

DEMOCRACY BECKONS IN Vietnam

Pluralism among the political elite and the ability of society to shape public policy hint at Vietnam's unique brand of freedom

ALLOW ME TO ask this provocative question: Can Vietnam be considered a democracy? People who hold strong anti-communist feelings for Vietnam would surely disagree with me.

The alleged human rights abuses of political dissidents and the lack of free elections in Vietnam is case in point.

However, there is more to Vietnam's political system than meets the eye.

Democracy has many definitions and the most popular one is the Schumpeterian definition which uses free and fair elections as a yardstick. Advocates of democracy in Vietnam think that once the regime allows alternate political voices and organisations to operate and allow free and fair elections, everything else — growth, development, prosperity — will fall into place.

Nobody can say there is Schumpeterian democracy in Vietnam and it does not seem the country is getting anywhere near there soon. But there are other yardsticks for democracy. One is whether people who are not at the core of the decision-making group can have access to the group and influence it so that consensus becomes the main mode of operation in policy-making.

With the 10th Vietnamese Communist Party National Congress likely to be held in April, the spotlight will once again fall on the Party's supposedly Marxist ideology and Leninist organisation.

If pluralism among political elites and a certain ability of society to influence the government to change policies are what advocates of freedom in Vietnam want, then

two recent developments should lead us to think of Vietnam as a democracy. In both developments, public pressure from the media and more importantly from National Assembly deputies have forced government departments to check and change, almost immediately. The first is in education.

EDUCATION POLICY UNDER FIRE

To ease the high cost of education in the state budget, the government late last year tabled a proposal to increase school fees across the board at a seating of the National Assembly. The quantum of the fee hike shocked many — from as much as 200% for universities to around 50% for primary schools.

For those living in the city, the new school fees would still be affordable. They also understood that the government was trying to eradicate corruption at the teacher-student level. As teachers are poorly paid in Vietnam, they would often withhold important parts of the lessons in the classroom and only teach them in home-based or after-school tuition classes in return for handsome fees. It was not uncommon for families to spend several times more on tuition fees than on school fees.

But with over 70% of Vietnam's population living in rural areas where the income level is significantly lower than that in urban areas, the fee hike would be hard to bear. As a result, the proposal was put to debate but defeated at the final vote with the under-sieged Minister for Education Nguyen Minh Hien promising that his ministry would re-examine the issue and submit a more reasonable proposal at another time.



Dancers performing in front of Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum in Hanoi on Sept 2, 2005, to mark the 60th anniversary of the country's independence from France.

The other policy which the government made a policy U-turn had to do with traffic management.

In the last ten years, the motorcycle and car population of Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi have increased by leaps and bounds.

In an effort to ease congestion, the city authorities of Hanoi in 2003 decided to stop the registration of motorcycles within the city. That policy won the support of the central government and it asked Ho Chi Minh City to do the same.

The residents of these two cities, however, did not sit idly by. As the two cities could not prevent motorcycles registered in other provinces from circulating in the city, the practice of registering motorcycles in other provinces became prevalent, thus negating the policy.

Over the last two years, the media maintained a persistent campaign to highlight the inadequacy of traffic



management and the lack of success of the non-registration policy.

Under pressure, the central government, at the advice of the Ministry of Law, last year decreed that the ban should be lifted as it was unconstitutional, maintaining that every citizen should be allowed to own property without undue restrictions.

While the Ho Chi Minh City Authority abandoned the ban immediately, the Hanoi City authority hesitated and wanted the ban to stay.

Finally, it took a meeting between city and central government officials and a directive from the Prime Minister to get Hanoi to toe the line. Public opinion, however, was not all for lifting the ban, especially from the city planners.

The two examples of recent public policy-making practices show a government that is responsive to societal voices calling for change and for fine-tuning policy proposals.

This is putting aside the issue of whether what these voices want do more harm than good to the problems the people want addressed in the first place.

FREE ELECTION OF THE ELITE?

Public policy-making is not simply a cost-benefit analysis, nor is it simply a matter of giving the people what they want. What is significant in the two examples above is that there is now frequently seen in Vietnam a process of interaction between the government and societal voices — whether represented by the National Assembly, mass media or NGOs. If the definition of democracy is simply giving the people what they want, then Vietnam amply qualifies.

What about the argument that there are no free and fair elections in Vietnam? The party decides who can run in elections to offices in local authorities and in the National Assembly. Again, things are by no means

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static in this area. Independent candidates have been allowed to stand for elections since 1989, although some quarters remain sceptical. But consider this: if real power lies within the hands of the Communist Party, then it is elite politics within the Party that we should pay more attention to.

In the last two decades, appointments to the highest party offices have moved increasingly towards a pluralistic model. As the 10th Vietnamese Communist Party National Congress draws near, the process of leadership selection has once again shown that consensus is a more important than the dictates of a few persons. The congress is less than a month away and yet the Central Committee still does not have the final lists of its nominees for the next tenure of the Central Committee (2006–2010) and the candidates for election to the pinnacle of political power, the Political Bureau.

Leaks from within the party have indicated that there are likely to be more than seven retirements from the present bureau. But sources say those who have been voted out will not take it lying down and will battle for their political survival.

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Whether following all the wishes of the people is a good thing, of course, is another matter altogether. ■

David Koh is coordinator of the Regional Strategic and Political Studies Program at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. His book "Wards of Hanoi" which examines Vietnamese state-society relations will be published by the institute in March. The views in this article are his own and do not represent those of the institute.