An additional 150,000 to 200,000 are Roman Catholic" (Cultural Orientation Resource… n.d.). Currently, the ethnic group "make[s] up about 80 percent of Vietnam's Protestants" (Abuza 2001, 204). As with the Buddhists and Catholics, land confiscation is an issue intertwined with extensive religious regulation; Human Rights Watch asserts that Montagnards are characterized by "growing anger and desperation over the steady loss of their farm land to agricultural plantations and lowland… settlers, along with tightened restrictions on independent house churches" (Human Rights Watch 2011a).

> A complicating factor in the Central Highlands has been the mutual distrust between the government and the highlanders. The government asserts that Montagnards belonging to independent house churches are using religion as a front for political activities, while many Montagnards distrust the government-authorized Protestant church in the Central Highlands, the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV). Some Montagnards have opted to worship in village or house churches that they control themselves, rather than affiliating with the SECV. (Human Rights Watch 2011a, 4)

Over the last decade, Montagnards have channeled their discontent into protests against the Vietnamese government.

> In February 2001, thousands of ethnic Montagnards… took part in unprecedented demonstrations against religious persecution and land confiscation… These protests were brutally put down by the authorities. Numerous members of the Montagnard population were arrested and convicted of violating state security and public order. In 2004, new demonstrations broke out, which were once again violently suppressed. At least eight people were killed and many hundreds injured in the ensuing crackdown. According to Human Rights Watch, as of June 2006 some 350 Montagnards were serving heavy prison terms for taking part in these demonstrations. (International Federation for… 2007)

As with the political parties, the networked dissidents originating from organized religion prove that there are massive segments of the population that have grown tired with the government repression. In a further threat to the CPV, several individual religious dissidents have begun an attempt to bring groups with highly-specific grievances into the general pro-democracy movement: workers and farmers.

Workers and farmers

Despite being a nation whose guiding principle is ostensibly socialist, contemporary Vietnam has a troubled relationship with the bases most important to that ideology: urban workers and rural farmers. The former are heavily restricted by the government. Vietnamese labor laws "[do] not authorize freedom of association. All labour unions are under the umbrella of the 'Vietnam General Confederation of Labour'… controlled by the CPV. Free trade unions are prohibited." Nevertheless, "economic [liberalization] and competition to provide cheap labour has led to serious abuses of labour rights" (Federation Internationale des… 2009, 8). In many instances, these abuses are overlooked by the avaricious CPV:

> Vietnam has founded its whole development strategy on its industrious, docile and low-paid workforce. Giving priority to the managers and foreign investors, the government has turned a blind eye as top officials arrange deals for investors and receive handsome pay-offs in return. In this climate of rampant corruption and power abuse, a new class of business-minded cadres has emerged who use their positions to enrich themselves, often at the workers' expense. (International Federation for... 2010, 37)

Thus, "the state's dilemma [is] plain: if workers were treated more decently, foreign investors would be deterred. But, if it failed to do anything, autonomous workers' unions might fill the vacuum" (Kolko 1997, 115).

2006 saw the formation of two such illegal unions, the first of which was the United Worker-Farmers Organization (or "Association") of Vietnam (UWFA), created by "labour strike activists" (Thayer 2009b, 41; Human Rights Watch 2009).

> 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… 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. (Thayer 2009b, 41)

According to Hayton, the UFWA was keen to take a "confrontational stance" towards the government, which resulted in its ten leading activists… in detention" "within six weeks of [it] going public… Others continued its work, but by early 2007 it was an underground operation, small and isolated" (2010, 127). However, the movement was not dead. The second of 2006's independent unions, formed by a "well-known dissident and former political prisoner," was the Independent Worker's (or "Labor") Union of Vietnam (IWUV) (Thayer 2009b, 41; Human Rights Watch 2009). Each union shared a common concern, emphasizing "the link between exploitation of work-

ers and confiscation of farmers' land in the countryside, noting that increasing landless-

ness is a factor forcing hundreds of thousands of farmers to urban areas and industrial

zones in search of work" (Human Rights Watch 2009).

Farmers, too, have become outspoken opponents of the Communist Party in re-

cent years.

> Peaceful demonstrations by farmers and peasants, known as the 'Victims of Injustice'… have also been brutally repressed. This is a massive rural protest movement, in which dispossessed farmers march from the countryside to Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) to protest confiscation of lands for development projects and lack of compensation. The movement, which began after… doi moi in the 1980s, has reached explosive proportions, with over two million complaints filed over the past 10 years. Many Police routinely beat and arrest demonstrators or forcibly return them to their homes. (International Federation for… 2010, 35)

The movement progressed significantly in 2007, when, between June and July,

> Farmers… 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. (Thayer 2009b, 48)

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, "the protest could turn out in retrospect to mark

an important development for Vietnam's human-rights activists. Most notably, what

started out as a peasant land protest ended up featuring a speech by a leader of the

country's nascent democracy and religious-rights movement, Thich Quang Do, head of

the persecuted Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam" (2007).

Within days of Thich Quang Do's speech, "armed forces and riot police violent-

ly disbanded the demonstration and forcibly escorted the 2,000 peasants back to their

villages" (International Federation for… 2010, 2). Nevertheless, the involvement of the

UBCV prompted the *Journal* to suggest that "the protest could turn out in retrospect to

mark an important development for Vietnam's human-rights activists… This marks the

first convergence of basic land protests and the human-rights movement. It may be a

sign that some aggrieved peasants are starting to view their complaints as connected to

the more abstract principles of freedom and democracy. Furthermore, the publication

lauds the "role of modern technology" in the protests: "At least one protester told a pro-

democracy radio station that she had first heard about the protest on the Internet. That

may help explain why the protest gained numbers over the first few weeks — from a

couple of hundred of individuals at first to more than 1,000 at its peak." Protest leaders

used cell phones to both "stay in touch" and "disseminate news of events on the ground

in real time.

> Rights activists abroad received updates as often as hourly. Observers of Viet-
> nam's rights movement say this was one of the best-reported protests in the
> country's recent history. The protest shows that the Vietnamese people are
> growing more willing to air their grievances with the regime publicly and that
> they're learning how to organize themselves to protest against it peacefully.
> (*Wall Street Journal* 2007)

Summarizing dissent external to the CPV

The period between 2006 and 2007 was indicative of growing collaboration

amongst four distinct movements that oppose Vietnam's ruling party: the UWFA with

the political parties, farmers with the UBCV, workers with farmers, and the latter coali-

tion with overseas Vietnamese. In response to the developments in the 2000s, the *Wall*

Street Journal concludes that "the communist government won't topple tomorrow, but

Hanoi does have something to worry about" (2007). Furthermore, Kolko suggests another dimension to this coalition: "the party is committing serious folly by ignoring the immense gamble that its abandonment of its original supporters could entail, not the least because the army remains sympathetic to the plight of the peasants and it alone has the force adequate to control the increasing public manifestations of discontent" (1997, 155). With this revelation, one is reminded of the underlying hostility that already exists between the party and its military. Thus, it is evident that there is a great deal of interconnectivity between the weaknesses faced by an authoritarian regime.

Broad disaffection

Indeed, despite the fact that a great deal of this essay has argued for the specific application of Sharp's weaknesses, some are more fittingly translated to Vietnamese society as a whole. For instance, Sharp suggests that "regional, class, cultural, or national differences may become acute" (2010, 27). There is a geographical dimension to the aforementioned inter-Party battle between conservatives and reformers: the latter group "is widely identified with… party politicians from the South, including President Nguyen Minh Triet and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung" (Hong and Nguyen 2007). Furthermore, there are class differences between the ruling CPV and its constituents; Kolko suggests that, "as a significant portion of its members have become a decisive section of the ascendant economic elite, the Communists have increasingly divorced themselves from the masses" (1997, 156).

This disconnect results in one of Sharp's weaknesses that trumps all the others

as a fundamental cause of both internal and external political dissent in Vietnam. Sharp

suggests that an authoritarian government is threatened when its "ideology… erode[s],

and myths and symbols of the system… become unstable." These symbols are analyzed,

using Vietnamese textbooks and educational material, by Casey Lucius in 2009's

Vietnam's Political Process. As early as childhood, "historical narratives lead to

development of rules and protected values that support national preferences." In other

words, the CPV uses its nationalist credentials (having fought off both France and the

United States) in an attempt to indoctrinate its citizens, starting at an early age and

using "political messages [to] guide [them] through [their entire] lives" (2).

However, Abuza argues that the influence of party propaganda is waning:

> The party that once had so much legitimacy that it could call on the Vietnamese people to make continued and repeated sacrifices has squandered much of its popular support. The aging leadership remains profoundly influenced by the war and continues to believe that the population will support it because of its leadership role in anti-colonial struggles (2001, 2)

In summary, "the party remains trapped by the contradiction between its

ideology and its commitment to the market, and it refuses to acknowledge the

irreconcilable tension between them" (Kolko 1997, 129). In doing so, the CPV

conforms to another of Sharp's weaknesses: "The requirements and effects of the

regime's past policies will somewhat limit its present ability to adopt and implement

conflicting policies" (2010, 27). Frequent CPV critic Nguyen Dan Que alleges that

"modern Vietnam has changed so much that it is difficult for the party to stick to the

traditional interpretation of Marxism-Leninism" (2006). This has led to massive

disconnects between the party and the people, and within the party itself.

Conclusion

Considering all of these threats to the CPV, how durable is the regime? An analysis of recent years is illuminating. In 2009, Vietnam renewed its crackdown on political dissent by arresting an estimated twenty-six to thirty political dissidents and detaining four well-known bloggers. Thayer considers this crackdown to have begun in response to the emergence of Bloc 8406 in 2006 (Thayer 2009a, 55). In any case, Janice Beanland – a researcher with Amnesty International's Southeast Asia team – suggests that, based on arrest trends leading up to 2011, the future will show "no letup in the current crack-down, which has been going on since at least 2009" (Voice of America 2011).

Nevertheless, Vietnam's political dissidents have not endured this prolonged "crackdown" without applying countervailing force. These dissidents were further provoked by the "Arab Spring in miniature" progressing in Asia, which Dr. Amitav Acharya, *Reuters* correspondent Raju Gopalakrishnan, and other international commentators term the "Asian Summer" (Acharya 2011; Gopalakrishnan 2011). Hoping to capitalize on the movement, persistent activist Nguyen Dan Que, as mentioned above, called on young people to use the Internet and mobile phones to spread the word for millions to take to the streets and demand an end to Vietnam's one-party rule" (Fox News 2011) .

The Asian Summer seemed to exacerbate existing anti-CPV resentment within not only Nguyen Dan Que, but the aforementioned farmers' movement. *Al Jazeera* documented a Ho Chi Minh City protest of "about 100 farmers from across Vietnam holding silent vigil" using signs to "criticize authorities for illegally seizing their land,"

while "others demanded basic rights and freedoms." Although the tape was smuggled out of the country, and details were limited, one woman's handmade sign read "21-2-2011," which would date the protests within the prime of the Arab Spring. (Chao 2011). However, the act most imitative of the Middle Eastern revolutions was the self-immolation of a "Vietnamese engineer named Pham Thanh Son," who "apparently set himself afire to protest the confiscation of his family's property by local authorities" (Hoang, "Vietnam: Self-immolation…" 2011).

Nevertheless, when asked whether the Arab Spring might have a significant impact on Vietnam, Janice Beanland opined that there is "no evidence that Vietnam is going to go down that road at all." Furthermore, Human Rights Watch's Phil Robertson suggested that an Arab Spring-type revolution more accurately represented "the sum of the fears" of the Communist Party than a credible, tangible threat (Voice of America 2011).

Lest outside observers make hasty conclusions, Gopalakrishnan reports that the Asian Summer is less revolutionary in nature than the Arab Spring, and merely indicates functioning democracies: "although part of a trend toward more political openness in the region, the changes have been driven mostly by governments or through elections" (2011). Furthermore, Acharya suggested that, "with the possible exception of China," the Arab Spring had not been imported to Southeast Asia. He also warned that, for three reasons, Asia might in fact be somewhat "immune" from direct annexation of the Arab Spring. The first concerns the fact that Asia is already past its period of democratic uprisings. He contends that the notion of "people's power" was in fact *invented* in Asia, and, as examples of this, cites late twentieth century movements

in South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Indonesia, and that, according to Freedom House, the number of Asian Democracies doubled – from five to ten – between 1988 and 1999. Secondly, Acharya posited that, to placate societies which might grow exasperated with authoritarian rule, Asian states typically engage in periods of "regime replenishment" in which new faces are inserted into the ruling bloc. Finally, he noted that Association of Southeast Asian Nations has had far more prosperous economies in comparison with the nations of the Arab Spring (2011).

Acharya – who, as mentioned above, is the UNESCO Chair in Transitional Challenges and Governance and Chair of the Association of Southeast Nations Studies Center – concluded by offering his opinion of what would be the ultimate cause of mass unrest in Vietnam: either "political upheaval in China" or "major economic crisis" (2011). In his opinion, the CPV will not see its power seriously threatened by the Asian Summer. In keeping with this assessment, O'Donnell and Schmitter posit that "no transition can be forced purely by opponents against a regime which maintains the cohesion, capacity, and disposition to apply repression," which the government of Vietnam certainly does (1986, 21).

Nevertheless, the CPV increasingly finds itself facing internal schisms. As mentioned above, these include rifts within the party itself between the conservatives and reformers. Hayton suggests that the eventual dominance of the latter group is inevitable: "as more and more Vietnamese encounter the outside world, the integrationists are getting stronger. Official delegations, study tours, tourism and the influence of overseas Vietnamese are all changing the mindset of the national leadership… it seems to be a one-way street" (2010, 202).

Additionally, there are rifts between the party and the National Assembly, the military, and the administration of regional provinces. According to Sharp, this constitutes a grave threat: "withdrawal of popular and institutional cooperation with aggressors and dictators diminishes, and may sever the availability of the sources of power on which all rulers depend. Without availability of those sources, the rulers' power weakens and finally dissolves" (2010, 19).

Furthermore, external opposition is strengthening. According to Hayton, the brief struggle of Bloc 8406 in "2006 and 2007 created new underground networks of activists and new ways of organizing them, and strengthened the links between dissident inside the country and their supporters outside" (2010, 113). Writing in 2009, Thayer expressed a similar sentiment:

> 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. 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. (37-8)

Thayer opines that "these developments are harbingers of the future… The… 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" (Thayer 2009b, 53). Nguyen Dan Que suggests that technology and globalization will play a large part in the fall of the Communist Party:

> The world has become smaller in the information age and with the ease of communication, through the Internet and travel, overseas Vietnamese

communities and those organizations advocating human rights have conveyed to
Vietnam millions of points of light illuminating the universal values of human
rights and democracy that our people should have enjoyed but for the thuggish
misappropriation by the communist dictatorship. (2005)

Furthermore, Russell Dalton, a UC Irvine political science professor, suggests that "it is
reasonable to believe that the Communist regime will cave in within the next 30 to 40
years" (Bharath 2007).

In the meantime, the CPV faces serious threats. In the experience of Gene Sharp,
"if people are not afraid of the dictatorship, that dictatorship is in big trouble" (Stolberg
2011). There is certainly no shortage of individuals willing to stand up to the
Vietnamese Communist Party. Writer Hoang Tien contends that, "nowadays, the
movement for democracy contains people from many sections of society" (International
Federation for… 2007, 26). *Al Jazeera*'s Steve Chao states that, "inside Vietnam,
activists tell us that more people than ever are willing to publically express their
dissatisfaction" (2011). Similarly, Human Rights Watch's Phil Robertson suggests that
there are an "increasing number of protests in Vietnam, in part because people are
becoming more brave, and they have more information" and are better able to organize
protests via internet (Chao 2011). Perhaps most dramatically, when pressured to sign an
affidavit alleging his guilt in actions against the state, lawyer Nguyen van Dai declared
"you all can kill me, but I will never sign it" (Hayton 2010, 125). Thich Quang Do
demonstrates similar conviction: " I'm not afraid of anything, of anything, because I am
struggling for the right cause" (*Al Jazeera* 2007). The Buddhist monk summarizes the
doomed nature of the Communist Party of Vietnam:

> There will come a time when the authorities will be unable to silence all of the
> people all of the time. The moment will come when the people will rise up, like

water bursting its banks. Together, 80 million Vietnamese will speak with one voice to demand democracy and human rights. The government will be unable to ignore their demands, and will have to face up to this reality. Then, the situation in Vietnam will be forced to change, and a democratic process will emerge. (Que Me: Action… n.d.)

The time to which Thich Quang Do refers may come in "30 to 40 years," as Dalton asserts. Alternatively, it may come sooner, following Acharya's prediction, on the heels of an abrupt international financial crisis or unexpected political turmoil in nearby China. In any case, the end of the Communist Party of Vietnam, rife with internal weakness and facing external threats from almost every segment of society, is inevitable in the foreseeable future.

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