

REVIEW

Democracy in Vietnam: a matter of class consciousness?

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Democracy is a Western concept without roots in Asia in general and Vietnam in particular. There are several reasons why Vietnam might be a prospective democracy: (1) its capitalist economy is worth US\$371 billion in 2022; (2) the number of civil society associations has risen in Vietnam since 1990. There are increasing signs that space for civil society is opening up; and (3) there are isolated cases where democratic actions have occurred in Vietnam. This article explains why democracy faces significant challenges in Vietnamese late modernity. It uses a seven-question democratic framework to determine the existence of democracy in Southeast Asia.

Framework for analysis: The framework for analyzing democracy in Southeast Asia with seven questions is as follows: (1) Are there regularly held elections that are free and fair in the country? (2) Are there external or foreign observers of the elections? (3) Are the ballot boxes stuffed openly or secretly? (4) Are the voters bribed in any way before or during the elections? (5) Is the vote secret? (6) Are there secret police operating beyond the law? and (7) Are there opposition parties that can freely take part in elections with low barriers to entry?

Keywords: democracy, Vietnam, political science, Southeast Asia, communism

Introduction

The destruction of Champa based on the Panduranga source of 1832 saw the absorption of the kingdom into three Vietnamese provinces. Some scholars even claim that the idea of Cam and Champa shows the co-ethnic relationship with the ancient Cambodians, and hence Cam as in the city of the Cambodians. There are other claims such as the idea of Cham and the Cham people who made up Champa only to have their cities disintegrate into engulfing Viet districts noting the 17th- and 18th-century Nguyen Kingdom which might have been at the heart of the Vietnamese dynastic polities. A century and a half later, the French missions would provide what appeared to be educational mobility for Vietnamese Catholics in the 1920s and the 1950s. Yet the 18th to early 20th century in Vietnam was a long period of uneven economic development.

The Vietnam War

Most people have some image of the Vietnam War even in late modernity. This is regardless if they participated in it or were born long after it. America has never learned any lessons, strategic, or tactical, from the Vietnam War (1, 2). Even the anti-war movement and the so-called television war merely served to make the American public even more angry about their sons dying in the streets of Saigon (3–5). It was after all more of a local people's war where American soldiers did not have their hearts or minds in winning it as there were no clear gains for them to have been drafted there (6). American presidents stated that they wanted to keep Laos neutral and maintain peace in Laos. That never happened, not for a single moment. In spite of the casualties and costs to Laos, Vietnam became America's worst defeat since 1776: no matter what the pro-American historians claim and no matter what the American apologists say even decades later.

French colonialism

Hence, it is very clear that liberal democracy or even grassroots democracy never had a chance in the early modern and later history of Vietnam. The French colonialists and various military failures at Dien Bien Phu and in spite of the large victory during the New Year invasion served merely to show the weaknesses and confounding stupidity of the French in Indochina alongside their American allies.

The People's Liberation Army

It has always been clear that the Chinese were the traditional enemy of Vietnam in spite of the proximity of both states. The so-called attempt by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to teach the Vietnamese a lesson in 1979 ended in the routing of over 200,000 Chinese Communist soldiers. This event is often suppressed in Chinese history books due to the embarrassing results.

Cold War

Even after the Cold War era, Vietnam did not develop any grassroots democracy. The large toll on the locals and the failure of the foreigners simply made liberal democracy or any form of democracy even less appealing. Therefore, one cannot even claim that democracy in Vietnam was abortive as it was virtually and practically non-existent.

Nepotism

Ever since the reunification of the two Vietnams, the North and the South, there has been nepotism. Nepotism used to be part of the old Nam Viet Nguyen Kingdom's royal family. However, the Communist party leaders have made a special effort to send their immediate family members on the best holidays and events to attend the best schools in the Communist world.

Conclusion

Vietnam makes use of the authoritarian capitalist model where trade and commerce as well as foreign investments create wealth that is forcibly distributed through a cadre system but without any national or regional elections in the liberal democratic sense. Survival in Vietnam is *ipso facto* a matter of class consciousness. The reason why civil society associations are present is because of the image that the Communist Party wants to periodically promote. But there is little to no political space for civil society groups or associations. People who protest in Vietnam are treated very harshly if not taken away never to be seen again. Any country that bans all forms of protest—be they silent or noisy—is an authoritarian state. All authoritarian states only take care of their own families, and there are always cases of nepotism. There is a *class-in-itself* rather than a *class-for-itself*. A class in itself is one that is made up because each class is made up by a categorical label such as a class of engineers, dock-workers, mechanics, basket weavers, hawkers, and postmen. A class for itself is quite different because it can articulate its own class interests. Vietnam is made up of different classes in itself rather than a single class for itself and that is why the prospects for democracy are very low to impossible.

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