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## **Just one non-party candidate elected in Viet poll setback**

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HANOI - THERE is widespread disappointment at the results of last week's election for Vietnam's national assembly.

Of the 493 newly elected legislators, 92 per cent are members of the ruling communist party.

Even the government has admitted that its hope for more non-party members and independents has been dashed.

Hanoi had professed to want a more open legislature to improve its image on the international stage.

But the 500-seat body, which evaluates decisions made by the communist regime, will now have only one member who is not a communist or who was not handpicked by the party.

Said Mr Bui Ngoc Thanh, general secretary of the Central Election Commission: 'We had expected more than 50 non-party members to be elected.'

Instead, a largely indifferent electorate either voted the party line or, more commonly, simply did not show up to vote. In many cases, one person voted on behalf of an entire household.

On election day, it was not uncommon to see the trickle of voters at polling stations being given several voting slips.

So, while the number of Vietnamese actually voting was small, the total number of votes cast was relatively high, resulting in the official turnout figure of 99.64 per cent.

Said Professor Trinh Duy Luan, a sociologist at the Vietnam Academy of Social Science: 'The fact that one voter votes for many people shows that Vietnamese are not interested in their civic duties.'

'And it shows how the government has not made people understand their rights and obligations.'

Of course, the nation's senior leaders were all re-elected. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung received the highest number of votes among the candidates with 99.1 per cent.

But it was the reduced support for the non-party candidates and independents that caught everyone's attention.

In the 1997 election, three independents were elected. Five years ago, two independents won. This time, only one succeeded.

Most analysts agree that the election is so skewed in favour of communist candidates that many ordinary Vietnamese see little point in voting.

Said Mr Nguyen Tran Bat, chairman of business advisory firm Investconsult: 'The government expected more independent candidates to be elected, but how could that happen if the candidates cannot show up and introduce themselves to voters?'

The new legislature will meet on July 19, when it will approve a new Cabinet, which is expected to include at least nine new ministers.