

## **The Semi-Civil Society in Vietnam: a Possible Pathway for Democratization?**

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### *Goal of the Study*

This study will analyze the “semi-civil society” to ascertain whether the semi-civil society has growing potential to emerge as a political force that could push through a democratization of Vietnam. Our starting point is the observation that in Central and Eastern Europe, organizations, such as universities, research centers, critical journals and magazines, etc., that were officially state-run and thus not part of the traditional civil society, played a major role in bringing about the democratization of society. Under reforming regimes, the semi-civil society might have been more important than the “pure” civil society in bringing down the regimes. We will analyze two areas of the semi-civil society in Vietnam, which since the 1980s have gone down the path of rather radical economic and cultural reform, combined with moderate political liberalization. In particular, we will investigate universities and trade unions, to see whether they are becoming more autonomous from the state and becoming a greater force for the democratization of society.

### *Updated Status of the Project*

Since we only received about half the money that we applied for, we could not hire all the people that we planned, so now mainly only Steven Saxonberg and Jofen Kihlström are working on the project. Kihlström has done field work in both northern and southern Vietnam in interviewing activists within the official youth organizations. Because of a lack of funds, we did not do fieldwork ourselves on the labor unions, but we hired a Vietnamese sociologist to do interviews for us. Now all the interviews in both areas are finished and we are in the process of getting the interviews transcribed. I was also able to use some Czech funding to hire a research assistant (a Czech political scientist, who is fluent in Vietnamese) who wrote some reports for us on how the Vietnamese mass media, the Vietnamese academic discourse and the official on-line sources from the unions and youth organizations. The Vietnamese assistant also wrote reports for us on these topics, but concentrated on sources that are not on-line. We also paid the Vietnamese National University to write two reports for us on two cases in which official organizations actually succeeded in getting the government to change its policies. Thus, we now have enough empirical material to begin writing our book.

The theoretical part our project made it into my book published this year with Cambridge University Press entitled *Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism: Regime Survival in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam*.

We now have two articles that are ready for submitting to top international journals. One of the articles we send to *Comparative Political Studies*, which is the top journal in comparative politics. Both of the reviewers were very positive to our concept of the semi-civil society and were generally very positive to our article – especially the part on Vietnam. However, the editor still rejected the article, because the first reviewer – who was obviously from China, thought we should write a little bit more about China (even though we emphasized that we would concentrate on Vietnam, since much less has been published on Vietnam) and he/she wanted us to cite a book that was only published in Chinese. The second reviewer was obviously from Singapore and was also very positive toward the article, but basically seemed to think the article should be on Singapore, even though he/she added at the same time that we should not write at all about non-communist countries except for in the conclusion. Even though we were of course disappointed that the article was rejected and we felt these types of comments are not really fair, the fact that they greatly supported our theoretical argument encourages us to revise the article now and send it to another journal.

We also have an article ready for the journal *Democratization* that deals with two case studies, but the editor wants us to make some changes, so we plan to resubmit it next week.

#### *Preliminary Results*

As we had assumed when starting the project, it is clear that in many ways the official organizations in Vietnam have become much more autonomous than previously. We were surprised to find that they even have been able to change the policies of government and that governmental proposals nowadays sometimes get voted down in parliament. As we also thought, our interviews with the youth organization activists show that many no longer believe in the ideology. We are in the process of getting the interviews with union leaders transcribed, so we cannot say anything about them yet. However, an interesting finding is that far from being the type of “totalitarian” mass organizations that have been described under Stalinist types of dictatorships, which all citizens must join, so that the state can control them, almost the opposite seems to have happened: the unions are facing great problems in recruiting members. To some extent the state is even pressuring them to become more autonomous so that they can represent the workers better and get more members. A major problem which the union leaders face at the enterprise level, though, is the fact that the enterprises pay their salary, which makes them dependent on the enterprise management. This in turn, makes it more difficult to make demands on the management. Thus, almost all of the strikes that take place are wildcat strikes without union support. At the same time, these types of strikes put pressure on the unions, as it is embarrassing for the unions that the members take action without them.