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# Resilience of the Communist Party of Vietnam's Authoritarian Regime since Đổi Mới

Hai Hong Nguyen

**Abstract:** Unlike communist parties in the former Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has overcome crises to remain in power for the last 30 years and will most likely continue ruling in the coming decades. Strategies and tactics undertaken by the CPV are found to be identical to those canvassed in the extant literature on the durability of authoritarian regimes around the world. The present paper argues that the CPV's regime has been resilient thus far because it has successfully restored and maintained public trust, effectively constrained its opposition at home, and cleverly reduced external pressures. To support this argument, the analysis electively focuses on four aspects: (1) economic performance, (2) political flexibility, (3) repression of the opposition, and (4) expansion of international relations.

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**Keywords:** Vietnam, authoritarianism, Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), Đổi Mới, resilience

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## Introduction

Political crises between the late 1970s and the early 1990s transformed dozens of authoritarian regimes and military dictatorships into democracies across the world, generating the so-called ‘Third Wave of Democratization’ (Huntington 1991). This ‘wave’ contributed to the number of democratic countries increasing from 44 in 1973 to 86 in 2000–2001 (FH 2010). In 2011, the ‘Arab Spring’ ended dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, inspiring other popular uprisings in the Arab world, from Yemen and Bahrain to Syria, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and forthrightly cultivated in a high expectation for another possible wave – the ‘fourth wave’ – of democratisation (Diamond 2011; Gershman 2011; Howard and Hussain 2013). These events show us that democracy can take root and grow in every corner of the world, including in non-secular societies in the Arab world that had been branded as “exceptionalism” to democracy (Harik 2006; Diamond 2010), and further intensifies the conventional wisdom that authoritarian regimes and dictatorships are inherently fragile (Nathan 2003).

Nevertheless, more than two decades after Fukuyama declared the “end of history” (1989), marked by the predominance of liberalism associated with free-market capitalism and political democracy, and while the expansion of global democracy has assuredly been an impressive development, authoritarianism has persisted in numerous states and re-emerged in one form or another in many post-transitional states. Between 1972 and 2003, 77 per cent of transitions from authoritarian government resulted in another authoritarian regime, but only 23 per cent of such transitions led to democracy (Hadenius and Teorell 2007: 152). These findings are further supported by the discovery that of 123 democratic transformations took place between 1960s and 2004, only 67 democratic regimes survived through 2004, while 56 ended up returning to authoritarianism by the end of that year (Kapstein and Converse 2008: 59). According to the Freedom House, prior to the ‘Arab Spring’, 89 of the world’s 194 countries were “free”, 58 were “partly free” and 47 were “not free” (FH 2010). These figures do not offer much grounds for optimism among democracy supporters. As Thomas Carothers has noted, it is no longer appropriate to assume that the world is moving away from dictatorial rule and in transition toward democracy (2002).

Since the global financial crisis broke out in 2008, democracy seems to have been in decline further and authoritarianism has been resurgent globally (Diamond 2015; Kornai 2015; Levitsky and Way 2015; Shevtsova 2015; Walker 2015). Countries involved in the Arab Spring are noticeable examples of how the hopes for a fourth wave of democratisa-

tion have been doused. Five years on, real democracy has not yet been delivered in these countries, with the exception of Tunisia (Butt 2014). In Egypt, for instance, the government has returned to old authoritarian practices with increased military involvement in governance and political affairs (FH 2015). Saudi Arabia remains one of the worst human rights abusers in the world (FH 2016). Democracy supporters are more rigorously depressed by the fact that many well-established and newer democracies have been performing poorly in economic terms (Fukuyama 2015) and political rights and civil liberties have worsened significantly across the globe (FH 2014, 2015). Authoritarian regimes have smartly adopted reactive and proactive strategies, including the use of the Internet, which was heralded as a “tool of liberation” five years ago at the heyday of the Arab Spring to fight on-line anti-government movements, scrutinise democracy activists and extend their reach and authority (Kalathil and Boas 2001, 2003). The fact authoritarian regimes are not only proving their resilience and capacity for resurgence but also are actively shaping the cyberspace to their own strategic advantage has become conventional wisdom (Deibert 2015: 64). Given this fact, there is an inevitable need to explore why certain authoritarian regimes bucked global trends and maintained their grip on power at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and yet still survived in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and possibly for many more years to come.

The durability of authoritarian regimes in Vietnam and China shows that there needs a rethink of the conventional wisdom on the fragility of these regimes. In Vietnam, the rise and resilience of the regime is closely associated with the rule of the Marxist–Leninist communist party. Founded in 1930 in the British-colonised China-Hong Kong, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) became the ruling party in the northern part of Vietnam after defeating the French at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, and across the nation since 1976 following the collapse of the American-backed southern regime.<sup>1</sup> The next decade saw the CPV's rationalist installation of a Stalinist-style centrally planned economy. This led to a profound and comprehensive social crisis by the mid-1980s, generating a serious decline in public trust and a pendulum in socialism among party members, inviting a real threat to the CPV's legitimacy and survival (CPV 1991; Vasavakul 1995; Luong 2003; CPV 2005; Kerkvliet 2005; London 2009; Thayer 2010). The CPV responded to the crisis by formal-

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1 Vietnam was militarily reunified in 1975 after communist troops entered Sài Gòn, the former name for what is now called Ho Chi Minh City, and the American-backed southern regime declared surrender on 30 April of that year.

ly introducing an all-embracing policy known as *Đổi Mới* (or renewal)<sup>2</sup> at its 6<sup>th</sup> National Congress in late 1986, shifting away from the command economy and reaching extensively to the outside world. Progress achieved in all fields resulting from *Đổi Mới* in the last three decades is indisputable. Economically, Vietnam has impressively joined the rank of lower middle-income nations. High economic growth that continued from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s led to Vietnam being dubbed as an ‘economic dragon’, similar to South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1970s. In the political sphere, Vietnamese society is becoming increasingly pluralistic (London 2013; Hải 2016b). Vietnam has expanded its relations with most countries, including its former enemies France and the United States, and proactively involved in international institutions (Thayer 2015). *Đổi Mới*’s achievements have obviously enabled the ruling CPV to not only restore public trust but to also continue intensifying its legitimacy and monopoly of power.

This article looks at Vietnam as a typical case study of the resilience of an authoritarian regime. I start by reviewing the extant literature on the resilience of authoritarian regimes. In the second section, I electively analyse measures undertaken by the ruling CPV since *Đổi Mới*. The analysis shows that the CPV’s measures are adaptive to both endogenous and exogenous pressures and have three main aims. First, to regain and maintain public trust by carrying out both economic and political reforms. Second, to constrain internal pressure by preventing the opposition from its nascence. Third to reduce external pressure by increasing linkages to the West to reinforce the CPV’s legitimacy and its regime. Finally, the article offers some thoughts on challenges to the CPV’s rule in the future.

## Extant Literature

During times of crisis, the resilience of regimes is manifest in their ability to anticipate and prepare for shocks, to effectively undertake measures to respond to crises as they unfold. Regimes that are able to survive these crises have their political legitimacy intensified as a result. In recent decades, scholars have identified a number of sources to the resilience of authoritarian regimes (for different types of authoritarian regimes and hybrid regimes, see some sampling: Collier and Levitsky 1997; Geddes 1999; Carothers 2002; Diamond 2002; Schedler 2002; Ottaway 2003;

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2 See our discussion of the concept ‘*Đổi Mới*’ in Hải Hồng Nguyễn and Phạm Quang Minh (2016, forthcoming).

Howard and Roessler 2006; Levitsky and Way 2010). These sources can be divided into two categories: the national elements, which are identified by the domestic structuralist approach, and the international diffusion effects on national politics, which have been inspired by the massive increase in the number of democracies since the end of the Cold War (Levitsky and Way 2010: 37).

To keep grip on power, authoritarian rulers first and foremost rely on a well-trained, equipped and effective loyal internal security apparatus (Skocpol 1979; Bellin 2004; Way 2008). The core of this apparatus lies in security forces that are vested with dual-mandated duties to cope effectively with mass protests, and where necessary to intimidate and even use violence to restore public order. In addition to overly repressive actions such as dispersing organised protests or harassing and arresting oppositionists, this apparatus may also undertake “low-intensity” actions such as denying licenses or basic social services, extending special taxes, and ordering attacks by non-uniformed thugs (Levitsky and Way 2010). By doing that, the authoritarian rulers aim to convince aspiring oppositionists that organising resistance is personally risky and also unlikely to accomplish any desired goals.

In addition to the security apparatus, high economic performance and control over natural resources are important for authoritarian regimes to maintain long-term popular support and to be resilient to periods of crisis (Huntington 1991). The regimes usually manage to hold power through violent revolutions and earn their political legitimacy not in free elections but by public belief in assumed values. Hence, for them to stay in power, authoritarian rulers must dutifully deliver high-level economic growth and improve the living standards of most citizens. Some scholars have contended that those authoritarian rulers who achieve higher per capita incomes and avoid acute short-term economic downfalls tend to hold onto power for longer periods (Przeworski and Limongi 1997; Geddes 1999). Nevertheless, modernisation theory informs us that the link between economic performance and regime survival is not always linear. Citizens' expectations are proportionate with their increase in living standards. Consequently, if their expectations are left unfulfilled, the regime will lose public support (Gurr 1968). Moreover, modernisation theorists like Lipset (1959) and Rostow (1960) argued that continued economic growth can transform society in destabilising ways, unleashing new social forces that cannot be managed through established forms of political control. For authoritarian regimes that possess rich resource, as is the case with some Arab countries, this problem is less acute. This is because the regime can generate massive wealth

by tapping oil or gas reserves, and can thus distribute economic resources to its supporters, creating a middle class that is dependent upon the regime for its material well-being (Beblawi and Luciani 1987; Walle 1998; Way 2008). For resource-poor authoritarian regimes, economic growth is a double-edged sword. While they justify their rule through economic achievement, they must also avoid short-term economic downturns and find new methods to control increasingly dynamic, complex societies.

The durability of authoritarian regimes is also determined by whether formal institutions like political parties are in place and how effectively they function. Empirical studies have shown that having a powerful and highly institutionalised political party really matters for the durability of these regimes (Geddes 1999; Brownlee 2007; Magaloni 2008). It has been argued that a hegemonic party stands as the sole vehicle for accessing state rents, political positions, and the privileges associated with loyalty to the ruling regime (Geddes 1999; Magaloni 2008). Furthermore, beyond the distribution of patronage, the party may also bind cadres together by legitimising an official ideology and the shared experience of armed struggle, especially in the case of revolutionary authoritarian regimes (Way 2008; Levitsky and Way 2013). Most importantly, a party can establish universally applicable and merit-based procedures for how cadres are promoted and dismissed. From the vantage point of officials, this provides a more credible commitment that one's continued loyalty to the party will translate into personal and professional benefits in the long term (Nathan 2003; Brownlee 2007; Magaloni 2008). However, during times of unrest, the party may reduce the benefits that cadres might receive for defecting to the opposition. Hence, benefit cuts could pose a threat to the coherence and power of the party. Powerful political parties can also consolidate their power by shrewdly managing leadership turnovers. Such parties tend to establish norms and procedures for succession (Bratton and Walle 1997; Geddes 1999; Nathan 2003; Hale 2005). This 'intra-democracy' approach helps mitigate disagreement within the party and among the elite, reducing the risk of a break in the party's unity. As a result, the ruling elite will be less likely to fragment in the face of public opposition or reveal visible divisions that might be exploited by outsiders.

Elections, an indicator of democracy, are also conducive to the durability of authoritarian regimes (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). Although questions have been raised about their actual meaning (Morgenbesser 2014) because they are usually seen as 'window dressing' (Gandhi 2008), elections in authoritarian regimes are held to connect the

elites with the public. Moreover, the regime-sustaining function of these institutions is so pivotal that the holding of formal elections presents no clear division between authoritarianism and democracy. These nominally competitive elections in no way represent democracy, but in the long term they can serve democratising purposes (Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002; Schedler 2002). In competitive authoritarian regimes, which are also branded as hybrid regimes combining characteristics of democracy and authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010: 5), formal elections are held but manipulated by authoritarian rulers to varying degrees in order to maintain, if not enhance, their grip on power. In fact, authoritarian regimes use elections to consolidate and increase their legitimacy (Schmitter 1978), divide and weaken the opposition (Linz 1978), identify critics of the regime, provide forums for forging compromises with potential challengers (Gandhi 2008; Lust 2009), reduce official corruption and malfeasance (Nathan 2003), increase government responsiveness (Manion 1996), and give dictators the opportunity to make a non-violent exit from power (Schedler 2009). In effect, authoritarian regimes that hold nominally democratic elections have substantially greater longevity than those that do not (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007).

A durable authoritarian regime is one that is able to withstand external pressures for transformation. That said, the durability of authoritarian regimes cannot be attributed solely to domestic factors, and also must be understood within a particular international context. In recent decades, scholars of regime transitions have stopped their tendency to treat the breakdown of authoritarianism and the appearance of democracy as primarily domestic processes. Empirical studies have found that political transitions away from authoritarianism cluster both spatially and temporally (Huntington 1991; Starr and Lindborg 2003; Kopstein and Reilly 2003; Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Gleditsch and Ward 2006). In addition, a country's proximity to democratic neighbours is a stronger predictor of its potential for democratisation than any particular social requisites (Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Brinks and Coppedge 2006). It has been suggested that the establishment of democracy in one country also has a powerful demonstration effect on its neighbours. This reveals the possibility of democratisation in the first country, inspires the morale of the opposition and exposes the kinds of mobilisation tactics that dissidents might use to challenge and overthrow a regime (Huntington 1991). The 'graduates' of opposition movements in their own countries could help to bring about electoral revolutions in neighbouring authoritarian regimes (Bunce and Wolchik 2006). However, that diffusion dynamics may not necessarily explain regime breakdown, as was the case in Arme-



nia in 2003 and 2008, Azerbaijan in 2003 and 2005, and Belarus in 2006, where electoral challenges proved to be ineffective (Way 2008). Furthermore, the demonstration effect of successful revolutions in other states does not always work in favour of opposition activists as authoritarian rulers also learn from successful and failed electoral revolutions abroad to strengthen their regime in the present (Way 2005; Carothers 2006).

There are other tools that authoritarian regimes employ to enhance their durability. These include power-sharing, by which the rulers aim to control threats from different groups in society to rebel (Magaloni 2008); elite cohesion, which purports to prevent possible defection within the party (Levitsky and Way 2012); and cohesive mass organisations, which are created and manipulated by the rulers to manage and survive crises (Levitsky and Way 2012). However, not all of these tools are applicable to every authoritarian regime. The authoritarian regime in Vietnam has been resilient thus far because it has electively undertaken measures that can be seen as being identical to the sources canvassed above.

## CPV's Resilient Authoritarianism since **Đổi Mới**

Since its establishment in 1930 until the end of the anti-American war in 1975, the CPV's political legitimacy and authoritarian regime were built on the three grounds – traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic – as identified in Max Webber's well-known theory on how regimes seek to legitimate themselves (see Roth and Wittich 1978; White 1986; Dogan 2001). In the post-war era, the CPV has relied on its ability to confront and manage crises. In the mid-1980s, Vietnam found itself in an all-sided social crisis that had seriously eroded public trust and threatened the CPV's legitimacy (CPV 1991; Vasavakul 1995; Luong 2003b; CPV 2005; Kerkvliet 2005; London 2009; Thayer 2010). The party at that time confronted a critical question: reform or death? In late 1986, the CPV formally introduced a policy, known as **Đổi Mới**, that involved shifting away from state-socialist economic institutions, the base of the command economy that was partly attributable for causing the crisis, and conducting selective political reforms that were arguably for democratising purposes (Hải and Minh 2016). In 1996, the CPV articulated that the country had surmounted the comprehensive crisis; public trust was restored and political regime was firmly maintained (CPV 1996). As of early 2016, Vietnam had joined the ranks of lower middle-income states and had established diplomatic relations with most countries, including its former war foes. The analysis that follows concentrates on the measures the

CPV has undertaken in the last three decades, including its repressive tactics to cope with a new challenge that emerges as a by-product of *Đổi Mới* – the increasingly independent civic voices that criticise the CPV's continued Marxist-Leninist political institutions and call for substantial political reforms towards democracy (Thayer 1992, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Kerkvliet 2015).

## Economic Performance

Prior to *Đổi Mới*, the CPV-installed state-socialist economic institutions failed to meet the basic needs for survival of its citizens, who had been devastated by decades of armed confrontation. Meanwhile, corruption in the elite was widespread, in contrast to the citizens' impoverishment. Civic protests in rural and urban areas, starting in the mid-1980s, manifested the decay of regime performance (for a sampling, see Kolko 1997; Vasavakul 1998; Thayer 2009a), which threatened the CPV's legitimacy.

Empirical studies have shown that regime performance over time is an important factor that contributes to building and maintaining broad-based system support. Political regimes are resilient in the long run if there is a deep popular belief in the effectiveness and legitimacy of their institutions. More particularly, sound and effective economic policies in terms of delivering what citizens want and expect from their government are an important dimension of regime performance, efficacy and legitimation.

As early as the 1990s, Vietnam was considered an under-developed country and its populace was in chronic poverty and hunger. Nevertheless, within a decade, *Đổi Mới* had yielded impressive economic results. The average economic growth rate in the period from 1991–1995 was 8.2 per cent, and in the 10 years from 1988 to 1997 it was 7.1 per cent. The inflation rate decreased from 67.1 per cent in 1991 to 12.7 per cent in 1995 and 5 per cent in 1996. The most impressive indicator for the success of *Đổi Mới* on a larger scale is Vietnam's decline in poverty rate, which was even more steep than that of China. The poverty rate fell from 75 per cent in 1984 to 34.7 per cent in 1997, then to 15 per cent in 2007 and 5.8 per cent in 2014. Before the Asian financial crisis in 1998, Vietnam had been dubbed as an emerging economic 'dragon' in East Asia (CPV 1996; Dollar and Litvack 1998; Glewwe, Gragnolati, and Zaman 2000; Abuza 2001; Adams 2002). Although Vietnam still has social inequality, which is actually increasing, most Vietnamese have experienced significant improvements in their standard of living. This is reflected across a wide range of socio-economic indicators, from house-

hold income to life expectancy. Economic growth has also permitted broader access to essential goods and services such as education and health, clean water and electricity. It is no exaggeration to state that *Đổi Mới* has transformed the former CPV Secretary-General Lê Duẩn's vision in 1976 of a radio, a television set and a fridge for each family within 10 years into a truism. Significantly, economic progress is a critical factor that helps maintain social order and political stability, given that approximately 80 per cent of the Vietnamese population live in rural areas.

In the post- *Đổi Mới* era, civic protests and demonstrations have not been unusual in Vietnamese politics. Somewhat surprisingly, however, none of these protests is linked with economic downturn, as is the case in many other countries. This does not necessarily imply that the country has a good governance system, but the regime could have been able to avoid another social crisis when it was hit by the global financial crisis in 2008 by ensuring that its economy has continued to grow by 4–6 per cent annually in the past seven years. While the world potentially faces a new cycle of economic turbulence, Vietnam's economy grew at 6.68 per cent in 2015 and is expected to increase by 6.5 per cent in 2016 – rates that most countries would envy. The CPV may confront critiques of its constraint on political liberalisation, but undeniably high economic performance has enabled the CPV to intensify its legitimacy since *Đổi Mới* given that its traditional grounds of legitimacy is fading (Hiệp 2012).

## Political Flexibility

The term “political flexibility” (*uyển chuyển về chính trị*), as used in this context, partly overlaps with the concept “responsive state” that Kerkvliet used in reference to the CPV's response to public demands (Kerkvliet 2010). More broadly, the term allows an all-embracing interpretation of the CPV's political actions, including political reforms such as a change of electoral rules that aim to promote democracy within the CPV's power structure, or a reform in working methods of the national assembly to hold the government more accountable. In a nutshell, it can be a dutiful response of the authorities to public demands in “everyday politics” (Kerkvliet 2005). Furthermore, “political flexibility” in this context concurs with the argument that political reforms should have been considered on the one hand as “sincerity” (*thành tâm*) on the part of the CPV to catch up with the spin-offs of economic liberalisation, and, on the other hand, as tactics to minimise public outrage that potentially challenges the party-state's authority (Hải 2016a). These political move-

ments should be seen in a constructive manner as progressive democratisation in the nation since *Đổi Mới* (Hải and Minh 2016).

Political reforms conducted by the CPV in the last three decades have been responsive to public demands and have absorbed public outrage in mechanisms under the party's control (Hải 2016a, 2016b), as well as the endogenous needs within the party itself. From organisational perspectives, they have strengthened the CPV's ability to cope with new challenges and intensify its "combat-ability" (*sức chiến đấu*). The most notable political reform is the CPV's adoption of grassroots democracy in 1998 in response to peasant protests in Thái Bình in 1997. Initially undertaken as a political experiment (Abuza 2001a: 87), the implementation of the norm has now been made compulsory nationwide. Although grassroots democracy has been described as "window-dressing," implying that it just showcases the CPV's rhetoric on democracy, there are success stories in which local people have been able to implement some political rights. The failure and success of grassroots democracy show the dynamics in implementing this norm in a political environment where the law is subject to the party's rules. However, what needs to be emphasised here is that grassroots democracy provides a mutually empowering mechanism for the party and the peasants. Grassroots democracy is a mechanism that enables the CPV to stabilise rural areas and mitigate peasant dissatisfaction (Hải 2016a: 41).

Organisational adaptation to market conditions is a showcase of the CPV's political flexibility in the reform era, even though the idea of entrepreneurship contradicts with communist ideologies. In 2006, the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress adopted a resolution allowing party members to run businesses. This decision was followed by another breakthrough commitment at the 11<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2011, when the CPV agreed to admit private entrepreneurs into the party. Many saw this change as a break away from party rules and Marxist–Leninist ideology. Private entrepreneurs, the "enemy of socialism" (Han and Baumgarte 2000: 6), can now join the party, despite fears among conservatives that this reform will threaten the party's class representation and nature (Thông 2011). In effect, this new party resolution aims to formalise a de facto practice that has been implemented since the early 1990s. In March 1994, under Decisions 90/TTg and 91/TTg issued by the prime minister, a large number of state-owned enterprises were merged into large-scale state corporations or economic groups known as Corporations 90 or 91, nearly half of whose operational capital was contributed by private entrepreneurs (Doanh 1996: 66; CIEM 1999: 46). These corporations were fashioned after the South Korean Chaebol (OECD 2013) and chaired by a party

member. Arguably, the entrepreneurial path of the CPV's adaption to market conditions has increased the party's capacity for the inclusion and co-optation of new economic forces in the reform era, thereby contributing to the formation of a mutually transformative relationship between entrepreneurs and the party. Furthermore, by appointing party members to oversee those corporations that would implement Western-style liberalism and pursue capitalism, the CPV sought "to increase its compatibility" and build up its image as "the party of the whole nation, representing the most advanced production force" (Hải 2014: 144). At the same time, it could still control these liberal forces, even while noting that the alternative Stalinist economic policy of central planning had led the country to extreme poverty and the brink of political crisis in the 1980s.

The fight against corruption, which is "only committed by party members," is an on-going effort by the CPV to achieve a two-fold goal. The first objective is to clean itself, as the party admits that corruption threatens its survival and the regime. The second is to ease the public outrage when the CPV secretary-general bitterly acknowledged that "corruption is everywhere" and is like "itchy scabies." Although the anti-corruption campaign has achieved little and has more often been criticised as CPV rhetoric (Hải 2012, 2016c), the party has at least successfully calmed down the public anger by showing its determination to combat corruption.

The CPV's political flexibility in "everyday politics" is demonstrated in the ways it has responded to public outrage. In 2012, Đoàn Văn Vươn, a shrimp farmer in the Tiên Lãng district of Hải Phòng, a northern seaport city 120 kilometres south of Hanoi, and his brother used homemade landmines and an improvised shotgun to engage security forces who came to evict him and re-possess his farmland (Quân 2012; *VnExpress* 2012; Đô and Thế 2012; *BBC* 2013). The eviction was reportedly linked to corruption and land mismanagement by local authorities (Ponnudurai 2012; D. Brown 2012; M. Brown 2012; Đô and Thế 2012b; GoVO 2012; TU-HP 2012). Public reaction to the case placed severe pressure on the CPV, leading the prime minister to declare that the eviction was "illegal."

A more recent case was a wild-cat protest by residents in Hanoi against a 6,700-tree-cutting campaign launched by the local government. The protest involved thousands of people and eventually caused the authorities to stop the campaign and discipline related officials. The chairperson of Hanoi municipal authority had to make an apology afterward. Although the case took place at the local level, it again showed how authorities have been flexibly responsive to public concerns and

have effectively managed civic outrage, which has been the source of political crises in many parts of the world.

## Repression of the Opposition

A top Vietnamese leader recently instructed the regime's security apparatus not to tolerate political opposition forces and to be prepared to suppress any nascent opposition threat. Zachary Abuza (2015) pointed out five new tactics that the regime employed to suppress opposition and anti-government forces. These tactics are: targeting lawyers who represent political prisoners; using criminal charges to deflect criticism that those sentenced are political prisoners; tolerating physical attacks by non-uniform police and thugs against dissidents; recruiting an army of Internet polemicists to monitor and detect online anti-government activists, bloggers and Facebook users; and adopting coercive powers on websites that are trying to make the critical jump from individual blogs to multi-authored and edited news portals, a critical transition for the development of an independent media. More recently, the regime has used a tactic that can be termed as "political deportation"; that is, to "expel" and let its citizens—dissidents live in exile overseas. A number of well-known political dissidents, such as Trần Khải Thanh Thủy, Cù Huy Hà Vũ, Điều Cày Nguyễn Văn Hải, and most recently Tạ Phong Tần, have been deported abroad for exile after being released from detention. This is not a new tactic that authoritarian rulers have used to isolate dissidents from the general populace. The case of well-known Soviet writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is a point of reference (Kaufman 2008). By using this tactic, the regime in Vietnam has smartly nullified the voice of these dissidents at home and prevented it from spreading in society.

## Expansion of International Relations

Levitsky and Way (2010) theorised the post-Cold-War international dimension of democratisation, in which they focused on the so-called "Western leverage and linkages to the West." Linkages to the West are identified by ties in the following six dimensions: (1) economic linkage, of flows of trade, investment, and credit; (2) intergovernmental linkage, including bilateral diplomatic and military ties as well as participation in Western-led alliances, treaties, and international organisations; (3) technocratic linkage, or the share of a country's elite that is educated in the West and/or has professional ties to Western universities or Western-led multilateral institutions; (4) social linkage, or flows of people across bor-

ders, including tourism, immigration and refugee flows, and diaspora networks; (5) information linkage, or flows of information across borders via telecommunications, Internet connections, and Western media penetration; and (6) civil society linkage, or local ties to Western-based NGOs, international religious and party organisations, and other transnational networks (Levitsky and Way 2010: 38–44). While the leverage may not be a direct regime threat, Levitsky and Way suggested that linkages are more effective in bringing down authoritarian regimes. However, the resilience of the CPV's authoritarian regime informs those interested in the linkage theory that the theory does not yet apply in Vietnam.

The CPV's aim to amplify the regime's linkage to the West is essentially intended to boost the economy and protect it from exogenous pressures on political democratisation. Since *Đổi Mới*, the regime has successfully expanded its international relations, transforming from being a member of the socialist camp to a member of the international community (Thayer 2015). Its linkages to the West have been deepened by joining the World Trade Organisation (1997), a Western-rule based trade organisation, and entering trade agreements with the European Union (2015) and the United States (2000) and, more recently, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (2016). The regime's diplomatic relationships with Western nations have been intensified and characterised by different tiers, from normal to comprehensive and strategic partnerships. The nation's linkages to the West is also illustrated by the presence of hundreds of international non-governmental organisations, most of which are based in Western countries and operating therein (PACCOM 2007). Altogether, if the six dimensions of linkage to the West suggested by Levitsky and Way holds true, Vietnam would have been transformed to democracy. Nevertheless, despite its deep and extensive linkage to the West, there is little sign that such a transformation will occur any time soon.

Vietnam's increasingly improved bilateral relationship with the United States, for example, is enabling the CPV to consolidate its legitimacy rather than posing a threat to the regime. In a state-to-state document, the United States has committed to respecting Vietnam's current political system (US–VN 2015), thereby implicitly recognising the CPV's legitimacy in ruling the country. This commitment was echoed in the US President Barack Obama's speech in Hanoi during his visit to the country in May 2016 (Obama 2016) despite there being serious concerns about the regime's human rights violations records. By contrast, the United States has not done this with China, its most important trading partner, or with any other communist party-ruled regimes. There are assumptions related to Vietnam's geo-political position that ferment the

closeness between the two former enemies. However, Vietnam also has established strategic partnerships with other Western nations, such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany. Whatever hypotheses there may be about the regime's international relations, its deepened linkages to the West thus far have proved to be the leverage to buttress its ability to withstand exogenous challenges to the regime's resilience.

## Conclusion

At the start of this article, I argued that the CPV's authoritarian regime has been resilient since *Đổi Mới* because it has been able to restore and maintain public trust, constrain the opposition at home, and reduce external pressures. I have illustrated this argument by analysing four elective sources: economic performance, political flexibility, repression of the opposition, and expansion of international relations.

High economic performance is deemed as the principal source of the CPV's legitimacy in the post-*Đổi Mới* era, given that traditional legitimisation grounds are fading. The CPV has acknowledged that, thanks to economic liberalisation, public trust in the regime has been restored. In the political domain, the CPV has experimented and adopted changes to adapt itself to market conditions. More importantly, as the ruling party, the CPV's changes have exerted an impact on the regime's management of crises. Politically speaking, the CPV's authoritarian regime embraces several features that could arguably explain its resilience to crises. It bears characteristics of David Shambaugh's smart authoritarianism (2008), where the ruling party is responsive to public demands and creates mechanisms that aim to absorb and manage civic outrage. The adoption of grassroots democracy is an example of how the CPV uses a state-controlled institution to manage political crisis. It also holds characteristics of Levitsky and Way's competitive authoritarianism (2002, 2013) where competitive spaces are somehow permitted and democracy is implemented even within the ruling party. Developments in elite politics before and during the CPV's 12<sup>th</sup> congress, and the self-nomination movements in the national elections in 2016, offer vital illustrations for this characteristic (Hải 2016b). Finally, the CPV's regime cannot yet be described as fully authoritarian, as perceived by Levitsky and Way (2010) and Snyder (2006), where political opposition is not entirely tolerated. The present article has also shown that the regime's linkage to the West is not posing a threat to its durability, but instead helps intensify the regime's legitimacy.



Đổi Mới has proved the CPV's ability to be resilient to shocks and periods of crisis as they unfold. However, the regime's resilience is now being contested by new challenges associated with the so-called 'the system's fault'. These include high levels of public expenditure that has caused massive pressure on the state budget, a soaring sovereign debt, rampant corruption in the public sector, and destruction of the natural environment as a result of development. In addition, recent developments in elite politics, which are manipulated by vested interests and emerging crony capitalism in a more mature market economy, and the emergence of an increasingly assertive civil society with the support of the Internet, have presented tough challenges to the CPV's rule. With regard to the effect of international relations, the CPV's legitimacy is now threatened by its linkage to China rather than its close relationship with the West. China's sovereignty claims over the South China Sea and its aggressive actions against Vietnamese fishermen have led the CPV to be cautious with the public if the regime wishes to establish closer ties with its ideological ally. In short, the resilience of the CPV's authoritarian regime in the coming years will be contested by how smartly it deals with these challenges related to public trust in the regime.

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