

An Approach for Analysing State-Society Relations in Vietnam

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This article examines four arenas in Vietnam’s political life in which state-society relations are problematic: governing institutions and processes, mass media, agricultural collectives, and corruption. Each has evidence to support two common interpretations, which argue that the state and its various organizations in society run the political show in Vietnam. Yet, there is also evidence for a third interpretation, which highlights political activities in society beyond the reach of the state and its organizations. The article also finds ongoing deliberations in each arena about what relations between the state and society should be.

Vietnam’s leaders say the government is “of the people, for the people, and by the people”. Yet the country’s political system has only one political party, the Communist Party. Elections typically have only candidates approved by that party. Tight restrictions make very difficult the formation of any organization or the establishment of any publication that criticizes the Communist Party’s domination of the political system. In such a system, what is the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, the authorities and “the people”? Secondly, what is being said and debated in the country about what those relationships should be? This article offers an approach to analysing such questions. It uses three interpretations in the scholarly literature to examine specific political arenas. It finds that each interpretation contributes to an understanding of the political system but is incomplete. This approach also reveals contending notions in Vietnam about appropriate relations between state and society.

Conceptualizing Relations between “State” and “Society”

State and society are important concepts in everyday life as well as in political analysis. But the concepts are elusive and hard to define. One of the most perplexing problems is distinguishing between the two. Where does the state “end” and society “begin”, and vice versa? State and society are different, yet they are not entirely separate. For example, in a country like Australia or the United States, is a government-funded university part of “the state” or is it part of “society”? People working in such a university are on the government payroll; they are often part of a state employee healthcare or retirement system; they are probably bound by certain restrictions applicable to all government workers. The highest governing body of such a university typically is often a board or council that includes representatives from the state. Yet most people in a university would probably not think of themselves as being part of the state. They would not see themselves as being responsible to the government’s chief executive or the state agency “in charge” of higher education. Students at the university, even those on state scholarships, would not likely say they are part of the state. Instead, students and faculty are likely to think of themselves as being independent scholars, free to pursue their own course of study, and teach and take the courses they want within the bounds of university-designed — not state-designed — requirements. Periodically, issues do arise that highlight the complexities of a university’s position. For instance, when a state official or agency tries to tell a faculty member how or what to teach or threatens to withhold funding from a university or an academic programme until it does as the government says or when faculty members and students who criticize the government are threatened with expulsion, then debates are likely to erupt over the role of the university and its obligations to state authorities, to “the community”, and to scholarship. Boiled down, such discussions are about the state in the affairs of society, specifically, the relations between the state and the university.

This is but one of many examples in which boundaries between “state” and “society” are murky and in which trying to locate and draw them is important yet highly contentious. This situation is true in many countries, including Vietnam.

It brings me to an important point about how to conceptualize and talk about relations between the state and society. Rather than trying to say that one entity is part of the state and another entity is part of society, a more fruitful approach is to think of arenas in which boundaries, rights, jurisdictions, and power distribution between state and societal agencies are debated, contested, and resolved (at least temporarily).¹ These arenas can be within physical institutions, including those that, structurally speaking, clearly belong to the state, for example, government ministries and militaries. But the arenas can be other institutions, like a government-funded university, whose locations in the state structure are ambiguous. Arenas can be groups and organizations not part of a state structure yet in one degree or another are penetrated by state rules and regulations — for example, families, villages, and religious groups. Arenas may also be problems and controversies that are not confined to a particular institution. An example in the United States today would be abortion, which is swirling with questions about the proper role of state agencies and individuals and organizations in society. In Vietnam, a current contentious state-society issue is corruption, which I will examine later in this article.

“Society”, as used here, is a summary term for people in a country, including their institutions and customs, who share political and economic circumstances and environment.² “State” refers to officials and institutions that make, implement, and enforce rules that are intended to apply across the entire society and its various parts.³ No society, however, is thoroughly uniform. Rarely does it have a singular set of institutions, customs, and circumstances. But to be a society, it must have in common some significant features, certain practices, or particular conditions. Rules and regulations of the state are among the circumstances people in a society share and which contribute to influencing the way they live and which

they may indeed shape in turn. In other words, a society has many organizations, activities, and institutions. One of them is the state. The state, therefore, is in society. The state, however, claims to be, and in fact may be, the ultimate agency setting and arbitrating the rules and regulations that frame what other institutions, groups, and so forth, in society do, including how they interact with the state. In this sense, the state, although in society, may also be the chief agent defining and delimiting society. This conceptualization does not presume, however, complete, society-wide acceptance of the state or the form of a particular state. A society may well have individuals, groups, and communities struggling against the state and rejecting the state's attempts to constrain or set terms for how and where they live. At the same time, society may, and usually does, have groups and other actors seeking protection, support, and intervention from the state. Nor does this conceptualization presume that the state is capable of ruling and regulating all sectors of society, or that it acts alone in attempting to do so. Such matters require investigation and analysis in order to know how people in society see the state or how able the state is to set parameters for society.

“Society”, I hasten to add, is not the same as “civil society”. Not all societies possess civil society's qualities or features. Civil society, as I think of it, refers to individuals and groups on their own — without the state's instigation and manipulation — speaking, writing, teaching, acting, and organizing around various interests and issues and doing so in public places independent of the state.⁴ It requires considerable civility — the give and take of contending ideas and claims but with controlled passions and restrained exuberance. It requires tolerating differences in opinion, organization, and practices. It also requires the willingness to work and interact with the state. Resorting to killing one's political opponents or to violent revolution against the state amounts to abandoning civil society. Civil society also requires an accommodating state — one that not only tolerates differences and criticisms but helps to maintain institutions, laws, and practices that make public debate possible without violent or silencing repercussions. Of course, the degree to which civil society

exists varies over time within the same society and from one society to another.

Many questions can be raised about relations between state and society. A single article cannot explore them all. I shall concentrate on relations between government authorities and people living within the jurisdiction of that government. In particular, two kinds of questions will be addressed. The first concerns how the political system works. How, if at all, does the state allow or encourage citizens to be involved in the process of setting and implementing rules and policies of the country? How, if at all, do people in society affect or try to affect what state authorities do; and to what extent do people abide by what authorities say? The second are normative questions. What should be the relations between state authorities and people in society? What involvement should the state have in people's economic, social, cultural, and political affairs; and what involvement should groups and individuals in society have in state affairs?

Three Interpretations of the Political System

Tentative answers to some of these questions appear in the scholarship on Vietnam's political system and state-society relations. Few analysts would say their findings are adequate, and too much remains unknown. Research is sparse and generalizations often rest on slender evidence. Nevertheless, efforts have been made to analyse how the system works. They can be synthesized into three interpretations.⁵

The first, which I call the "dominating state" interpretation, says that rules and programmes governing Vietnam are done by and within the state, in which the Communist Party is the most powerful and pervasive institution. One such formulation argues that Vietnam is a "vast and co-ordinated party-state which pre-empt[s] alternative and autonomous societal organizations from the national centre down to the grassroots of the village and the workplace" (Womack 1992, p. 180). "Vietnam's system is mono-organizational socialism", writes Carlyle Thayer, in which "there is little scope for the organization of activity independent of the party-led command structures". Though

the Communist Party relaxed its grip following reforms in the mid-1980s, Thayer says, its control was reasserted after 1988, hence “civil society [is] awaiting the erosion of mono-organizational socialism before developing further” (Thayer 1992a, pp. 111–12).

With regard to policy-making and implementation, according to this dominating state interpretation, society has no significant impact. Gareth Porter is clearest on this:

The model of the *bureaucratic polity*, in which major decisions are made entirely *within* the bureaucracy and are influenced by it rather than by extra-bureaucratic forces in society — whether parliamentary parties, interest groups, or mass movements — aptly describes how the Vietnamese policy system works. Not only the determination of major policies but the power over the selection of political and governmental leadership is confined to a small group of party officials. (Porter 1993, p. 101; emphasis in the original)

Differences within the state do arise. Scholars analyse internal debates and factions within Communist Party and other components of the state.⁶ But the only important influences outside the state that the dominating state interpretation acknowledges are international ones. For instance, events in communist countries in Eastern Europe and Soviet Union in the 1980s are said to have had a profound impact on Vietnam’s political leadership (Porter 1993, p. 96; Kolko 1997, pp. 29–30, 133–37).

A second interpretation modifies the first by saying that forces in society can influence policy through organizations that the state itself dominates. Some analysts talk about this phenomenon as “mobilizational authoritarianism”; others call it “state corporatism”. Setting aside fine distinctions between them, I will refer to both as “mobilizational corporatism”. It draws attention to the importance of various organizations, typically one for each major social sector that the state, particularly the party, has established and runs. Using these organizations, the state can mobilize people to support its programmes and policies, maintain channels of communication between authorities and each sector of society, and manage social and economic groups that otherwise might become unruly. William

Turley argues that because other organizations independent of the state are few, indeed are usually prohibited, and because the Communist Party retains considerable legitimacy, “the power elite has been able to invite popular involvement under its supervision without much fear that things will get out of control ...”. At the same time, people’s concerns expressed through these authorized channels can influence policy debate among national leaders.⁷ This interaction between leadership and citizens through state-instigated and state-managed organizations also helps to perpetuate the political system.

The first and second interpretations focus on formal institutions of politics. Both also emphasize national-level politics, paying little attention to local political dynamics. They also concentrate primarily on policy and policy-making; they say little about discrepancies between what state leaders have decided and what people in society actually do. According to a third interpretation, the above conceptualizations attribute too much power to state and too little to society. In the first place, due to insufficient resources and other inadequacies, the state’s capacity to co-ordinate programmes and implement policies is considerably less than what a dominating state or mobilizing corporatist interpretation would lead one to believe (Woodside 1979; Thrift and Forbes 1986, pp. 81–83, 101–4). The state, concludes Melanie Beresford, has long been “highly decentralized”, making it difficult for the central authorities’ policies and programmes to actually be implemented and involving considerable negotiation between local and central authorities.⁸ Furthermore, social groups and processes not under state control have remained afoot, shaping Vietnam’s economy and society as much as or more than state policy and administration. Such factors in society together with weak administrative machinery help to explain discrepancies between what the state claims and what actually occurs (Thrift and Forbes 1986, pp. 82–83). Another part of this interpretation is that social forces outside of the state and official organizations have affected national policies. Beresford, for instance, indicates that the Communist Party has been responsive to pressures from below and recognizes the “existence of independent

sources of political power” (Beresford 1989, pp. 116–18). Other analysts have linked significant policy changes due to pressures from various quarters of society (Fforde 1989, esp. pp. 203–205; Chu Van Lam et al. 1992, esp. pp. 78–79; Kerkvliet 1995; White 1985). The main message running through studies highlighting these features of Vietnam’s political system is that there can be negotiation between various components of the state and interests in society. I summarize this phenomenon, however imperfectly, as “dialogue” in the broad sense of the word, which incorporates communication of contentious ideas and preferences in ways that, in Vietnam, are often indirect and non-verbal.⁹

With these three interpretations of Vietnam’s political system in mind, let us now look at four arenas to investigate the two questions on state-society relations raised in the previous section.

Governing Institutions and Processes

This arena includes how the state makes and implements policies and rules for society. Much that we know about how Vietnam is governed fits within the dominating state and mobilizational corporatist interpretations. Not only is the Communist Party the only political party in the country, but authorities reject any suggestions of a multi-party system and squash any potential rival political organizations. Vietnam’s state is even more rigid in this regard than neighbouring China where at least a few tiny opposition political parties are allowed. Vietnam’s Communist Party has about 2.1 million members (Kolko 1997, p. 72). Although making up only about 3 per cent of the nation’s total population, party members compose a large percentage of government officials, from the smallest unit of administration, called sub-districts (*xa*) in the countryside (generally composed of two to five villages) and precincts (*phuong*) in the cities, to the district and wards (*huyen, quan*) and the provinces, and to the national ministries, courts, and National Assembly. Elections are regularly held to select the representatives to run all these levels of government. The nomination system organized by local units

of the Fatherland Front (*Mat Tran To Quoc*), which is dominated by the Communist Party, almost always produces candidates who meet the approval of party leaders in the locality and, for higher offices, the approval of the party's Central Committee (about 150 people) and the Political Bureau (more than a dozen members).¹⁰ Most candidates, especially for provincial- and national-level offices, are party members, and the overwhelming majority of those elected are party members. In the National Assembly, for example, about 90 per cent of the nearly 400 delegates during the late 1990s were members of Vietnam's Communist Party.

Most policies and laws are made in a process that is hard to follow. Much of it seems to occur within the Communist Party and government offices behind closed doors. Rarely are deliberations open to the public. Access to decision-makers at the national and provincial levels is very restricted. Although the average person probably knows more about how district and sub-district authorities make decisions, even there the process is rarely accessible to most citizens. A national bureaucracy, charged with implementing policies and enforcing rules, has branches extending down to district and often sub-district levels. It includes a national police and domestic security system whose work monitor people thought to be disenchanted with the political system or engaged in activities potentially damaging to the regime. Alongside the nation-wide bureaucracy is the Communist Party's own elaborate hierarchy that extends down to villages.

Helping to generate support for the state and to channel citizens' concerns and criticisms in a non-threatening manner to the leaders are numerous organizations of the party or other institutions of the state. Some two dozen are affiliates of the official overarching association, the Fatherland Front. The organizations are supposed to represent various sectors of Vietnamese society: for example, the Peasants' Association (*Hoi Nong Dan*) for agricultural producers, the General Confederation of Labor (*Tong Lien Doan Lao Dong*) for workers, the Women's Association (*Hoi Phu Nu*), and the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League (*Doan Thanh Nien Cong San Ho Chi Minh*). One that has become prominent in recent years is the

Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Vietnam (*Phong Thuong Mai va Cong Nghiep*), which was established by the Ministry of Foreign Trade.¹¹ Communist Party leaders head these organizations and typically occupy key positions in their local branches. Just as the mobilizational corporatist interpretation says, authorities use these state organizations to carry out government programmes and policies. In north Vietnam during the 1950s, for example, the official peasant organization of the day (then called *Nong Hoi*, a predecessor of today's Peasants' Association), helped local officials and party leaders to carry out a sweeping land redistribution programmes and then to persuade, encourage, and coerce villagers to join agricultural collectives. In recent years, government and party authorities have called upon the Women's Association, Peasants' Association, Youth League, and Confederation of Labor to drum up support in neighbourhoods and villages for national campaigns against illegal drugs, prostitution, and gambling, and other "social evils". Statements from the Peasants' Association make clear that the organization is a "prop [*cho dua*] of the [Communist] Party and State, a crucial force of the peasants' movement to implement the policies and undertakings of the party and the state ..."¹² The largest and longest mobilizational role of these groups and the party itself was keeping up citizens' determination to join the war to fight the Americans and reunite the country (1960–75). Many Vietnamese no doubt would have sacrificed a lot for this cause even without these organizations circulating information, holding meetings, singing patriotic songs, and putting on performances depicting the heroics of their countrymen. Nevertheless, those activities were ubiquitous and probably helped the war effort significantly.¹³

Although often boosters for whatever the government and party leadership want, these state organizations also promote their members' interests. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry lobbied on behalf of businesses during debates and deliberations over investment laws and helped to shape the 1994 legislation. In national policy-making circles during 1993–94, the Confederation of Labor pressed for minimum wage laws, the right to strike, and other

measures supported by large numbers of workers (Stromseth 1998, chap. 4 and 6). Officers of the Peasants' Association have faulted state authorities for mistreating peasants. They have also urged the state to subsidize farm-gate prices for rice, increase the volume of low-interest loans for peasants, and put in place other programmes beneficial to rural people's needs. The Peasants' Association also claims to have influenced, on behalf of its members, the content of the 1993 land law, especially sections allowing villagers to transfer their land use rights to others.¹⁴

What has been said thus far synthesizes a great deal about state-society relations in governing processes. But additional evidence about how the government works, which does not fit within the dominating state and mobilizational corporatist interpretations, also needs to be taken into consideration. For one thing, many activities affecting government operations are unauthorized or fall outside official channels. Informal arrangements between officials and ordinary citizens constitute one cluster of such activities. Personal connections can figure prominently in how decisions are made and rules are implemented. Family ties, friendships, and relationships carrying over from when people were classmates or in the army together or hailing from the same province or village can influence how officials behave. Having "connections" makes it possible, at least in some cases, for a citizen to get favourable decision from a government office even if otherwise not merited or have that office ignore an infraction that the person has committed.

A second cluster of evidence is the dispersed, unorganized, yet extensive actions that violate what state agencies stipulate. Housing practices is one area that has been researched (Thrift and Forbes 1986; Koh 2000, chap. 5). In the 1980s, tens of thousands of urban residents in Vietnam ignored and sometimes blatantly defied state rules and regulations about building and renovating dwellings. For a combination of reasons, among them limited resources for state law enforcement in the face of widespread violations and many local officials turning a blind eye or actually helping people to skirt the law, residents frequently did as they wanted yet avoided fines and

other punishments.¹⁵ At several junctures during the 1980s and 1990s, the widespread violations compelled national authorities to make new laws that were more in line with what people were actually doing. In other words, unorganized societal pressure outside official channels had helped to shape the state's rules. This conforms to the dialogical interpretation of government.

So does a third cluster of evidence: organized activities beyond official channels to voice citizens' concerns and demands. Workers in numerous state-owned and private companies went on strike in the early 1990s before such actions were legal. Besides seeking better pay and working conditions, the strikers also often demanded "democracy in the workplace". By 1994, these and other public demonstrations by workers had pressured Confederation of Labor leaders to champion the right to strike and contributed to the National Assembly's decision to legalize strikes that conformed to certain guidelines (Greenfield 1994, pp. 226–28; Kerkvliet 1995a, pp. 17–19). Placard-holding citizens periodically step outside authorized channels to demonstrate in front of government offices and in the streets in order to draw attention to their grievances against golf courses being built on their rice fields, excessive government taxes, government confiscation of land, abusive authorities, flawed elections, corruption, and other conditions. In May 1998, for instance, over 500 angry villagers surrounded the provincial government offices in Nam Dinh province; a year later a hundred peasants staged a silent demonstration in front of the National Assembly in Hanoi. Sometimes, such as in parts of Thanh Hoa province in 1989 and Dong Nai province in 1997, demonstrators become more aggressive, throwing stones through office windows, shouting abuses at officials, and taking policemen hostage until they extract some concessions from authorities.¹⁶ Government responses are typically a combination of sending in the police to make arrests and attending to some of the protesters' complaints.

During the 1990s, a couple of dozen organizations emerged that helped drug addicts, unemployed people, homeless street children, minority groups, and others. These "non-governmental organizations"

(NGOs) have also launched modest campaigns to draw attention to social and economic problems and solicit help from government and international aid agencies (Beaulieu 1994; Grey 1997; Ljunggren 1994, pp. 27–33). While these organizations have to comply with certain state regulations, many have avoided becoming handmaidens of state officials. Across Vietnam, hundreds, probably thousands of other small organizations have no legal standing but are active in furthering their interests. There are, for example, groups of vegetable growers, associations for the repair and maintenance of religious temples, and organizations among vendors and pedicab drivers.

There is one large organization wholly outside the state. It is the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV, *Giao Hoi Phat Giao Viet Nam Thong Nhat*). Formed in the 1951 in southern Vietnam, its spokespersons claim that it represents the majority of Buddhists in the country. In 1981, the state sought to bring all Buddhists under a single organization, called the Buddhist Church of Vietnam (*Giao Hoi Phat Giao Viet Nam*). But many monks and lay Buddhists refused to join. They remained instead in the UBCV, defying the state. From time to time leading monks in the UBCV demand that the government stop meddling in religious affairs. Some have written scathing critiques of the government's violations of human rights and have advocated a multi-party political system. Authorities' reactions have included clamping down on UBCV activities, detaining several UBCV monks for such offenses as causing public disorder and undermining national unity, sentencing prominent monks to years in prison, and harassing UBCV activists. So far such reactions have not expunged the organization. State authorities have refrained, however, from launching a determined frontal assault against the organization, probably for fear that such an extensive repression would arouse widespread anger and unrest.¹⁷

Another aspect of governing processes pertinent to state-society relations is debate over state-society boundaries that occurs within state institutions. In recent years an important dynamic within the Confederation of Labor, the only authorized national organization for workers, has been an ongoing discussion, punctuated occasionally

by heated outbursts, about its purpose. Many workers and local Confederation leaders have criticized the organization for behaving primarily in a top-down manner, conveying to workers what the Communist Party and government leaders want rather than pressuring state authorities to address workers' needs (Greenfield 1994, pp. 220–23). In more general terms, members have insisted on a distinction between what they want and what the state wants. Elections have been another site of struggle for a clearer distinction between people's interests and the state's. For instance, twice in recent years, voters in a sub-district on the outskirts of Hanoi have dumped candidates favoured by party officialdom. To a significant degree the reasons came down to most voters' conception of a good public official being at odds with what authorities were insisting on (Malarney 1997). Equally significant, the majority of voters there had managed to turn elections their way rather than leave them controlled by local representatives of the state. Letters to the editors of some newspapers and articles by some journalists have conveyed discontent with the electoral system because it allows voters too little choice and has but one political party. Some of these writings insinuate, contrary to the official line, that the system is not democratic. In many urban electorates in Hanoi, officials countenance proxy voting, even though it is illegal, in part to assuage many residents' discontent with being compelled to go through the motions of voting when they see the process as largely meaningless (Koh 2000, chap. 3).

But one does not need to look at local politics to find debate within state institutions about where the boundaries between state and society should be. Beginning at least as early as the mid-1970s, leaders in the national government and the Communist Party itself were arguing about whether, and if so how, the state should cease trying to plan and control the country's economy. Gradually, those advocating greater scope for free markets, removing price controls, allowing private enterprises, returning farmland to individual households, and so forth, brought about significant changes.¹⁸ Debates on these issues continue to this day, with some in the party arguing that the state has ceded too much to free markets, domestic entrepreneurs, and

foreign investors. But the result thus far, officially summarized as “renovation” (*doi moi*), has been much more space in the economy for individuals, households, private enterprises — in short, society — and far less for the state. Debates within national offices about allowing more space in the political system for autonomous organizations, possibly even other political parties, have also flickered from time to time, although with only modest changes thus far.

Media

Another arena for observing state-society relations and contested views about what the boundaries should be is the mass media. Much that we know about how it is organized and used by the state conforms to the dominating state and mobilizational corporatist interpretations of the country’s political system. All television, radio, and telephone systems; film making; and Internet service providers are owned and operated by state agencies. All newspapers, publishing houses, and printing presses are owned and operated by government ministries, the Communist Party, and official organizations. Authorities in the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Communist Party’s Department for Culture and Ideology scrutinize and often intervene to determine the content of publications and of radio and television broadcasts. The state uses these media outlets not only to inform and educate citizens but also to inundate them with official positions on a wide range of domestic and international issues and to mobilize people to do what government, party, and mass organization leaders require.¹⁹

Individuals and groups trying to publish and disseminate a publication, make a radio or TV broadcast, or produce a film outside the state’s system encounter virtually insurmountable obstacles. Compared with rules regarding housing, traffic, and residency requirements, which people in many parts of the country often ignore with near impunity, rules against unauthorized outlets of media are rarely breached and when they are, the law enforcement agencies respond quickly to stop the infraction and often punish the violators.

State authorities made their position clear in the mid-1950s. At that stage the Communist Party government was still young, and many of its policies and rules were still being formed. Although the state ran the radio stations and telegraph offices and produced newspapers and other publications, private publishing houses and printing presses also existed. But by 1958, those private outlets had been shut down following a heated struggle over a range of issues regarding the extent to which the state should control what writers, artists, scholars, and other people could say, publish, and create. I shall say more about the content of that struggle in a minute. Since 1958 other efforts to produce and distribute publications outside the state's media network have been quickly snuffed out. In early 1989, for example, several members of the Club of Former Resistance Fighters (*Cau Lac Bo Nhung Nguoi Khang Chien Cu*) in Ho Chi Minh City managed to publish a magazine and some letters in defiance of authorities' prohibitions. Their efforts to continue doing so and establish, in effect, a private publication, collapsed as national and local authorities blocked the club members' efforts to find printing presses or use mimeograph machines to reproduce their texts. By early 1990, police had detained these club members and placed the most prominent one, Nguyen Ho, under house arrest (Heng 1999, chap. 7). That same year authorities arrested Doan Viet Hoat, a critic of the regime, for writing and circulating unauthorized material. Since then few Vietnamese have managed to distribute letters and short essays critical of particular policies or of the political system before being arrested and, usually, imprisoned or put under house arrest.

Technological changes have made it somewhat easier for people who are determined to circulate contraband publications and other printed materials. Photocopy machines, previously as scarce as meat in a vegetarian restaurant, have become ubiquitous since the early 1990s. Convenient for people of all kinds, this machine is also a handy tool for critics wanting to produce quickly copies of materials that the state would not approve. Caught possessing such forbidden material, however, can mean grave consequences, which of course continues to make people nervous and reluctant to keep it. Fax

machines and the Internet are new ways to distribute unauthorized materials. Despite state authorities' efforts to monitor what is zipping electronically into and out of the country, they have not yet figured out how to stop all communication it dislikes. Previously, writings by such critics as Ha Si Phu, Duong Thu Huong, Lu Phuong, and Nguyen Thanh Giang that could not be published in Vietnam might eventually appear in newspapers and magazines published in Paris, Toronto, San Jose, Melbourne, or other foreign places with Vietnamese communities. Since the late 1990s, such material is instantaneously flashed to e-mail lists around the world. Numerous web sites, most of them established by anti-communist Vietnamese organizations outside the country, feature writings and statements by people in Vietnam who have criticized policies or the party-state itself. Since about 1996, a few newsletters and magazines said to be by people in Vietnam and crammed with unflattering accounts about the regime and particular authorities, have also circulated via the Internet.²⁰ Although the state's grip on the mass media is firm, there is an undercurrent of debate about what the proper line should be between state and society regarding media operations and content. This debate is not only between authorities and dissidents but also within the state's media system itself.

According to Vietnam's constitution, citizens have the freedom to speak, publish, create, and form associations. In the mid-1950s, shortly after the Communist Party government was established in the north following the defeat of the French army and the division of Vietnam into two parts, numerous Vietnamese writers and scholars in Hanoi began to exercise these constitutional rights. In independent publications they wrote short stories, poems, and essays on a range of topics, including the importance of research, speech, writing, and publications separate from the state. Articles also criticized efforts by the party and other state authorities to control all media. Few attacked the regime *per se*. Indeed, many of these intellectuals had fought in the revolution against French colonialism on the side of the Communist Party. They supported the new government. One line of argument in their publications was that open debate, free from

state prohibitions, was in the party's own best interest. Such freedom, writers said, would help to prevent authorities from becoming dogmatic and authoritarian. Advocates of an independent media quickly collided with national authorities that held very different ideas. The clash became known as the *Nhan Van–Giai Pham* affair, referring to two of the independent journals published in 1956 that promoted free expression.²¹ National authorities argued that in order to press ahead with revolutionary change on all fronts — including culture, technology, and education — the state, led by the Communist Party, must have a firm hand on the mass media. Intellectual work unconnected to advancing the socialist revolution and preserving national independence, officials argued, would undermine the regime and the nation and help to revive capitalism and all its oppression. Excessive freedom and “unconstructive criticism”, they said, also would play into the hands of those in south Vietnam and the United States who opposed the socialist regime and the country's reunification.

Similar justifications for restrictions on what citizens can say, do, and publish persisted into the 1990s. The expansion of a market economy and other reforms since the 1980s have led to much greater variety of content in mass media, including frequent accounts of improper behaviour among officials. Officials repeatedly emphasize, especially to foreigners, that people in Vietnam have considerable freedom to say and do what they like. But they also argue that the state has a right and a duty to guard the nation against hostile domestic and international forces that hide behind a pretense of “human rights” and “democracy” to threaten peace and order and the country's hard-won independence and its social and economic improvements.²² Drastic changes in the political system, they contend, such as allowing several political parties and independent media outlets, will result in chaos, similar to what happened to the Soviet Union. Numerous people within the country strenuously disagree. They advocate freedom to speak, assemble, and organize as well as freedom from state domination in the media, arts, and research. To support their views, they often invoke Vietnam's constitution

and other official documents. Some cite Ho Chi Minh's writings decades ago that lambasted the French for depriving Vietnamese of these very freedoms.²³ Like *Nhan Van-Giai Pham* contributors and publishers in the 1950s, such Vietnamese today are essentially saying that the state's grip on the expression and circulation of ideas is wrong. Citizens should be able to speak and publish independently of the state. Sites of these ongoing debates and struggles over how much or how little the state should regulate the mass media include some of the state's own institutions, even those in charge of media outlets.²⁴ In 1957, for example, members in the state-organized Vietnam Writers' Association (VWA, *Hoi Nha Van*) produced the magazine *Van* (Literature) that resonated the concerns of those independent publications in 1956 that had been banned. Writers in *Van* frequently criticized the intensifying pressure on artists to conform to what officials wanted said. Many poems and short stories published there flew in the face of the party leadership's insistence that literature should adhere to "socialist realism". Even after higher officials had forced the publication to close, many writers within the association refused to join the state leadership's campaign against those who had produced and contributed to the magazine. Other struggles have erupted over censorship when newspaper editors and reporters try, sometimes successfully, to publish things that their superiors or party-state agencies regulating the media object to. In 1986, two newspapers persisted, despite pressures from regulatory agencies and high-ranking party officials, to expose corruption and other nefarious activities of the party secretary and other officials in Thanh Hoa province. Although a complicated matter, a struggle over censorship was a central dynamic in this episode. Another dispute surfaced in 1988. Tran Do, head of party's Commission on Culture and the Arts, together with Nguyen Ngoc, editor of the state's main literary magazine, *Van Nghe*, clashed with superiors and media regulatory bodies over the publication's content. Ultimately they lost their jobs. They had wanted to publish more creative and lively work, as well as essays that debated important issues of the day. Like many other intellectuals, Tran Do and Nguyen Ngoc were

weary of doctrinaire articles that filled newspapers and magazines. Not that these men and their many supporters within party-state media circles were necessarily pressing for liberal democracy or complete separation between state and media; their views on these issues are not clear from the material at hand. What is clear is that they wanted journalists and writers to have a much freer hand to publish and write and greater distance from state intervention and supervision.²⁵

Agricultural Collectives

Beginning in the mid-1950s, the Communist Party state in north Vietnam established collectivized farming, a centrepiece for its radical reorganization of agricultural production.²⁶ Collectives were crucial to the state leadership's overall programme to make Vietnam a socialist country with state-controlled markets, state-owned companies, an equitable distribution of wealth, and other features of a centrally planned economy. After the country was reunified in 1975–76, the state extended this programme to the south. Collectivized agriculture required farming households to pool their lands, draught animals, and labour and then work together to raise crops and livestock. Villagers were organized into teams. Several teams made up a collective, which was directed by a committee typically headed by Communist Party members. Initially, each collective encompassed only households in the same village or part of a village, but fairly quickly the size grew to incorporate households in several villages.²⁷ Collective members were paid, usually in rice and other produce, according to complicated formulas that took into consideration how much work each person did, the quality of that work, the need to assure everyone enough to eat, and the imperative to prevent large inequalities in living conditions.

National officials used the state bureaucracy, various organizations under the Fatherland Front, and the Communist Party to form and run the collective farms. Agencies of the state organized wave after wave of educational, training, and political campaigns to get villagers

to join the collectives, become model collective workers, believe in the superiority of collective farming over individual or household farming, and embrace socialism. During the war against the United States and to reunite the country (1965–75), authorities from central to local levels stressed that the collectives were vital for providing food and other supplies to soldiers at the front and to those soldiers' families back in the villages. Indeed, one responsibility of the collectives' leaders was to recruit young villagers to join the army.

Officials frequently debated various aspects of how collectives were organized and administered. In the early years, some officials argued against plans to increase the pace at which collectives were being established. In the 1960s, officials debated about ways to improve the efficiency and productivity of collective farming. Some favoured smaller sizes; others insisted on large collectives; some wanted to allow more latitude for household-based farming and other production while others disagreed. Some input to such debates had percolated up through mass organizations of the state and other official channels. During meetings with local officials, for instance, villagers complained about how work points were counted, favouritism in work assignments, low prices for the commodities they produced, and other problems with how collectives operated. Periodically, a small percentage of members even requested permission to leave the collectives. Such concerns did reach the central offices of the Communist Party and its government. Although collectivized production remained the official policy, discussions, and debates did result in modifications to specific rules and regulations regarding how it was supposed to be done and how produce should be distributed. In the mid-1970s, officials also disagreed over how rapidly or extensively collectivized farming and other aspects of centrally planned economy should be imposed on the south following reunification. By the late 1970s, there were deep divisions within the party and various government ministries about how to re-organize collectives in order to prevent production from falling further and further behind what the nation needed. In 1979 such disagreements contributed to modest shifts away from collectivized production

towards individual household farming. The swing in that direction became larger during the 1980s, and by the early 1990s nearly all farming was done by individual households. Collectivized farming was no longer the official policy.

As synthesized thus far, the evidence regarding the rise and demise of collectivized farming corresponds well to the dominating state and mobilizational corporatist interpretations of Vietnam. But there is more to the story, which corresponds to the dialogical school. One significant influence on the debate within official circles was what was happening in the villages and fields where collectives were supposed to be operating. From the outset, few villagers had been enthusiastic about the state's collectivization policy. Most had joined reluctantly, realizing that, because authorities were determined to collectivize farming, they had no viable alternatives. Others joined on the condition that living conditions would improve, which is what authorities had assured them would happen. Initially life did get better. But by the early 1960s, improvements stalled, and by the middle of that decade through the 1970s living conditions deteriorated for a large proportion of villagers. The collectives were not the only reason. But many villagers believed that the collective system stood in the way of having more to eat, better housing, and other improvements. For evidence, many simply pointed to the fact that productivity was at least twice as high on the tiny plots of land that authorities allowed households to farm individually than on the collectively farmed land. To many villagers, one basic problem was that collective farming did not reward diligent work. Whether one worked hard or not, one still did not have enough to eat. Moreover, individuals doing the same task received virtually the same amount of payment regardless of how well or poorly each person had laboured. Often villagers were also disgusted with local leaders who abused their authority and embezzled money and other resources belonging to the collective.

Rarely did villagers openly demonstrate against collectivization. Known cases of such opposition were in southern Vietnam in the late 1970s when villagers in several areas marched to protest against

being forced to turn over their lands to the collectives. There are several reasons for so little public opposition. One is that people were intimidated. Because collectivization was a major policy of the state, challenging it meant challenging the state. A second major reason applies to northern Vietnam during the war. Because officials repeatedly emphasized the importance of collective farming to defend the country, open opposition to the collective could be misinterpreted as being opposed to the war and unpatriotic. Another aspect is that many villagers, despite their reservations about and even dislike for collectivized farming, suppressed as much as possible their discontent for the good of the country and the war for national reunification.

Although public opposition to collectivization outside authorized channels was rare, widespread discontent was expressed in subtle, non-confrontational ways that continuously worried local and central authorities. In many parts of the country, villagers went about their duties on the collectivized farms in a half-hearted manner. Leaders of production teams complained in the 1960s and 1970s that members worked lackadaisically, showed up late and made all kinds of excuses to go home early, and “dragged their feet” (*lan cong*). For instance, transplanters, who earned work points according to how many bunches of seedlings they planted, would make their bunches smaller than was stipulated, thus getting by with less work. Harvesters often “worked as though they were playing”, cutting each stalk, one by one rather than taking a handful at a time. Disinterest and disgust towards collectivized farming was so serious in some areas that land went unplanted. By the late 1970s, at least 150,000 hectares of the nation’s collectivized land lay fallow because farmers were not “enthusiastic about production”.²⁸ In many places, families took bolder steps. They encroached on collective land to increase the area for private farming, enlarge their gardens, and build their houses. Such encroachment during the 1960s and 1970s, wrote one researcher, was “widespread and had been going on for many years” (Dinh Thu Cuc 1977, p. 40). In Ha Bac province, for instance, the improper use of collective land and especially the unauthorized enlargement

of private plots in many villages angered provincial leaders who implored local officials to recover those lands and vigilantly enforce the rules. By the middle or late 1970s, the percentage of land farmed as household plots may actually have been 7 to 13 per cent of the land nominally under the jurisdiction of co-operatives, significantly greater than the authorized 5 per cent.

By the middle to late 1960s and through the 1970s, several villages in northern and central Vietnam were quietly tinkering with production arrangements, seeing how much they could get away with without attracting unwanted attention from officials, especially beyond the village. These alternative arrangements were often called “sneaky contracts” (*khoan chui*). In some villages where pig raising was supposed to be done by co-operative teams, it was instead contracted to households, who were allowed to keep a high percentage of net earnings (Hy Van Luong 1993, pp. 202–3). In others, land used in the winter months for growing vegetables or land that could not be irrigated during the dry season was allocated to interested households who paid a certain amount to the collective and could do as they pleased with the rest of what they grew. Encouraged by the results of these modifications, some collective officials in several areas gave in to villagers’ pressure to contract rice production to individual households. Provinces in which such “sneaky contracts” intermittently occurred included Ha Bac, Ha Nam Ninh, Ha Son Binh, Hai Hung, Hai Phong, Nghe Tinh, Phu Tho, and Vinh Phuc.²⁹ Authorities in some districts with “sneaky contracts” turned a blind eye. Others even encouraged these modifications so long as production improved. Vinh Phuc provincial authorities, knowing that villagers were often disgusted with collective farming, began in 1966 to support limited contractual arrangements so long as the spirit of collective farming was maintained. Soon, however, villagers were exceeding those limits. They farmed fields as their own, turning over only a fraction of their harvests to collective officials. Some surrendered none of their crops. To prevent further unravelling of collective system, national authorities stepped in, reprimanded the provincial authorities and insisted that the family

contract system stop. That was effective for a while, but gradually “sneaky” arrangements reappeared.

The persistent and extensive problems of getting villagers to behave as good collective members gradually influenced officials who were deliberating how to revive the flagging agricultural economy in the 1970s. Wave after wave of campaigns to improve productivity, restructure the size and administration of collective organizations, introduce new agricultural technologies, and convince villagers to embrace collectivized farming had done little to improve the economy or make collectives stronger. A Ministry of Agriculture report in 1984 summarized the situation in the late 1970s:

while some advanced cooperatives still maintained and protected production achievements, many cooperatives had come to a halt and some had fallen into ruins. The masses had little enthusiasm to labor and produce energetically. In many places production was at a standstill and deteriorating. This reality was an obstacle for enhancing agricultural output and building a new socialist countryside. (Bo Nong Nghiep 1984, p. 14)

In effect, the reality was bearing down on authorities. It was also strengthening those in official circles who were questioning the wisdom of collectivized production and contributed significantly to policy-makers discarding collectivized farming and making new policies that authorized family-based farming.

Some analysts have suggested that, because agricultural collectives were supposed to be the lowest rung on state apparatus, villagers’ foot dragging, sneaky contracts, and other resistance against them were all within the state (Thaveeporn 1999, pp. 166–67). The implication is that such struggles had nothing to do with state-society relations. But whether collectives were part of the state is unclear. Like public universities in North America, their location was mixed. Certainly, they were creations of the state. And they were part of the state’s overall effort to centrally control the nation’s economy. But did members see themselves as part of the state? Like students and faculty in many universities in the example used at the beginning of this chapter, few villagers probably did. They were not on the

state's payroll. Not even collective officials received a salary from the state; they were paid from what the collective produced on its own. Meanwhile, collectives had to pay the state a certain portion of their produce.³⁰

More important for state-society relations than determining whether collectives were inside or outside the state is to query what the struggles were about. One of the main issues was the preferred role of the state in agricultural production and other rural activities. Vietnam's state authorities had sought to control farming, the distribution of produce, and many other aspects of village society in order to socialize agriculture and village life. This meant minimizing as far as possible what individuals and households could do on their own, especially regarding production and distribution. Authorities expended enormous time and other resources to bring about these changes. Although most villagers in the north by the early 1960s had joined the collectives, few shared the socialist vision of collectivized farming. Most preferred instead to farm individually, as members of households and families, not as members of collectives. Later, after the war and the country had been reunited, many rural producers in the south indicated similar sentiments. For the most part, villagers expressed their preferences more through what they did than what they said. Through their actions, they were engaged in an extended dialogue with state authorities about how much agricultural production and other facets of village life should be given to state institutions and how much to societal ones. Eventually, those Vietnamese pressing for much more space for societal ones gained ground while those insisting on state institutions lost it.

Seeking an end to collectivized farming did not mean villagers wanted the state to abandon entirely agriculture or the countryside. Since the end of collectivized farming in the late 1980s and the revival of household-based farming, small rural producers have asked for state assistance. Many villagers have wanted the state to protect land from being accumulated by a few at the expense of the majority (Scott 2000, pp. 77–78; Kerkvliet 1995*b*, pp. 84–85). This was an important concern in debates, manifested in various fora

within and beyond official channels, leading to a new land law in 1993. Villagers have frequently asked the state to subsidize prices for fertilizer and other inputs, provide low-interest agricultural loans, crack down on smuggling, and protect villages against criminals. In short, the state, villagers are saying, has roles to play in rural society but one of them is not to compel villagers to farm collectively.

Corruption

One prominent claim in the three arenas discussed so far is that people should have more autonomy from state authorities and that the distance between the state and society should be greater than it has been. A prominent claim regarding corruption, however, is the opposite: *less* autonomy from the state for organizations, groups, and individuals and *less* room for non-state activities. Corruption in Vietnam within the Communist Party, government ministries, and other agencies of the state has many forms and methods. Often it involves, as one prominent party leader explained, someone in authority taking advantage of his or her position for personal or family gain through such activities as smuggling, accepting or demanding bribes, embezzlement, and other forms of stealing, graft, and kickbacks.³¹ Another side of corruption is citizens who manage to obtain — through personal connections, monetary enticements, and illicit arrangements — resources from the state or be allowed privileges by state agencies to which they are not legally entitled. The various forms boil down to individuals and groups personally benefiting, usually materially (money, land, or other property), from illicit uses of state resources, authority, and privileges. Corruption, therefore, amounts to appropriating for the benefit of oneself or others in society that which is supposed to remain in the public domain or be used by state agencies in order to govern. Preventing and stopping corruption requires maintaining strict boundaries between what belongs to or should be protected by the state for the public good and what people in society, as individuals and groups, can use as their own.

Specifying those boundaries are anti-corruption laws and regulations in Vietnam. These rules, however, are not well monitored and enforced. But unlike the widespread violations of rules and regulations about housing, for which citizens seem only infrequently to want strict enforcement, violations of laws and regulations against corruption have frequently aroused people to demand better law enforcement — better maintenance of the separation between what belongs to or should be used by state authorities for public benefit and what individuals can use or appropriate for their own personal benefit.

Corruption has been a problem for the Communist Party state since at least the early 1960s when it afflicted some agricultural collectives. In those days, typical incidents involved officials taking for themselves small amounts of rice or money that belonged to the state or taking for their own use cement or other construction materials that were supposed to be used for public buildings. Although serious, considering that those years were times of great scarcity, the amounts were tiny compared with what occurred in the 1990s when corruption appeared to be far more widespread and represented much more money. Figures from police reports show that, on average, each known case of corruption in 1999 amounted to about US\$86,000 going into officials' pockets.³²

In ways consistent with the dominating state view of Vietnam's political system, party and government officials have deliberated the corruption problem many times in recent years. National Assembly sessions and Communist Party congresses have passed resolutions and expressed concern. Rank-and-file party members have written to higher leaders detailing corrupt behaviour of various officials.³³ Ministries have issued instructions and injunctions against corruption. Police have arrested officials for corruption and associated crimes (for example, smuggling and selling contraband products like heroin). Courts have convicted many, including some prominent officials. The former Minister for Energy, Vu Ngoc Hai, for example, was fired from his post in 1992, expelled from the Communist Party in 1994, and was tried and convicted that same year for masterminding a

scam during the construction of the country's north-south electrical power lines, causing losses to the state of nearly US\$300,000.³⁴ The highest official to date known to have been dismissed from office for corruption is Ngo Xuan Loc. The National Assembly dismissed him from his post as deputy prime minister in December 1999. Reportedly known as "Mr. Cement" because of his leverage over construction projects, he had used his various government positions during the 1990s to become extremely wealthy.³⁵

There is evidence, too, supporting the mobilizational corporatist interpretation. The Peasants' Association, Confederation of Labor, Women's Association, and other state organizations have campaigned against corruption, urged members to report cases, and in other ways been mobilized by the state to fight corruption. Journalists of these organizations' official publications have exposed corrupt police, tax collectors, local government officials, and bureaucrats.³⁶ Average citizens have used official channels to complain against authorities that use their government or party positions to steal tax revenues, give lucrative favours to relatives, and demand bribes for public services. Each year, when the National Assembly tallies citizens' written submissions regarding various problems, corruption and related misbehaviour generally rank among the most common complaints. Allegations of wrongdoing reported through these official channels have helped to prompt authorities to investigate and enforce anti-corruption laws.

But pressure on authorities also comes from beyond official channels and the state's mass organizations. In 1988, angry peasants marched in Ho Chi Minh City protesting against "local mandarins" who abused their authority and used their positions to benefit themselves. This event was an early warning that prompted central authorities to pay more attention to corruption (Thayer 1992*b*, p. 354). Since then, many more outbursts have occurred in the country, helping to make corruption and other unsavoury behaviour by officials a crucial issue for the state. For instance, an analysis of 120 incidents of "major or even fierce struggles" in Thanh Hoa province between November 1988 and November 1993 found that one

principal cause was that “some of the local leaders had engaged in corruption, violating the ownership rights of the people”, making them “detested” by a majority of ordinary residents and party members. After failing to get satisfactory results from higher authorities to which villagers had sent petitions and complaints, some residents resorted to public demonstrations and heated confrontations with officials (Nhi Le 1994, pp. 49–50).

In recent years, the most vivid and influential expression of ordinary people’s views about corrupt officials was the outburst in Thai Binh, a province at the southeastern end of the Red River Delta.³⁷ Beginning in 1994 and increasing during 1995–96, villagers sent through normal channels petitions and letters complaining about local authorities. The statements alleged that these authorities were pocketing proceeds from selling land that did not belong to them, misallocating land in ways that made money for themselves, using local tax revenues for their own private purposes, claiming public expenditures were higher than they actually were, then keeping the difference for themselves and their families, and misusing their authority in other ways in order to benefit personally. Adding insult to injury, these authorities flaunted their illicit wealth. They built large houses, filled the homes with nice furniture and appliances, bought expensive motorcycles, and wore fine clothing. The petitioners and letter writers wanted higher authorities to step in, investigate, and punish the culprits. In effect, they wanted higher authorities to maintain the boundaries in these matters between the state and society.

The petitioners received no or only perfunctory responses. Unsatisfied and now more angry, several stepped outside the formal channels and into the streets to voice publicly their discontent. Between late 1996 and the early months of 1997, nearly half of the province’s 260 sub-districts had peasant demonstrations; at least forty more occurred in the provincial capital as well. In October 1996, for instance, two groups, the first with 700 and the second with 1,500 people, both from the same sub-district, went in succession to the provincial capital to present petitions and demand investigations into local officials’ improper use of public land and funds. These

various demonstrations produced no satisfactory response. This was the situation in May 1997 when thousands of villagers gathered in district town of Quynh Phu and then made their way on foot and bicycle to the provincial capital. As word spread, villagers from elsewhere also converged on the capital, bringing the total to about 10,000 demonstrators.

Up to this point, all the demonstrations in Thai Binh had reportedly been peaceful, consisting mostly of people sitting or walking in front of government offices pleading for proper investigations into abuses. But the May protest resulted in violence. How it started is not clear. It included police throwing tear-gas canisters at the crowds and clubbing and chasing protesters; meanwhile demonstrators threw bricks and stones, smashed office windows, and wrecked a fire truck that had been sent to the scene. Although this clash soon subsided, it proved to be a turning point, leading to more violent clashes during May and June between villagers and authorities in many places across the province. In some areas, villagers overwhelmed policemen, held several of them hostage, and set fire to some local officials' homes (understandable targets given the villagers' complaints), and damaged other property.

The scale and nature of the unrest in Thai Binh provoked national authorities to act. They did not, however, send in the army. National officials, according to available accounts, used limited force to restore order. Their approach emphasized instead dialogue with the demonstrators. They also took measures to minimize publicity and press coverage about the unrest until conditions had been restored to normal. Meanwhile, party and government officials in Hanoi organized investigations into what had happened and why. From such studies they reached basically three conclusions: Many of the villagers' allegations of corruption and other abuses by local authorities were well founded. Second, provincial and other local authorities were negligent for not responding more promptly and thoroughly when villagers' first began to complain about the problems. Third, some villagers were provocateurs who took advantage of the discontent to make matters worse. As of September 1999, nearly 2,000 officials

in the province had been disciplined.³⁸ Among them were the provincial secretary of the Communist Party and the chairperson of the provincial council (the two highest officials in Thai Binh), who were removed from office. Further details about disciplinary measures are not reported other than to indicate that about thirty officials were imprisoned. At the same time, some protesters were also charged with crimes having to do with destruction of property, disturbing the peace, and provoking unrest. Between forty and sixty-two protesters were convicted. Most apparently were given short or suspended prison sentences. Some, however, were still in prison more than two years after the event.

The Thai Binh protests sent a strong message to national leaders that corruption is political dynamite. Numerous party and government offices have been studying what happened and drawing lessons about how to avoid similar or worse situations in the future. The message from many top leaders, such as the nation's president in February 1998, is that firmer, more persistent and determined measures must be taken to defuse the situation by curbing corruption and taking more seriously villagers' complaints about authorities.³⁹ Whether state authorities are capable of this is debatable. Critics within Vietnam, some of them current and former party members, argue that significant change is impossible so long as the state's leadership refuses to tolerate open and candid criticism and to permit other political organizations to rival the Communist Party. In any event, the demonstrations in Thai Binh and elsewhere are proof that political struggles regarding state-society relations are not confined to official channels and state-dominated organizations.

Summary

This article has suggested an approach for analysing state-society relations in Vietnam that eschews trying to distinguish between what is in the state and what is in society. Instead, the approach emphasizes arenas in which relations between state and society are problematic. The arenas can be specific places but may also include

organizations, groups, policies, and controversies. The four arenas examined here are governing institutions and processes, mass media, agricultural collectives, and corruption. Each is analysed by using three prominent interpretations in the scholarly literature regarding politics and state-society relations in Vietnam and focusing on two matters: how the political system works and discussions about appropriate state-society relations.

Each arena has considerable evidence to support the “dominating state” interpretation of Vietnam’s political system. The Communist Party, government ministries, police, and other agencies of the state have tremendous powers not only over policy-making and implementation but the media, religion, and organizations for various sectors of society. There is also evidence for the “mobilizational corporatist” interpretation, which highlights the role of official organizations in both mobilizing support for the state and being a channel through which people’s concerns can influence what state agencies do. But individuals, groups, and social forces outside official channels can also affect the political system. This is what the “dialogical” interpretation is pointing out. State agencies do not completely control policy-making and implementation. People can ignore the state’s rules on some matters. They can also go beyond official channels to make their views and concerns known. Groups and forces in society beyond the reach of the state not only exist but their activities from time to time influence what authorities decide.

In each arena, this article also finds ongoing deliberations regarding proper relations between the state and the rest of society. Discussion on these matters occurs in many forms and in numerous places, including inside state institutions themselves. The tendency during the last twenty years, resulting in part from societal forces and activities, has been to reduce and change the scope of what the state should do in the economy and other aspects of society. The outcome thus far has been more space in which people can live without directly interacting with agencies of the state. At the same time, the state remains in control of the media. State institutions still, despite pressures from within and outside them, allow citizens only

a little room to establish their own organizations in order to speak and act publicly on important issues. Hence, Vietnamese NGOs and other signs of civil society have only recently begun to emerge.

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NOTES

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1. Helping me to come to this position are Migdal (1994, pp. 7–34) and Mitchell (1991). For earlier analyses of Vietnam using a similar approach, see Fforde and Porter (1994, pp. 8–9, 27) and Kerkvliet (1995a, pp. 40–43).
2. My discussion of society and state corresponds broadly to how the two are used in Migdal (1994) and in Kohli and Shue (1994).
3. I am trying to include here both the physical and structural aspects of state (buildings, offices, army, bureaucrats, government officials, roadways, and so forth) and the ideological dimension and psychological impact of a state. The state includes agencies that keep the wheels of government turning (issue passports, police cities, create new laws, punishes violators, mobilizes armies, collect taxes, build new buildings); but the state also has purposes, plans, objectives. How extensive and elaborate those are varies over time within same state and from one state to another.
4. “Civil society”, as several well-read scholars have explained, has meant many, often contradictory, things in “Western” political thought and practice. My usage draws on Keane (1988), Krygier (1996), and Kumar (1993).
5. In order to elaborate and illustrate each, I will be referring to some publications written in English. By no means do the mentioned ones exhaust the literature. A comprehensive synthesis of pertinent literature is another project entirely. Also, a reference to a particular scholar’s work does not mean that everything that person has written about Vietnam fits within one interpretation and one only. Given that this field of study is relatively young and new information appears frequently, an individual

scholar can come to one tentative conclusion at one stage but arrive at a different one later on.

6. See, for example, Thai Quang Trung (1985) and Stern (1993). See also Kolko (1997, pp. 119–25, 130–32). While arguing that the party runs the country, Kolko says it is riddled by factions competing over “wealth and power”, not ideological issues, and united only by the desire that the party retain “total power” (pp. 125, 130).
7. Turley (1993*a*, pp. 269–70; 1993*b*, pp. 330–31). For state corporatist arguments, see Jeong (1997) and Stromseth (1998).
8. Beresford (1995, p. 10). Also see the following study that highlights disarray in the Vietnam state’s administrative capacity and efforts by national authorities in the mid-1990s to regain the upper hand over local officials: Thaveeporn (1996).
9. Such usage applied to Vietnam appears in Post (1989, pp. 14, 212), Pelzer (1993), Hy Van Luong (1994), and Kerkvliet (1999).
10. For studies of election processes, see Thayer (1993), Koh (2000, chap. 3), and Porter (1993, pp. 153–57).
11. For details of the Chamber’s growth and its relationship to the state, see Stromseth (1998, chap. 3 and 4). Presumably the Chamber is now under the Fatherland Front, although Stromseth’s discussion does not make that clear.
12. Hoi Nong Dan Viet Nam, Ban Chap Hanh Trung Uong (1993, p. 12).
13. A short history of the Peasants’ Association has pages listing war-related efforts of its predecessor organizations in south and north Vietnam (Ban Chap Hanh Trung Uong Hoi Nong Dan Viet Nam — Vien Lich Su Dang, 1992). I thank Jonathan Stromseth for providing me a copy of this unpublished report.
14. Interview with Nguyen Van Chinh, President, Vietnam Peasants’ Association, Hanoi, 21 September 1995. Also see Kerkvliet (1995*b*, pp. 87–88).
15. Local authorities sometimes assisted residents out of compassion and empathy for people who had no other options but to ignore the building codes. At other times they helped because the residents were relatives, or they gave assistance in exchange for payments and other remuneration. See Koh (2000, chap. 5).
16. Several news reports about Dong Nai appear in Reuters News Service between November 1997 and 15 January 1998. References for other cases include Thaveeporn (1998, pp. 317–18), Deutsche-Press-Agentur, 21 October 1998, Reuters News Service, 20 May 1999, and Kerkvliet (1995*b*, pp. 76–79).
17. For illustrative writing and reports about UBCV and its encounters with Vietnamese authorities, see Denny (1992, pp. 3–7) and Amor (1998). For views of a prominent UBCV leader, see Thich Quang Do (1995).

18. For an extensive analysis, see Fforde and Vylder (1996).
19. For an informative account of how the media is organized in Vietnam under the Communist Party, see Heng (1998).
20. Examples are “Nguoi Sai Gon: Tieng Noi cua Nhan Dan Them Tu Do Ngon Luan” [Saigoner: voice of the people craving free speech], which began in early 1996 (as of mid-1999, issues appeared in the following website but when I checked again in early 2000, they were not there: <http://www.lmvntd.org/dossier/ngsaigon>); and “Thao Thuc: To Bao cua Gioi Tre Viet Nam trong Nuoc” [On alert: newspaper of young Vietnamese in the country], beginning in March 1998 (for several issues, see <http://www.lmvntd.org/dossier/thaothuc>).
21. For recent discussions of this episode, see Nguyen Hung Quoc (1991, chap. 2), Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh (1996, chap. 4), Boudarel (1990, 1991), and Heng (1999, chap. 3).
22. See articles in *Nhan Dan*, the daily newspaper of the Communist Party (for example, a series on human rights on 2, 3, and 28 June 1993; 1 and 16 May 1998) and statements to international fora, such as Deputy Minister of Justice Ha Hung Cuong’s message to the United Nations Commission for Human Rights, Geneva, on 28 March 2000 (BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 3 April 2000).
23. “Nha Van Hoang Tien Phan Doi Ha Noi Dan Ap Tu Do Ngon Luan” (1998, p. 56). *Tivi Tuan San* [TV weekly], published in Melbourne, frequently carries articles about and by people in Vietnam who criticize the government.
24. This paragraph draws on Russell Heng’s perceptive analysis of the print media (1999, chap. 3, 5, and 6).
25. Years later, after retiring from the military, General Tran Do expressed his views more fully in letters addressed to the highest party officials. The letters were subsequently circulated around the world through the Internet and foreign publications. These writings, which upset top officials so much that they expelled him from the Communist Party in January 1999, have made him a well-known “dissident” who seeks a more open and competitive political system. Tran Do, “Tinh Hinh Dat Nuoc va Vai Tro cua Dang Cong San” [The state of the nation and role of the Communist Party — an undated (*circa* December 1997) letter to Communist Party leaders], serialized in *Tivi Tuan San* (Melbourne), 11, 18, 25 February 1998. (An English translation was put on the Internet in early January 1998: <http://www.fva.org/document/dissident/trando.htm>.) This long letter was followed in 1998 and 1999 by several more missives, which also appeared in Vietnamese language publications outside the country. His letters, so far as I am aware, have yet to be published in Vietnam.
26. Unless otherwise noted, my discussion of agricultural collectives leans

- on Fforde (1989), Vickerman (1986), Kerkvliet (May 1995), Kerkvliet (1998), and Kerkvliet (1999).
27. Indicative is that the average collective in 1960 had fifty-nine households, but a decade later had 156, and in 1980 had 387. See Tong Cuc Thong Ke (1973, pp. 557, 559) and Tong Cuc Thong Ke va Bo Nong Nghiep va CNTP (1991, p. 73).
 28. *Nhan Dan*, 25 April 1984, quoted in Quang Truong (1987, p. 263).
 29. Tran Duc (1991, pp. 25, 29); “Cung Co Hop Tac Xa San Xuat Nong Nghiep, Day Manh Cong Tac Khoan” [Reinforce agriculture producer co-operatives, speed up contract work], 1981, a Ministry of Agriculture report, in Le Thanh Nghi (1981, pp. 66–67).
 30. Asked whether the collective was part of the state, a villager gave me a puzzled face as if to say “What kind of question is that?” He then answered with a wry smile that if it were, he should have been getting a state salary, and if he had that salary, he would not have lived so miserably as he did during the height of collectivization (interview conducted in Nghiem Xuyen, Thuong Tin, Ha Tay, on 2 May 1996).
 31. Nguyen Van Linh, former Communist Party Secretary General (1986–91), Reuters News Service, 10 May 1993. Similar usage appears in many publications in Vietnam. See, for instance, Dao Tri Uc (1997, pp. 24–28). Uc was the head of the Institute on State and Law.
 32. The 1,115 known cases of corruption in 1999 involved 1.35 trillion dong going illicitly to authorities (*Kyodo News*, 21 January 2000, through Reuters Limited). At 14,000 dong per U.S. dollar, the average is US\$86,482 per case. No doubt the extent of actual corruption is far greater than the number of known cases.
 33. For an example, see “Huyet Tam Thu To Cao Tham Nhung cua 11 Dang Vien Dang CSVN” (1988).
 34. Accounts by Reuters News Service, 17–23 February 1994.
 35. Accounts by Reuters News Service, 12 November 1999, 6 December 1999, and 15 January 2000.
 36. For examples, see Heng (1999, chap. 5) and Sidel (1998).
 37. Unless otherwise indicated, the following account relies primarily on a report commissioned by the Prime Minister and written by Tuong Lai, head of the Sociology Institute of the National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, entitled “Bao Cao So Bo ve Cuoc Khao Sat Xa Hoi tai Thai Binh cuoi Thang Sau, dau Thang Bay Nam 1997” [Preliminary report of a sociological investigation in Thai Binh in late June and early July 1997], 8 August 1997; a serialized story was published in *Tien Phong* on 2, 4, 7, and 9 October 1997; and an article in *Dai Doan Ket* on 23 February 1998, p. 6.

38. This and the following information about punishments come from news reports by Associated Press, 11 November 1997; Agence France Presse, 25 August 1998; *Vietnam Economic News*, 23 September 1999; *South China Morning Post*, 25 September 1999; *San Jose Mercury News*, 31 October 1999.
39. President Tran Duc Luong's February 1998 speech in Thai Binh appears in *Sai Gon Giai Phong*, 4 and 5 March 1998, p. 5.

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