

Regime Critics: Democratization Advocates in Vietnam, 1990s–2014

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ABSTRACT: Beginning in the mid 1990s, public criticism of the Communist Party government in Vietnam spread to the point that by 2014 it had become a prominent feature of the country's political scene. This article emphasizes critics who want to replace, nonviolently, the present regime with a democratic political system. Drawing primarily on the writings and actions of Vietnamese critics themselves, the analysis shows that they differ over how to displace the current system. Some regime critics think the Communist Party leadership itself can and should lead the way; others form organizations to openly and directly challenge the regime; still others urge remaking the current system by actively engaging it; and some favor expanding civil society in order to democratize the nation. Underlying the four approaches are different understandings of what democratization entails and how it relates to social and economic development.

Keywords: Vietnam; dissent; democratization; politics

Since the late 1980s, Vietnamese have formed clubs, associations, and other organizations with no or tenuous connections to the Communist Party (CP), its government, or other state institutions. By 2014, a few hundred were national in scope, a few thousand were provincial, and tens of thousands were in towns and villages. These numbers mark a huge change from when authorities tolerated practically no autonomous organizations. Most of these new ones have formed around churches, pagodas, sports activities, health needs, business interests, and the like. Few are explicitly political, but those, too, have increased and some publicly criticize government policies, actions, and institutions.

The Spread

Vietnamese public criticism of the political system in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam cautiously appeared in the late 1980s. From 1987 to 1990, several writers published short stories and other works that criticized, usually only implicitly, political conditions in their country.¹ In 1988, criticism became more direct. An organization of veterans of wars against the French, the US, and the Sài Gòn government petitioned the National Assembly and the CP's Central Committee to choose

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¹This and the next two paragraphs rely on Abuza 2001, 132–144; Heng 1999, 171–249; Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài 1994; Lockhart 1992, 2–9; Thayer 1992, 115–129; and Zinoman 1994.

leaders by secret ballots.² It also organized public discussions in Hồ Chí Minh City about such issues as how to make the National Assembly more democratic. At its 7 January 1990 gathering, speakers “raised a storm of criticisms against the [CP’s] failure in almost every aspect of governance, excoriating it for being undemocratic, inefficient, divisive ... and ridden with corrupt groupings clinging tightly to vested interests.” Some warned the party to “either ... carry out democratization or else citizens would take matters into their own hands.”³

The January gathering also insisted that a fourth issue of the veterans group’s magazine be published. Previous issues, which included opinion articles, may have emboldened several university students in Hồ Chí Minh City to launch their own publication in June 1989. In addition, in early 1990, another group of southerners circulated the first issue of *Freedom Forum* in an effort, its editors said, to break through the regime’s monopoly on political commentary.⁴

The veterans group’s January 1990 discussion was its last. And the fourth issue of its magazine never appeared. The student magazine quickly disappeared, and the *Freedom Forum* ceased in August. Increasingly alarmed at the veterans’ actions and other emerging nodes of discontent, authorities took decisive steps to stifle public political criticism.

For the next few years, criticism receded to private conversations among trusted relatives and friends, entries in personal diaries, and writings that went unpublished. One exception was public condemnations of corruption, which periodically occurred in several parts of the nation in the early 1990s.⁵

By 1993–1994, additional political matters were again being publicly criticized. One was restraints on religious organizations. I have set aside the large topic of struggles by religious groups in order to focus on others seeking to change the entire political system.

The individuals and groups I am emphasizing want Vietnam to have a democratic political system. They object to the present form of government, which many call authoritarian or dictatorial, run by the CP. They want regime change. I refer to them as regime critics or dissidents, people who disagree “with the basic principles of the political system” and “express such disagreement in public.”⁶ Terms people use for themselves include “resister,” “democracy and human rights activist,” “fighter for democracy,” and “dissident.”⁷ I base my analysis primarily on the writings and actions of critics. Such information comes mainly from the internet; some comes from printed publications and from my conversations and observations during periodic stays in Vietnam. The dissent is ongoing, but my account ends at 2014 by which time political criticism was a significant feature of Vietnam’s political scene.

²The organization was the Câu Lạc Bộ Những Người Kháng Chiến Cũ Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Club of Former Resistance Fighters, Hồ Chí Minh City).

³Heng 1999, 240.

⁴The Vietnamese title is *Diễn Đàn Tự Do*. Many of its articles were subsequently published in the United States. See *Đoàn Viết Hoạt* 1993.

⁵Between 1989 and 1993, Thanh Hóa Province, for example, had 120 “hot spots” of residents openly protesting corruption and other abuses by local authorities. Nhị Lê 1994, 49.

⁶The quotation is from Stein Tønnesson’s definition of dissident (2009, 15), a succinct version of one often used in literature about political dissent in other communist-ruled countries (Medvedev 1980, 1). This definition excludes everyday resistance to the political system, which also exists in Vietnam and likely feeds into public criticism. Such criticism typically “breaks the surface of public life when authoritarian regimes take small steps toward liberalization” (Johnston 2005, 120).

⁷In Vietnamese the first three are *người phản kháng*, *nhà hoạt động dân chủ nhân quyền*, and *nhà đấu tranh dân chủ*. “Dissident” is “*nhà bất đồng chính kiến*” or “*người bất đồng chính kiến*,” literally “a person with different political views,” similar to “people who think differently,” the translated Russian term critics in the Soviet Union reportedly preferred in the 1960s–1980s (Boobbyer 2005, 74).

In the two decades between 1994 and 2014, public criticism of the political system evolved from a few individuals to a movement with numerous networks, organizations, internet sites, and publications. The evolution was organic; the movement had no dominant group or clearly identified leader or even a single set of leaders. Although many critics and organizations were in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City, they were also elsewhere in the country (Figure 1).



Figure 1. In early 2015, in Hà Nội and cities elsewhere in Vietnam demonstrators protested against the government. Pictured here are protestors holding signs saying “I don’t like the Communist Party of Vietnam.” Images like this one circulated via social media. ([http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-w2IB6gMblJA/VK3U3pDAb3I/AAAAAAAAAko/-lsuLJ4C2TI/s1600/@image%2B\(3\).jpg](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-w2IB6gMblJA/VK3U3pDAb3I/AAAAAAAAAko/-lsuLJ4C2TI/s1600/@image%2B(3).jpg))

Four periods can be demarcated in this evolution. In the mid to late 1990s, a few dozen individuals wrote letters to authorities and circulated essays condemning corruption and

advocating an open political system. Their writings, which included their names and other identifying information, circulated from hand to hand, photocopy by photocopy. As the internet grew in the late 1990s, that became the way to disseminate their views. Some early critics knew each other, but they usually wrote individually; seldom did any speak out jointly.

In 2001–2003, a second period, collaborative activism emerged, beginning a prominent feature of contemporary political criticism. In September 2001, for example, Phạm Quê Dương of Hà Nội and Trần Khuê of Hồ Chí Minh City, who had become highly critical of the regime, formed an association to fight corruption that other people quickly joined despite some being detained by security police.⁸ In April 2003, the Club for Democracy, formed in 2001, circulated via the internet its first issue of *Electronic Letter*. The Club regularly published the magazine for the next four years.⁹ Its articles championed democratization, critiqued the regime, and accused government leaders of accommodating China at Vietnam’s expense. Most authors gave their names and locations, unlike a short-lived opposition publication in Vietnam during 1996–97 whose contributors were anonymous.¹⁰

In the third period, during 2006, a flurry of overtly political organizations emerged. Some emphasized civil rights and democratization. Two others were political parties: the Progressive

⁸Phạm Quê Dương and Trần Văn Khuê 2001; Nguyễn Vũ Bình 2002a, 2; and Phạm Quê Dương and Trần Khuê 2002. Trần Khuê (also Trần Văn Khuê), is a military veteran and scholar in Hồ Chí Minh City. Phạm Quê Dương, a retired colonel in Hà Nội, was a CP member from 1948 until 1999, when he quit in protest when the CP ejected retired general Trần Độ, another dissident. Nguyễn Vũ Bình edited a CP journal in Hà Nội before being fired after seeking to establish an opposition party in 2000. He was later imprisoned.

⁹The Club’s Vietnamese name is Câu Lạc Bộ Dân Chủ. The sixty-fifth and final issue of the *Điện Thư* (Electronic Letter) was July 2007.

¹⁰*Người Sài Gòn* (Saigonese) started in early 1996 and ended April 1997 in the face of imminent detection by security police. The cover on a compilation of its articles indicates it was circulated mainly by fax machines. Available at http://www.lmvntd.org/ngsaigon/ngsaigon_vsc.htm (accessed September 2001).

Party and the Democratic Party. Together with the People's Democratic Party, secretly formed in 2003 but becoming public in June 2005, three political parties based in Vietnam now openly opposed the CP.¹¹ Bloc 8406, launched in late April, pressed for the political liberties advocated in the "Declaration of Freedom and Democracy," which began to circulate on 8 April, dissidents' first major use of the internet to solicit support across the country. Initially endorsed by 118 individuals, the Declaration had 300 more signatures a month later. Over a thousand additional people subsequently signed, all providing their names and locations.¹² Also in 2006, other internet-based magazines began, including *Homeland*, *Free Speech*, *Freedom and Democracy*, and *Democracy*.¹³ The first three were independent of other organizations. *Democracy* was an organ of the Democratic Party. (The *Electronic Letter*, together with the Club that produced it, merged in July with the People's Democratic Party.)

Sixty to seventy people were prominent in the organizations created in 2006. Seventeen of them in Vietnam were in more than one, indicative of networks and personal connections among the critics. Their ages ranged between twenty-seven and eighty-seven; most were between thirty and fifty-nine. Eight lived in Hà Nội, four in Hồ Chí Minh City, three in Huế, and one each in Thái Bình and Hải Phòng Provinces. Six of the seventeen were veterans of war against France or the war for reunification or both; at least two had been CP members. In terms of occupations, five were writers, scholars, and researchers; the remaining dozen were distributed nearly equally among employment in business, engineering, law, the Catholic Church, government, and the military.¹⁴

Several people involved in the political organizations of 2006 suffered for their activism. Security police raided their residences, and harassed, detained, and interrogated them for days. Some were imprisoned. Repression caused a number of the organizations to fade. But others persisted, among them the Democratic Party and Bloc 8406. *Homeland* and *Free Speech* continued to publish twice a month, each issue with over thirty pages of articles written explicitly for them as well as essays and reports from elsewhere, especially from blogs.¹⁵

Marking the fourth phase in the expansion of public political criticism was the surge in politically pointed blogs and other websites. Websites criticizing the political system date from the 1990s, but these were based outside Vietnam. In 2006–2007, a few blogs emphasizing political

¹¹The Vietnamese names are Đảng Thăng Tiên Việt Nam, Đảng Dân Chủ Việt Nam (also Đảng Dân Chủ Việt Nam XXI), and Đảng Dân Chủ Nhân Dân.

¹²In Vietnamese, Bloc 8406 is Khối 8406 and the Declaration is Tuyên Ngôn Tự Do Dân Chủ cho Việt Nam. Using the list with 424 signatures ("Tuyên Ngôn 8406" 2006), I tallied 38 percent of the people were in the south, especially Bến Tre and Sài Gòn; 34 percent in the central region, primarily Huế and Đà Nẵng; and 28 percent in the north, largely Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, and Thái Bình. Nearly a quarter of the signers referred to themselves as citizens (*công dân*). Others indicated their occupations, the largest being peasants (*nông dân*) and teachers (*giáo viên*), 17 percent each; followed by religious leaders, 10 percent; business people, medical professionals, and office staff members, 7 percent each; engineers and technicians, 6 percent; and a few professors, lawyers, writers, architects, and retired military officers.

¹³The actual titles are, respectively, *Tổ Quốc*, *Tự do Ngôn luận*, *Tự do Dân chủ*, and *Dân Chủ*.

¹⁴The seventeen people are Bạch Ngọc Dương, Chân Tín, Đỗ Nam Hải, Hoàng Minh Chính, Hoàng Tiên, Lê Thị Công Nhân, Nguyễn Chính Kêt, Nguyễn Khắc Toàn, Nguyễn Phòng, Nguyễn Phương Anh, Nguyễn Thanh Giang, Nguyễn Văn Đài, Nguyễn Văn Lý, Phan Văn Lợi, Trần Anh Kim, Trần Khải Thanh Thủy, and Trần Khuê. My information about them and their public political activities comes from numerous internet materials, primarily interviews with and essays by the individuals themselves and documents from the organizations in which they were involved. There was an eighteenth person, Dương Văn Dương, prominent in more than one organization, but the only additional information I could find is that he lived in Thái Bình Province.

¹⁵Issues of each publication can be downloaded from their websites: www.to-quoc.blogspot.com for *Tổ Quốc*; and www.tdngonluan.com for *Tự do Ngôn luận*.

issues developed in Vietnam itself.¹⁶ Besides posting essays and news, such sites helped to mobilize hundreds of citizens in December 2007 to demonstrate against China's encroachment into Vietnam's territorial waters.¹⁷ The big leap in politically critical websites within Vietnam occurred between late 2008 and late 2010.¹⁸ Some new sites, such as Bauxite Việt Nam, began with a particular issue but later broadened to many political topics. Other new ones, like Dân Luận (People Debate) and Dân Làm Báo (Citizen Journalist), featured from the outset articles on numerous topics that were written primarily by people not directly involved in creating and maintaining the websites.¹⁹ Despite authorities' efforts to destroy them, most sites survived. And after 2010, more politically pointed bloggers emerged, even as others were arrested. In July 2013, over a hundred bloggers in Vietnam jointly, defiantly, and publicly condemned such arrests.²⁰

By 2013–2014, public political life in Vietnam was teeming with bloggers, websites, petitioners, networks, and organizations criticizing major public policies, key institutions of the state, or the entire form of government. These explicitly politically minded individuals and groups had become an important feature of the country's growing and diversifying civil society.

Why the Spread?

Reasons explaining the spread of public political dissent since the mid 1990s can be summarized as expanding opportunities and mounting condemnations. Both are traceable, in part, to the market economy that displaced the centralized economy. That change contributed to better living conditions for virtually all Vietnamese. Citizens also became freer to decide where to live, work, and study; what to buy and sell; and how to produce. Communication technologies and their widening availability enhanced people's opportunities to learn, form networks, and monitor the government. Prior to 2012, few Vietnamese owned a television; even fewer had a telephone. By 2012, the vast majority of households had both. And 40 percent of Vietnamese in 2012–2014 had access to the internet.²¹ These technologies significantly improved people's awareness of events far beyond their immediate vicinity.

They also made it much easier for critics to spread materials questioning the government and its policies and authorities found it more difficult to stop them.²² Previously, distributing unauthorized materials in Vietnam was not only complicated and risky, but also often failed. In 1988–1990, for instance, the veterans' organization referred to earlier had great difficulty reproducing its magazines due to the government's tight control over printing facilities. Just getting a duplicating machine was problematic. And the multiple copies they produced had to be circulated surreptitiously. Even with all this effort, the veterans succeeded in producing and distributing only three issues.²³ Contrast that to *Free Speech* and *Homeland*, which Vietnamese dissidents have produced and circulated to readers near and far through the internet twice a month since 2006.

That authorities did not stop these online publications is indicative of another reason alternative political views can spread: the Vietnamese state became less able or willing to maintain a tight

¹⁶Among them were Anh Ba Sàm, AnhbaSG, Nhà Báo Tự Do, Trần Đông Chân, and Osin

¹⁷Hoàng Xuân Ba 2008; Nhóm Phóng Viên Vietland 2008.

¹⁸Uy 2012; and "Chronology of Blogging" 2013 (for which I am grateful to Duyên Bùi).

¹⁹Dân Luận (<http://www.danluan.org>); and Dân Làm Báo (<http://danlambaovn.blogspot.com>).

²⁰Of the 103 who signed their names and gave their addresses, 28 were in Sài Gòn, 41 in Hà Nội, and the rest spread across 14 other provinces. Mạng lưới Blogger 2013a and 2013b.

²¹There were 145 mobile phones for every 100 Vietnamese. Tech in Asia 2012. For internet statistics, see Internet Live Stats 2015.

²²For some elaboration, see Marr 2003, 289–295; and McKinley and Schiffren 2013.

²³Heng 1999, 231–233, 242–245.

grip on society.²⁴ The market economy, having improved living conditions of Vietnamese, boosted the CP government's legitimacy. Yet it reduced authorities' hold over people's lives and contributed to an increasingly varied society. Officials, while often anxious about this new environment, generally regard it as a necessity for Vietnam's development. They also became more mindful of foreign scrutiny of how they treat societal groups, particularly political critics. Having cultivated good relations with countries around the world, especially those touting democratic institutions, authorities could not afford their state being deemed an absolutely repressive authoritarian regime.

While opportunities to publicly criticize widened, discontent with the regime swelled. Much of dissidents' criticisms pertain to corruption, democracy, and national pride. Corruption is what prompted many to start questioning the political system, particularly the CP's domination. One writer in Hồ Chí Minh City likened the CP to a "gluttonous monster" sucking life out of the people and the country.²⁵ Corruption is so entrenched, numerous dissidents concluded, that only fundamental changes in the political system can expunge it. The root cause of corruption, they argued, is "dictatorship" and the "mother" of that system is the CP.²⁶

Regarding democracy, regime critics often say the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the standard Vietnam should follow. Especially crucial are freedom of press, speech, association, religion, and trade unionism.²⁷ Essential democratic institutions frequently demanded are rule by law; separation of executive, legislative, and judicial functions of government; fair trials; and competitive elections.²⁸

The third theme is "national pride," a term I use to include assessments of Vietnam's level of development, its standing compared to its Asian neighbors, and its relations with China. Besides a strong economy, contend many critics, a developed country has high-quality education, wide opportunities for people to innovate, a robust civil society, and democracy.²⁹ Vietnam, dissidents say, falls far short of these standards. Despite economic improvements, a large percentage of citizens live hand to mouth while a few are exceedingly rich. Some critics blame this inequality on Vietnam's wholesale move into capitalism in which foreign-owned factories pay miserable wages to people desperate for work.³⁰ Others say the opposite: Vietnamese authorities have yet to embrace capitalism fully.³¹

²⁴This paragraph draws on Elliott 2012; Gainsborough 2010, 157–331; Gillespie 2010, 223–59; Vu 2014; Vuving 2010; and Wells-Dang 2012, 1–84, 106–135, 169–187. As studies of other authoritarian regimes have shown, when the state's reach is shortened or weakened, niches for criticism and resistance grow. See Boudreau 2004, 33–35; Joppke 546–548; Tuma 2004.

²⁵Nguyễn Hải Sơn 2004, 22.

²⁶Nguyễn Xuân Nghĩa, 2005; Đặng Văn Việt 2006b, 5; Phạm Quê Dương 2004; and Tổng Văn Công 2009. Nguyễn Xuân Nghĩa is a journalist and writer in Hải Phòng; Đặng Văn Việt, a veteran of the revolution against France and long-time CP member, lives in Hà Nội; Tổng Văn Công, former editor of the newspaper *Lao Động* (Labor), wrote (2014) he was leaving the CP after fifty-five years.

²⁷See, for example, "Tuyên Ngôn Tự do" 2006; Đỗ Nam Hải 2008; Phạm Hồng Sơn 2009; Trần Lâm 2005. Phạm Hồng Sơn, a medical doctor, resides in Hà Nội. Trần Lâm, a Hải Phòng resident, a lawyer, and former judge in Vietnam's supreme court, died in November 2014 at the age of ninety.

²⁸For example, see Nguyễn Thanh Giang 2006, 22–23; Nguyễn Vũ Bình 2002b; and "Lời Kêu Gọi" 2006 signed by 116 advocates for democracy. Nguyễn Thanh Giang is a scientist and military veteran in Hà Nội.

²⁹Phạm Hồng Sơn and Thư Lê 2002; Trần Độ 2004a, 6, and 2004b, 3, 5; and Nguyễn Khắc Toàn 2006b. Nguyễn Khắc Toàn has owned electronics and real estate businesses in Hà Nội.

³⁰For example, see Vi Đức Hồi 2008. The relevant passages are on pages 19 and 21 (printed on 8½ by 11 inch paper) in this lengthy account about how the author, a provincial official and CP member, decided to join the democracy movement.

³¹For instance, see Lê Hồng Hà 2004, section 2, and 2007b.

of the CP in that process, and the relationship between development and democracy. I discern four approaches. One stresses CP leadership in converting the present system into one leading to democracy. A second emphasizes building organizations that will confront and dismantle the CP so as to quickly establish a democratic system, which must come first, insists this confrontational approach, before development can occur. A third urges engagement with the authorities at all levels in order to press for socioeconomic advancement. From there, democratization will follow. The fourth stresses democratizing society by expanding and strengthening civic, social, and community organizations.

Even though identifiable, these approaches' boundaries can overlap. Also, individual critics' views may not fit within just one cluster. And a person's position can change, initially corresponding well to one approach but later to another. People of different approaches also typically respect each other.

One point to highlight is that none of the four approaches and none of the dissidents whose words and actions I am studying advocate violent methods for changing the political system. All implicitly and often explicitly endorse nonviolence.

Party-Led Approach

Several critics say the CP is a major cause of Vietnam's laggard development, yet implore it to lead the country to a democracy, which, they argue, does not require wiping away all current institutions. Vietnam already has, they contend, several democratic aspects. Sovereignty resides with the people, and the Constitution provides for human rights and elections. The major problem is that these key elements of democracy are not practiced or done very poorly. The reason is the CP's excessive power. The CP itself can fix this situation by setting the country on a path to democratization and socioeconomic development.

Trần Độ exemplifies this position (Figure 3). Born in Thái Bình Province in about 1924, this son of a civil servant became a CP member in 1940, and soon thereafter joined the army fighting for the nation's independence.³⁴ He was an officer at Điện Biên Phủ, where Vietnamese forces decisively defeated the French in 1954.³⁵ For much of the war against the US, he was in the south where he fought in numerous battles. He later became a senior government and CP official. He was vice chair of the National Assembly when he retired in 1991.

One reason for retiring was his growing disillusionment with political trends in Vietnam. Particularly appalling, he wrote often starting in 1995, was corruption, a consequence of a political system that "lacks mechanisms for restraining and checking authorities."³⁶ This in turn resulted from the CP's domination. During the wars, he said, the CP's commanding rule over the nation was crucial for winning independence from France in 1954 and reuniting the country in 1975. But since then, the CP's control has become a major problem.³⁷

Vietnam's economy, although still pitiful compared to many others in Asia, improved significantly since the 1980s, he said. How this happened is evidence, he suggested, for his argument about the CP's role. The party in the 1980s wisely listened to the people, who were weary of the state trying to control production and distribution. By allowing markets, the CP released people's pent-up creativity and energy.³⁸ These same steps – listen to the people and let them

³⁴Reported dates of his birth range between 1922 and 1924. For an informed account of Trần Độ, see MacLean 2013.

³⁵Trần Độ 1955 is about his experience then and the people he met.

³⁶Trần Độ 1998, 12.

³⁷Trần Độ 2004a, 3, 6; and 2004b, 4.

³⁸Trần Độ 2004a, 3, 4, 5; and 2004b, 5.

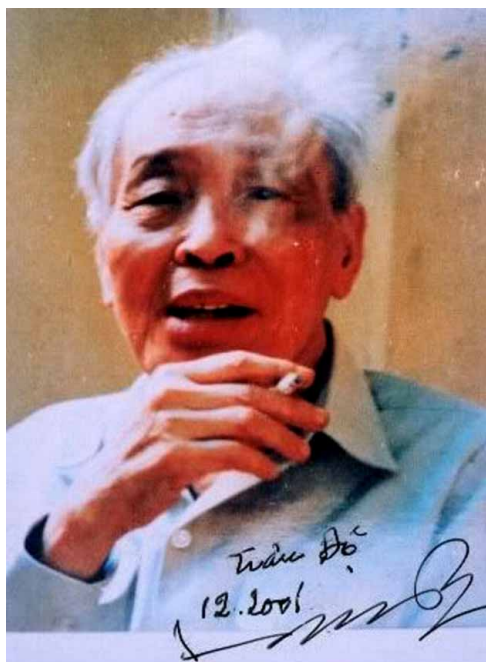


Figure 3. Trần Độ, pictured here, is an advocate of Communist Party–led democratization. December 2001. (danchimviet.info)

features, which, properly used, set the country on a course for further democratization and simultaneously accelerate development. The immediate task, then, is to close the gap between how the political system is supposed to work and how it actually works. Second, the CP is the organization best placed to lead that process. It brought about a democratic system in 1945–1946, before war against France engulfed the country. Many CP members favor democratization and believe that the party is responsible for the political system’s major shortcomings. Moreover, the party has a long tradition of doing what is best for the people. Party leaders should draw on its own history, ideals, and power to “renovate itself” and thereby transform the political system.⁴² Third, CP leaders can quickly start democratization by implementing the human rights provisions already in the Constitution; opening elections to many political parties; removing the passage in the Constitution that privileges the CP; separating itself from the state; and democratizing its own internal procedures.

Taking a similar stance is Trần Huỳnh Duy Thức, a much younger man than Trần Độ from a very different background (Figure 4). Born in November 1966 to a mother from the countryside and an English-teacher father, he studied at a science and technology university in Hồ Chí Minh City in the mid 1980s. Starting in the early 1990s, he and business partners created successful

speak and innovate – Trần Độ insisted, must now be taken in order for Vietnam to develop further. Otherwise, Trần Độ warned, the party will have undermined itself and, implying massive unrest, “the people will hasten the party’s complete removal.”³⁹

Trần Độ wrote these views in numerous articles and letters, often addressed to the state’s highest officials and circulated through the internet, between the mid 1990s and his death in August 2002. By 1998, he had so unnerved top authorities that they debated how to shut him up. His prominence probably saved him from being arrested, although police frequently harassed him and his family. In early 1999 the CP’s national leadership booted him out of the party.⁴⁰

His views coupled with his illustrious career made Trần Độ one of the most prominent early dissidents in contemporary Vietnam. To this day he remains greatly admired. Unlike numerous other regime critics, however, he maintained that the most promising route to democratization was through the CP itself.

His contention has three main parts.⁴¹ First, Vietnam already has numerous democratic fea-

³⁹Trần Độ 2001b, 13.

⁴⁰After being expelled, Trần Độ wrote (1999) he had no regrets being a CP member and urged party members to renovate it because, as one CP motto says, “renovate or die.”

⁴¹The argument is scattered across several writings; see particularly Trần Độ 2001a, 2001b.

⁴²In Trần Độ 2001a, 6–7, 16–17, he expressed some doubts about the CP’s ability to renovate itself (*tự đổi mới*), but concluded it could – and must.



Figure 4. Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc (far left) and his three codefendants, Nguyễn Tiến Trung, Lê Thăng Long, and Lê Công Định listen to the verdict at a court in Hồ Chí Minh City on 20 January 2010. The People’s Court convicted the four democracy activists of trying to overthrow the government. Định, a lawyer, who once studied in the US, received a five-year sentence. Thúc, who stressed Communist Party–led democratization, was sentenced to sixteen years in jail; Trung received a seven-year sentence; and Long was condemned to five years behind bars. (AP Photo / Hoang Hai / Vietnam News Agency)

computer and telecommunications companies in the course of which he saw much government corruption.⁴³ Wondering how to counter the corruption, he and a few friends read considerable social science scholarship, mostly in English. He concluded that a multiparty political system is no sure remedy; numerous countries with multiple parties suffer extensive corruption. Also, so-called democracies in many nations are “bogus”; they serve only a small minority of citizens. Creating an authentic democracy, he concluded by late 2008, starts not by having several political parties. Rather, democracy emerges over time through improved living conditions, citizens using their human rights, and state authorities being “resolved to building substantive democracy and securing conditions enabling people to be the masters.”⁴⁴

His study and business experience also led him to tell authorities that the narrow space allowed Vietnamese private enterprises and the state’s reliance on foreign investors endangered Vietnam’s sovereignty.⁴⁵ Indeed, he wrote in blogs and to authorities during 2006–2010 and in a précis for a planned book, Vietnam’s “market economy with socialist orientations” is prone to collapse. Although it allows more economic freedom and has improved people’s lives, its limits are near. For further development, people need political freedom. Otherwise, he warned, Vietnam will be hit by a huge crisis caused by the economy’s instability and limitations, opportunists using government power for selfish ends, and authorities

⁴³His many writings about corruption include letters to high-level government authorities; for instance, Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc 2004. For an account of Thúc’s youth, schooling, and businesses, see Phong trào Con đường Việt Nam 2013, 17–64.

⁴⁴Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc và những người bạn 2008–2011, 218, and see 192–193, 211–212. The discussion here also draws on Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc 2008a, 7; 2008c; 2008e; and 2010, 12.

⁴⁵Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc 2006; 2008b, 12–13, 15; and 2008d.

ignoring critics like himself who seek not to overturn the political system but improve it.⁴⁶ Another major cause is the wide discrepancy between the ideals championed by the CP and promised in the nation's Constitution and the realities of pervasive corruption, favoritism, and repression.⁴⁷

To avoid calamity, he urged the national authorities to rise to the occasion, as they did in the 1980s when they averted disaster by jettisoning the centrally planned economy. Now, he argued, government leaders should embrace a market economy in which Vietnamese enterprises flourish with state guidance based on social democratic ideals and “initiate a transfer of political power to the people.”⁴⁸ The latter effort should include bringing intellectuals into the government who are not CP members but can enhance its capacity to deal with a crisis, breathing life into democratic features already in Vietnam's Constitution, particularly the National Assembly, elections, and free speech, assembly, and press. Doing these things will give people confidence to exercise their rights, expand civil society, and push the country to a Vietnamese-style democracy.⁴⁹

Without these measures, he feared, the crisis will hit. Then domestic opportunists will “join hands with foreign countries to crush the nation's interests.” Or people will rise up and attempt to seize the power and rights that are nominally theirs.⁵⁰ Such an uprising, he worried, may release lingering rancor between losers and victors of the last war, making conditions even worse for the nation but better for self-serving opportunists. To avoid these outcomes, people's anger must be channeled constructively. Opposition organizations in Vietnam, he assessed, were too immature to do that. The CP, however, even though weakened, retained both the ability and responsibility to act positively; it remained the “only force possibly able to concentrate the might of the people.”⁵¹

In May 2009, a month after he and Lê Công Định, another dissident, had met in Thailand with a Vietnamese American opposed to Vietnam's government, authorities arrested him. In June, they also arrested Lê Công Định along with two other men. In January 2010, all four men were convicted of plotting to overthrow the government. Not allowed to defend himself in court, Thúc wrote an appeal, trying to prove his innocence.⁵² The appellate court, however, upheld the verdict and the sentence: sixteen years imprisonment, much longer than the terms given to the other men.

⁴⁶Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc 2006; 2007; 2008d; 2008f; 2010, 8, 9, 11, 22–23, 25; and 2008a. The last is a précis for a book that later became an essay written over time primarily, it seems, by Thúc and his friends Lê Công Định and Lê Thăng Long. That essay is Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc và những người bạn 2008–2011 (pages 169–171 explain its origins).

⁴⁷Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc và những người bạn 2008–2011, 235–240; Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc 2010, 6–13.

⁴⁸Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc 2008d. Additional sources for this discussion include Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc 2006 and 2008a; and Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc và những người bạn 2008–2011, 202, 203, 217, 222. One task for the state while guiding the market economy, he wrote on several occasions, is to guard against the rise of “colossal enterprises” (*các doanh nghiệp khổng lồ*) found in “capitalist market economies” (*các nền kinh tế thị trường tư bản chủ nghĩa*). Such enterprises, he said, obstruct and prevent new, smaller ones entering the market.

⁴⁹Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc 2008a and 2010, 17; and Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc và những người bạn 2008–2011, 249–250.

⁵⁰Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc 2009. Additional sources for this discussion include Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc 2008b and 2008d.

⁵¹The quoted passage is in Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc 2010, 16. Additional sources for this discussion are Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc 2008a, 2008c, and 2008d.

⁵²For that appeal, see Trần Huỳnh Duy Thúc 2010. Additional sources for this paragraph include Viện Kiểm Sát Nhân Dân Tối Cao 2009, 3–4, 6–7, 9–11, 15; *Nhân Dân* 2010; *Tuổi Trẻ* 2010.



Figure 5. Đỗ Nam Hải, pictured here, has emphasized a confrontational approach to democratization. February 2012. (www.diendanthekey.net/)

Confrontational Approach

Dissidents favoring confrontation stress direct opposition to the regime. The CP, they contend, cannot convert the country to a democracy. And without democratic institutions, especially multiparty elections and basic human rights, Vietnam cannot develop economically, educationally, culturally, as well as politically so as to catch up to other Asian countries.⁵³

Violent revolution is not viable; the only way is straightforward, open advocacy for a multiparty system that protects human rights.⁵⁴ This requires organizations, including political parties, to challenge the CP. Organizations will also give the democratization movement continuity and sustainability when the regime imprisons activists. Whether to have many organizations or to consolidate them is a question these critics have discussed.⁵⁵ Another issue is the role of overseas Vietnamese and foreigners. Some dissidents with a confrontational orientation see them as vital. A few have even said that leaders should be outside Vietnam until a strong democratization movement exists inside.⁵⁶ Others have argued that the movement must rely on domestic resources and leadership.

The “Declaration of Freedom and Democracy” is a prominent example of confrontation. As mentioned earlier, the document was written in April 2006 and circulated for endorsements. It demanded a pluralistic political system; freedom of press, association, religion, and other human rights; and an end to CP rule. The present system, it declared, is “incapable of being renovated bit by bit or modified” and should be “completely replaced.”⁵⁷

One of its principal authors was Đỗ Nam Hải⁵⁸ (Figure 5). Born in 1959 and residing in Hồ Chí Minh City, he is the son of CP members and veterans of wars against France and for

⁵³See, for instance, *Đảng Dân Chủ Nhân Dân* 2005, 1, 5–6; *Đảng Thăng Tiến Việt Nam* 2006, parts I and II; *Đặng Văn Việt* 2006a, 15; *Trần Anh Kim* 2006. Trần Anh Kim, a former military officer and CP member in Thái Bình, has been imprisoned twice for his political activities.

⁵⁴“*Tuyên Ngôn Tự do*” 2006, part III.

⁵⁵*Huỳnh Việt Lang* 2006; *Lê Quang Liêm* 2006, 10; *Nguyễn Vũ Bình* 2008, part 3, point 3. Huỳnh Việt Lang, a Hồ Chí Minh City resident and member of the People’s Democratic Party, was arrested in August 2006; Lê Quang Liêm is a Hòa Hảo Buddhist.

⁵⁶*Phạm Quế Dương* 2007.

⁵⁷“*Tuyên Ngôn Tự do*” 2006, part III.

⁵⁸*Nguyễn Khắc Toàn* 2006a chronicles the document’s creation.

reunification. He studied at universities in Vietnam and then Australia, where in the early 2000s he circulated through the internet his criticisms of Vietnam's one-party system. He continued doing so after returning to Vietnam in 2002. In 2005 his political views cost him his job in a bank.⁵⁹

Living in Australia, he wrote, taught him that competition is a compelling advantage of a multiparty political system over a single-party system.⁶⁰ With several parties, each one is motivated to learn what people need so as to compete in elections for votes. It is analogous, he said, to business. If there is but one company providing a crucial service, over time that company's attentiveness to customers is likely to degenerate. Two or more companies, however, will compete; as a result, customers benefit. The same is true for politics. Single-party rule, he argued, provides abysmal government. Vietnam is one of the poorest countries in the world, has massive corruption, and faces other serious challenges. The single-party system, he concluded by late 2004, "has been, is, and will be the problem of all problems, the reason of all reasons for the nation's many painful disasters and shameful laggard status."⁶¹ Replacing it with multiple political parties will not solve all difficulties, but doing so is needed in order to tackle them.⁶² The present "dictatorial, single party system," he argued in 2008, "will never be able to build a Vietnam with well-off citizens, a strong country, and a fair, democratic, and civilized society."⁶³

To change the system, he insisted, citizens across the country, especially intellectuals, must organize to intensify pressure to force, nonviolently, the CP to step aside. His models are the masses of protesting citizens that brought down authoritarian regimes in recent decades in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany, the Philippines, and Indonesia.⁶⁴ Unlike Trần Độ and Trần Huỳnh Duy Thức, he does not seem worried about such public outrage getting out of hand.⁶⁵ Nor, unlike them, did he write to authorities urging them to embrace democracy. That, he seemed to think, could be futile; the CP must be pushed aside by organized citizens.

Đỗ Nam Hải has been active in several pro-democracy groups, most notably Bloc 8406. He was one of its founders in April 2006 and is frequently one of its spokespersons. Together with other organizations, Bloc 8406 aims to "pressure and force" the CP's leaders to abandon power.⁶⁶ As steps to create that pressure, it has advocated boycotts against elections unless opposition parties can run candidates; urged demonstrations against the regime, for multiparty elections, and against bauxite mining by Chinese companies; and implored pro-democracy people to wear white clothing the first and fifteenth days of each month.⁶⁷ With the possible exception of the anti-bauxite mining campaign, these measures have generated little enthusiasm among Vietnamese. Nevertheless, Đỗ Nam Hải and other Bloc spokespersons saw tremendous progress in the democratization movement between 2006 and 2013. They were particularly pleased that Vietnamese have become less afraid to criticize the regime and join pro-democracy organizations.⁶⁸

⁵⁹Đỗ Nam Hải 2004a, 2004b, and 2005.

⁶⁰Mạng lưới Dân chủ 2004; RFA 2005.

⁶¹Đỗ Nam Hải 2004a, 3.

⁶²Đỗ Nam Hải 2004b. For his disquisition on Vietnam's numerous domestic problems, including the inappropriateness of Marxist theory and a market economy with socialist orientations, see Đỗ Nam Hải 2000.

⁶³Đỗ Nam Hải 2008, 3.

⁶⁴Đỗ Nam Hải 2005, 4; and 2008, 3.

⁶⁵He hoped Vietnamese authorities would surrender early to avoid what happened in Romania in December 1989 when crowds stormed Ceausescu's residence and executed him and his wife. Đỗ Nam Hải 2004a, 3.

⁶⁶Khôi 8406 2006, article 2.1.

⁶⁷See the following by Khôi 8406: 2007, 2009, and 2011.

⁶⁸See Đỗ Nam Hải 2007b and 2008; and Khôi 8406 2009 and 2014.

To silence Đỗ Nam Hải, authorities tried nearly everything short of imprisonment. They frequently raided his house, interrogated him, and harassed his family.⁶⁹ In March 2007, security police threatened to arrest him if he continued with Bloc 8406 and other activism; and they persuaded his father, an elderly CP member, and other relatives to beg him to stop.⁷⁰ He did, but only briefly.

Another critic taking a confrontational approach is Nguyễn Văn Đài, who in 2006–2007 was active in Bloc 8406, the periodical *Free Speech*, and other pro-democracy organizations. Born in 1969, he grew up in Hưng Yên Province near Hà Nội, the son of a CP member. He was a guest worker electrician in East Germany when the regime there collapsed in 1989. After returning to Hà Nội, he earned a law degree in 1995 and established his own law office in 2003. By then he had run unsuccessfully as an independent for a seat in the National Assembly, had defended clients persecuted for their religious beliefs, and had joined an evangelical church. In 2004 he was a member of For Justice, a group of lawyers offering free services to people contesting court judgments against them. The Hanoi Bar Association and the government quickly squashed the group. Nguyễn Văn Đài continued on his own to represent clients in legal trouble because of their religious and political beliefs.⁷¹

The democratization movement, argued Nguyễn Văn Đài in 2006, needs political parties to challenge the CP's policies and domination.⁷² Vietnamese people, he wrote, are knowledgeable and capable enough to participate in a multiparty political system. Vietnam had several political parties in the 1930s' nationalist movement, in the initial years of independence from France (1945–1946), and in South Vietnam during the 1960s–1975. Establishing opposition political parties is even allowed under Vietnamese law, according to his interpretation of the nation's Constitution.

Vietnamese authorities, claiming his views and actions violated laws forbidding propaganda against the state, arrested and sentenced him in 2007 to five years imprisonment.⁷³ The term was later reduced to four years. In 2011 he returned home to his family.

Soon thereafter, he resumed his activism. Massive pressure, he urged in late 2011, must be put on the CP regime. Needed were “thousands, tens of thousands of brave, daring people to stand up and fight for democracy.”⁷⁴ For that, he wrote in 2014, “we need to create a united movement.” Each of, say, ten civil society organizations should train and educate five members intensively for one month. Then, each of the fifty newly emboldened members should train five more, resulting after the second month in 250 additional inspired citizens. Then each of those people should train five more, and so on during subsequent months. After one year, thousands of people across the country would thereby be prepared to “speak up together, take to the streets, and do other things to make authorities respond to demands. If authorities don't, then a street revolution might emerge, like what has happened in North Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere.”⁷⁵

⁶⁹Examples of accounts about the harassment are Ủy ban Nhân quyền Việt Nam 2006, 6; and Đỗ Nam Hải 2007b; 2009; and 2010, 31–32.

⁷⁰Đỗ Nam Hải 2007a. This episode included authorities coercing him to sign a statement that his pro-democracy activities were illegal, causing some observers to doubt his authenticity as a dissident; some even suspected he had become a tool of the regime. See Trần Bình Nam 2007 and Nguyễn Bách Niên 2007.

⁷¹Nguyễn Văn Đài 2006b. Among my other sources about him are *Pháp Luật* (Law),” 10 May 2004, 3; BBC 2006a and 2006b; and Hayton 2010, 118–119, 122, 127. Regarding For Justice (Vi Công Lý),” see Sidel 2008, 183–188.

⁷²Nguyễn Văn Đài 2006a and 2006b.

⁷³The indictment against Nguyễn Văn Đài is in Viện Kiểm Sát Nhân Dân Thành Phố Hà Nội 2007.

⁷⁴Nguyễn Văn Đài 2011, 15. In this article, he celebrates the success of Myanmar's democracy movement and the international community in pressuring that country's leaders to allow multiple political parties and embark on democratization.

⁷⁵His prescription is quoted in RFA 2014b.

Engagement Approach

Rather than organized confrontation, several prominent regime critics have advocated remaking the system by actively engaging it. The urgent task, they argued, is neither to remove the CP nor to create a multiparty political system. Rather it is to stop policies and actions that hurt people and retard development. Democratization, they said, is about improving people's lives. It emerges as the country improves economically and socially. Democracy, wrote a critic favoring this approach, "doesn't exist by itself; it is combined with other important objectives" such as equality, freedom, and socioeconomic development.⁷⁶ A multiparty system does not assure these, an observation critics in the CP-led approach also made, as noted earlier.

Engagement advocates favor interacting and arguing with government and CP authorities at all levels, opposing harmful programs and officials, and promoting better ones.⁷⁷ Engagement, according to these critics, will further Vietnam development and gradually and cumulatively contribute to democratization. Indeed, there is no need "to be political or carry a flag for democracy" during struggles about people's livelihood and welfare, otherwise authorities are apt to be repressive rather than responsive.⁷⁸ For this reason and because some of these critics suspected that certain organizations, especially Bloc 8406, are heavily influenced by interests outside the country, the engagement approach eschews organizations, demonstrations, and petitions against the government.⁷⁹

Struggles for better living conditions, these critics argue, have already been influential. The CP, they say, had to endorse family farming in the 1980s due to persistent, yet unorganized, peasant discontent with collective farming. Widening dissatisfaction with poverty also forced the CP to replace its centralized economy with a market economy. "Communism" and "socialism" are now meaningless to most Vietnamese, a reality to which the CP has had to adjust.⁸⁰

Thus, wrote Lê Hồng Hà in 2007, "in the last thirty years the people defeated the [Communist] Party on economic and ideological fronts, although not yet victorious politically."⁸¹ A prominent proponent of engagement, Lê Hồng Hà was in the anti-French movement, which he joined in 1939 at the age of thirteen; a CP member from 1946 to 1995; and a ranking government official, particularly in the security police and Labor Ministry, until retiring in 1991. A couple of years later, he and another CP member concluded from their research that hundreds of people had been wrongly purged from the party in the 1960s. CP leaders dismissed their report and ejected both men from the party. In late 1995, a court sentenced Lê Hồng Hà to two years in prison for revealing state secrets, a charge he strenuously denied.⁸²

Before this experience, he was questioning the CP's dominance over Vietnam, a line of thinking he pursued after imprisonment while also studying how to change the system.⁸³ The system, he found, had already progressed economically and ideologically due largely to citizens' efforts to

⁷⁶Lữ Phương 2007, beginning "Tôi là người đang ..." Also see Lê Hồng Hà 2007a, section "Gọi tên." Lữ Phương, a Hồ Chí Minh City resident, was a CP official in the pre-1975 underground Provisional Revolutionary Government.

⁷⁷See, for instance, Trần Bảo Lộc 2007b; Hà Sĩ Phu 2008; and Lữ Phương 2007, beginning "Điều đặc biệt." The first two men live in Đà Lạt. Hà Sĩ Phu, a biologist, started to publicly criticize the government in the late 1980s.

⁷⁸Hà Sĩ Phu 2007, paragraph "Tất nhiên ..."

⁷⁹Trần Bảo Lộc 2007b; Đoàn Giao Thủy 2007; and Lữ Phương 2007, beginning "Cách đây không lâu."

⁸⁰Lê Hồng Hà 2005, points 3–6, and 2007a, section "Gọi tên"; and Trần Lâm 2009a, 6.

⁸¹Lê Hồng Hà 2007a, section "Gọi tên."

⁸²For material about Lê Hồng Hà's life, see Lê Hồng Hà 1995 and 2005; Bùi Tín 2014; and Thayer 2006, 119–120. Some accounts have other dates for his imprisonment.

⁸³For an early critical commentary, see Lê Hồng Hà 1991. His study included the demise of Soviet and Eastern European political systems.

improve their lives. He also concluded that Vietnam's single-party rule is unsustainable and will likely "self-disintegrate" because it is "anti-development," is run by "corrupt and depraved" officials, and "consequently, has lost all prestige" in the people's eyes. As the regime continues this course of self-destruction and citizens press for further improvements, it will "progressively, step-by-step" crumble. Think of the struggle that way, he urged pro-democracy supporters, rather than aiming to demolish the system in one fell swoop.⁸⁴ Specific tasks he recommended include separating the National Assembly and judicial system from the CP, creating laws to protect associations and a free press, and make the police and military defend the nation and its citizens, not the CP.⁸⁵

Cù Huy Hà Vũ, a legal specialist in Hà Nội born in 1957, may not have openly endorsed the engagement approach but his actions beginning in 2005 were in line with it. Also, like several engagement advocates, he avoided joining organizations pressing to eliminate the CP government.⁸⁶ He tried to change officials' behavior and the system by using existing laws.

He earned a doctorate in law at Sorbonne University in France, where he studied and worked for several years.⁸⁷ Before that he had graduated from Hà Nội's Foreign Language University and worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His mother was a nurse; his father, a famous poet, had held several government positions, including agriculture minister. After returning to Hà Nội from France, he and his wife, Nguyễn Thị Dương Hà, established a law firm. She is a member of the bar association. Hà Vũ is not a lawyer, but his legal education helped the couple to expand their practice.

Cù Huy Hà Vũ's politics emphasized trying to protect people from officials' unlawful actions, hold authorities accountable, and exercise his own legal rights. For example, in 2005, he sued the People's Committee of Thừa Thiên-Huế Province, arguing that the Committee's approval of a plan to build a resort on a heritage site violated laws protecting that area. Already a controversial plan locally, it received national attention because of Hà Vũ's suit. The suit itself, according to newspaper accounts, was a novelty.⁸⁸ In 2008–2010 he defended Lt. Colonel Dương Tiến and others who had been sentenced to prison for "injuring the state"; Dương Tiến had also been fired from his job and purged from the CP. Yet, argued Cù Huy Hà Vũ, the colonel and his co-accused had committed no crime. They were victims of Đà Nẵng authorities' revenge after they publicized reports detailing corruption by top provincial leaders.⁸⁹ In another example of Cù Huy Hà Vũ's engagement, he sought in 2007 to be a candidate for his home district's National Assembly seat. He pursued the nomination as an independent, a rarity in Vietnam's candidacy selection process. He received one third of the nominators' votes, insufficient to be nominated, but he was pleased with his effort.⁹⁰

He also tried twice to sue the prime minister, something no one had done before. His first attempt, in June 2009, argued that the prime minister had illegally allowed Chinese companies

⁸⁴Lê Hồng Hà 2007a. The CP, he envisioned, could participate in a democratic system. "Self-disintegrate" is my gloss on three terms he uses: *tự tan rã*, *tự tan vỡ*, and *tự vỡ*, each with slightly different meanings.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ban biên tập 2011; and Human Rights Watch 2011, 15.

⁸⁷This paragraph is based on several sources, including Human Rights Watch 2011, 9–10; and VOA 2010, 29.

⁸⁸*Tuổi Trẻ* 2005; *ViệtBáo* 2005. Later, others also sued authorities over the project, which ended up being suspended.

⁸⁹Cù Huy Hà Vũ 2010a. See also, *An Ninh Thủ Đô* 2008; RFA 2009a. Hà Vũ's wife, Nguyễn Thị Dương Hà, was Dương Tiến's attorney.

⁹⁰*ViệtBáo* 2007; VOA 2010, 30.

to mine and process bauxite in Vietnam. Both the Hà Nội People's Court and the nation's Supreme Court rejected his suit declaring that courts have no authority to judge the prime minister.⁹¹ The outcome was the same when he tried to sue the prime minister in October 2010 for prohibiting petitions and complaints signed by several people.⁹²

After this second suit, police detained him in November 2010 and then raided his home and law office. They confiscated material they deemed unlawful and charged him with spreading propaganda against the state. He was convicted in April 2011 and sentenced to seven years imprisonment. The family's prominence, vigorous publicity by his wife and other relatives, and substantial public protests brought his case national and international attention.⁹³ His hunger strikes in prison were also widely reported.⁹⁴ In April 2014, authorities released him "temporarily," they said, because he was ill. But they required him to leave Vietnam. They whisked him from prison to Hà Nội's airport and put him and his wife on a plane to the US.⁹⁵ There he has continued to criticize Vietnamese officials' actions and policies.

Civil Society Approach

A fourth approach links expanding civil society to democratization. It shares with engagement the idea that democracy is more than the multiparty system with elections that the confrontation approach stresses. Both engagement and civil society approaches also see a role for the CP in democratization, not as its leader, which the CP-led approach favors, but one of many participants. Also like the engagement approach, civil society advocates urge lawful means to criticize bad policies and officials.

But engaging government authorities is not primary in the civil society approach. Its emphasis is on getting citizens to discuss and tackle political issues through organizations they create.⁹⁶ By organizing, people can assist each other, advance shared interests, and enhance civil society, which these critics deem essential for democratization. Civil society, as many dissidents broadly understand the term, means organized activities outside the government, family, and economy. Such activity need not be explicitly political, yet because the organizations belong to its members, often bear on policy issues, and are separate from the state, they enrich the political environment.

And they contribute to democratization. Democratic governance, civil society advocates contend, does not emerge on its own; people need to struggle for it, albeit peacefully and without upending society and the economy. That struggle includes civil society organizations making their case and interacting with others with whom they agree or disagree. Democracy, civil society advocates contend, requires citizens knowing how to express themselves yet also listen to others, negotiate, and compromise. By participating in civil society organizations people learn these practices. Citizens in a democracy also need to be well-informed about their

⁹¹RFA 2009b, 2009c.

⁹²Cù Huy Hà Vũ 2010b.

⁹³See the discussion in Human Rights Watch 2011, 6–23.

⁹⁴See, for example, Bauxite Việt Nam 2013; *Washington Post* 2013.

⁹⁵Tòa Án Nhân Dân Tỉnh Thanh Hóa 2014. Some journalists in Vietnam thought pressure from members of the US Congress influenced Vietnamese authorities to release Cù Huy Hà Vũ; see RFA 2014a.

⁹⁶This paragraph and the next draw on several sources, especially Lê Hiếu Đằng 2010; Nguyễn Quang A 2009; Trần Bảo Lộc 2007a; Trương Lai 2007; and Diễn đàn Xã hội Dân sự 2013a and 2013b. Trương Lai, a CP member and former head of the Sociology Institute in Hà Nội, resides in Hồ Chí Minh City. Lê Hiếu Đằng opposed the pre-1975 Sài Gòn government, held prominent positions in Hồ Chí Minh City before retiring in 2009, and was a CP member for over forty years before quitting in disgust in 2013.

interests, other people's concerns, and national issues. For this, the civil society approach stresses, citizens need access to wide-ranging sources of knowledge.

The main goal, civil society advocate Nguyễn Quang A explained, is to make Vietnam “a wealthy people, a strong nation, and a society that is democratic, fair, and civilized.”⁹⁷ To be democratic does not mean starting with a multiparty political system, which would likely cause havoc in today's Vietnam. Political pluralism, he said, “comes at the end of, is a result of, a [democratization] process.”⁹⁸ That process includes evolving a political culture in which citizens know how to debate, take seriously other views, and find information. It requires “people understanding their rights, knowing how to use those rights, and continuously pressuring officials to improve an environment so that their rights can be readily put into effect.” Learning to live democratically takes time and practice, which is where “civil society organizations play a huge role.”⁹⁹ Also crucial are a free press and reliable information.¹⁰⁰

Beginning in 2006, if not earlier, Nguyễn Quang A publicly advocated democratizing Vietnam's political system, a process in which the CP itself, he said, should participate if it is wise and wants to serve the nation¹⁰¹ (Figure 6). His views emerged from diverse experiences. He was born in northern Vietnam in 1946, the year fighting began between Vietnamese nationalists, including his father, and French colonial forces.¹⁰² His father was killed in that war. In 1965, the government sent him to study in Hungary, where he earned a doctorate in information science in 1975. After returning to Vietnam in 1976, he entered the Vietnamese military. In 1983 he went back to Hungary where he was a research scientist and professor. In Vietnam by 1987, he left the military, worked briefly in the government, then moved from Hà Nội to Hồ Chí Minh City, where he started a software outsourcing business. In 1989, he established with others one of the country's earliest computer equipment companies; and in 1993, in Hà Nội, he was in a group of entrepreneurs that founded a private bank, one of the first in post-1975 Vietnam. In addition to his business, research, military, and government experience, he was also a member of the CP (1978–1993). And he read widely, including books in Hungarian and English on economics and political science, some of which he translated into Vietnamese.

His first major foray into civil society organizations was the Institute for Development Studies (IDS). Established in September 2007, IDS held that intellectuals should contribute to public



Figure 6. Nguyễn Quang A, pictured here in an undated photo, has emphasized a civil society approach to democratization. (Tập Chí Phía Trước: www.phiatruoc.info)

⁹⁷The CP also endorses this goal, an important convergence, said Nguyễn Quang A, between the regime and those like himself who are seeking to change the political system peacefully and nonviolently. Nguyễn Quang A 2006a, 1.

⁹⁸Ibid., 2, 5.

⁹⁹Nguyễn Quang A, correspondence with author, 24 January 2014.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.; also see Nguyễn Quang A 2008.

¹⁰¹Nguyễn Quang A 2006a, 6.

¹⁰²Information about his background comes mainly from Elliott 2012, 303–304, 307; Nguyễn Quang A 2006b; and correspondence with author, 11 April 2015.

debates about policies. Its mission was to do research, discuss, and publicize recommendations on the economy, education, health care, rural development, and other topics. Nguyễn Quang A led the institute, which he described as the first independent policy research organization in Vietnam.¹⁰³ Governed by a board of prominent scholars, IDS organized public seminars where specialists presented papers that were debated and posted on its website. These activities often criticized government policies. By early 2009, some officials accused IDS of opposing the state; and in July the prime minister forbade researchers from publicizing material disparaging the “direction, thinking, or policy of the [Communist] Party or the State.” Such criticisms could only be given privately to specified authorities.¹⁰⁴ IDS strenuously objected but to no avail. Rather than operate within this constraint, IDS dissolved itself in September 2009.¹⁰⁵

Subsequently, Nguyễn Quang A was prominent in significant collective efforts to bend Vietnam toward democracy. One was boosting public discussion in 2013 about the nation’s Constitution. When the National Assembly publicly circulated a draft revision of the Constitution in late 2012, he and about a dozen others, many former IDS members, saw an opportunity for citizens to discuss the kind of government they would like. The group wrote a critique of the National Assembly’s draft Constitution, sought input from others, revamped their document several times, and then obtained endorsements. The document became known as Petition 72, after the number of people who initially signed it. Its main point was that the National Assembly’s revision was not “firmly, fundamentally a democratic constitution” with distinct branches of government and “premised on rights to freedom of speech, press, association, assembly, and demonstration.”¹⁰⁶ In mid January 2013, Petition 72, including the names, affiliations, and locations of the signatories, was circulated through the internet together with a possible constitution for a democratic government. By May, over 14,400 Vietnamese had signed the statement, which had also stimulated numerous others to circulate ideas about how Vietnam should be governed. Although the discussion ultimately had little impact on the revised Constitution, Nguyễn Quang A was delighted that his group had helped to provoke widespread debate.¹⁰⁷

A second major collaborative activity of his was the Civil Society Forum, which he and others started in September 2013. The Forum’s objective is to “assemble and debate views that contribute to transforming peacefully our country’s political system from a dictatorship to a democracy.” For that and to help develop the “civil society required for a democracy,” the Forum created a website where “the ideas of all organizations, groups, and individuals sharing this objective” can be expressed.¹⁰⁸ The Forum also collaborated with other organizations for causes such as opposing the arrests of critics and supporting demonstrations against China.¹⁰⁹ Members also sought to run the Forum democratically.¹¹⁰

Police never arrested Nguyễn Quang A, but they often beleaguered him. A civil society advocate who *was* arrested is Phạm Chí Dũng, a journalist born in 1966, a resident of Hồ Chí Minh City,

¹⁰³Nguyễn Quang A 2007; RFA 2008.

¹⁰⁴Thủ tướng Chính phủ 2009.

¹⁰⁵Hội đồng Viện Nghiên cứu Phát triển IDS 2009; “Tuyên bố của Viện Nghiên cứu Phát triển IDS” 2009; BBC 2009.

¹⁰⁶“Kiến Nghị về sửa đổi” 2013, 1. This document has the critique, names of initial signers, and a possible alternative constitution. Additional sources for my account here include Nguyễn Quang A 2013; Nguyễn Đắc Kiên 2013; Wells-Dang 2014, 176–179; and correspondence with Nguyễn Quang A, 24 January 2014.

¹⁰⁷In his assessment, never before “had there been such vigorous, lively discussion about a constitution; many people started to have ideas about it, about people’s rights, about how the state is organized, etc.” (Correspondence, 24 January 2014.)

¹⁰⁸Diễn đàn Xã hội Dân sự 2013b.

¹⁰⁹20 tổ chức dân sự 2014; 21 tổ chức xã hội dân sự 2014.

¹¹⁰Diễn đàn Xã hội Dân sự 2013a, 2.



Figure 7. Initial members of the Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam. Phạm Chí Dũng, the association's president, is standing at far right (wearing a white shirt with a pen in his shirt pocket). The photo reportedly was taken on 4 July 2014, the day the association was announced. (anhbasam.wordpress.com/2014/07/04/2734-tuyen-bo-thanh-lap-hoi-nha-bao-doc-lap-viet-nam/)

and an economist. Beginning in the late 1980s, he wrote literary works as well as newspaper articles. In 2011–2012, while still a government employee, he published under aliases in online newspapers articles about corruption. He was arrested in 2012 for allegedly distributing subversive materials and consorting with overseas opposition groups. Police held him for six months, apparently without making formal charges, then released him. Afterwards, they often harassed him.¹¹¹ In mid 2013 he left the CP, saying it “no longer served and represented the people’s interests.”¹¹²

In an article celebrating Vietnam’s expanding civil society, Phạm Chí Dũng also noted shortcomings.¹¹³ He applauded the growing number of organizations that are “independent” – formed without seeking official approval or registering with the government. An early example, he said, is the Bauxite Việt Nam group that started in 2009. A more recent one is the Petition 72 group, which he deemed as important for Vietnam as Charter 77 was for Czechoslovakia in the late 1970s–1980s.¹¹⁴ He was also excited by the founding in 2014 of the Vietnam Association of Former Prisoners of Conscience.¹¹⁵ The rising number of independent civil society organizations signals, he conjectured, that “the era” in which people are afraid to express views contrary to the regime “is gradually drifting away” and the country’s “autocratic system is changing to a pluralistic one.” On the negative side, however, he said the quality of many organizations is low: they are not

¹¹¹Vũ Đông Hà 2012; RFA 2013a and 2013b.

¹¹²Phạm Chí Dũng, quoted by Nguyễn Thanh Giang 2014, 7.

¹¹³Phạm Chí Dũng 2014.

¹¹⁴Charter 77 refers to both a pro-democracy group in Czechoslovakia and the document they issued in January 1977 that advocated a range of human rights and criticized the country’s authoritarian regime.

¹¹⁵The Vietnamese name is Hội Cựu tù nhân Lương tâm Việt Nam.

terribly active and they have the same, usually older, people. The “struggle for democracy,” he argued, needs new faces, civil society organizations with members from different generations, and collaboration among the groups.

These concerns influenced him as he and others established the Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam in July 2014 (Figure 7). He became the association’s president. Two of its purposes are to protect journalists who are “harassed, arrested, imprisoned, or terrorized” and to oppose laws “used to oppress freedom of the press.”¹¹⁶ One of its activities has been to publish a daily online newspaper, *Vietnam Times*, which has articles about economic, social, and political events in Vietnam not reported by government-authorized media.¹¹⁷ The association’s initial forty-two members, men and women, came from diverse age groups and from several parts of the country. Soon after it began, it collaborated with other organizations. In August it was one of twenty-one signatories of a statement protesting the arrest of three pro-democracy activists in Đồng Tháp Province; and in November the association and twenty-four other groups jointly condemned the security police’s “violent and torturous” actions against citizens around the country.¹¹⁸

Possible Convergence

Since about 2012–2013, notable advocates of the confrontation and engagement approaches have gravitated to the civil society option. In 2008, Nguyễn Vũ Bình had argued that, in order to compel the regime to leave, the democratic movement needed “the strength to attack the CP and the state’s weaknesses.” A “necessity for that is one public organization of people fighting for democracy.” This, he concluded, “is a basic precondition” for success that movement participants must acknowledge.¹¹⁹ By 2014, his position had shifted. “We do not yet have an organization” leading the movement, he wrote, “nor know when there will be [one].” And even if one existed, he implied, the outcome is highly uncertain. The regime has “eighty years of experience in political struggle” and “the army, the police, the security force, and the power of 30 to 40 million people who benefit from the present system.” Given these circumstances, he concluded, the better approach now is to embrace the civil society direction the “movement itself has been creating in recent years.” He urged “developing civil society in many aspects of life,” directing organizations “toward political tendencies” and connecting with “progressives within the [Communist] Party and the state.”¹²⁰

Meanwhile, some favoring the engagement approach, which is leery of organizations, demonstrations, and petitions against the government, supported collective actions. Lê Hồng Hà, for instance, wrote in 2012 that “within the last couple of years” a movement to improve the country “has accelerated and strengthened.” He cited approvingly demonstrations supporting Cù Huy Hà Vũ, protests against China’s encroachments into Vietnam, and petitions against bauxite mining. “Over all, progressive forces in various forms and shapes and with different viewpoints are rising.”¹²¹ Similarly, by 2013 Lữ Phương, another engagement advocate, was pleased that a diverse political movement was becoming stronger. Those involved, he said, “are sowing seeds in order that, at an opportune time, the country will change.”¹²² Among the immediate tasks

¹¹⁶Hội Nhà báo độc lập Việt Nam 2014. This announcement includes the names of the association’s initial members.

¹¹⁷The Vietnamese title is *Thời báo Việt Nam*.

¹¹⁸21 tổ chức 2014; 25 tổ chức 2014.

¹¹⁹Nguyễn Vũ Bình 2008, points 3 and 4.

¹²⁰Nguyễn Vũ Bình 2014, 12.

¹²¹Lê Hồng Hà 2012, 14.

¹²²BBC 2013.

to help this movement, wrote Lê Hồng Hà in 2014, is “to encourage and support the establishment of civic associations.”¹²³

Whether a consensus will emerge is unknown. Notable, however, is some collaboration in recent years among regime critics who have favored different approaches to promoting democracy in Vietnam.¹²⁴ In any event, regime critics and the democratization movement have already made an indelible mark on Vietnam’s history.

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¹²³Lê Hồng Hà 2014, 21.

¹²⁴Examples include Lữ Phương and Hà Sĩ Phu, who have been engagement advocates, joined such civil society advocates as Nguyễn Quang A and Phạm Chí Dũng to sign an August 2013 statement opposing new government restrictions on internet useage and blogging (“Tuyên bố Nghị định số 72” 2013); and Nguyễn Văn Đài, Nguyễn Đan Quế, and Đỗ Nam Hải – three who have been confrontation advocates – signed, along with Nguyễn Quang A, Phạm Chí Dũng, and other civil society approach advocates, a widely circulated letter in November 2014 protesting security police abuses (25 tổ chức xã hội dân sự 2014).

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