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### **Will Development Lead to Democratisation in Vietnam and China?**

*By Le Hong Hiep\**

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Although a country's level of socio-economic development may offer an important indicator to how likely it will democratise or remain undemocratic, a more plausible answer can be found in the country's specific political, historical, socio-economic and cultural conditions.
- After three decades or so of economic reforms, the key "social requisites" for democracy in both China and Vietnam have strengthened, including growing levels of wealth, industrialization, education, and urbanization. As such, China and Vietnam now stand out as the most likely candidates for the next "wave of democratisation" in the region.
- However, both countries continue to sustain communist rule, through the respective government's ability to adapt to the changing environment by introducing limited and well-tailored political reforms aimed at promoting good governance and the efficiency of the state apparatus. As such, there have been no credible signs that either China or Vietnam will democratise any time soon.

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- This ability on the part of the two regimes to resist democratic pressures will be a key factor in determining the democratisation prospects in both countries. In addition, although maintaining a positive socio-economic performance is needed for their survival at least in the short run, it unavoidably also sows the seeds of their self-destruction in the long run.

## INTRODUCTION: DEMOCRATISATION IN ASIA

Many countries around the world have undergone a transition to democracy over the last few decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, the so-called “third wave of democratisation”<sup>1</sup> swept through Asia to bring about democratic transitions in nine countries: Bangladesh (1990), Indonesia (1998), Mongolia (1990), Nepal (1990), Pakistan (1988), the Philippines (1986), South Korea (1987), Taiwan (1987), and Thailand (1992). In tandem with fast-changing world developments, both the scholarly community and policy practitioners have been revisiting the processes of democracy-building and discussing how democracies develop.

There are many theories and models of democratisation but explanations usually begin with classic modernisation theory which proposes that democracy is more likely to emerge in a sustainable fashion as countries develop and accumulate wealth. In particular, ‘modernisation’ is typically defined as the process through which a given society gains greater levels of wealth, industrialisation, education, and urbanisation (Lipset, 1959). Such a process, among other things, transforms the social structure, breeding and nurturing modern groups such as the middle classes, the industrial bourgeoisie and workers who tend to favour democracy, while marginalising those who tend to reject it, such as traditional landowners.<sup>2</sup> In Seymour Lipset’s (1959, p. 75) words, “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater chances that it will sustain democracy.”

Yet when it comes to explaining such transitions in Asia, the relationship between modernisation and democracy—as proposed in Lipset’s original research agenda—seems to become weaker in comparison with other settings in the world. Seven out of the nine countries that have undergone democratic transitions in Asia were low or middle-income economies, and only two of them were upper-middle or high-income ones, namely South Korea and Taiwan.<sup>3</sup> The fact that some of these countries transitioned into democracy when they were still low or middle-income economies suggests that there are factors other than socio-economic development that can nudge a country into the democratisation process.

A number of Southeast Asian countries also seem to challenge the belief that industrialisation and economic development will lead to liberal forms or a Western conception of a democratic regime. Brunei, Singapore and Malaysia, for example, remain authoritarian or semi-democratic states despite their high levels of economic development and per capita income. These divergent cases have prompted scholars as well as policy makers to seek alternative explanations, in which the most notable

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel P. Huntington (1984, 1991) describes global democratisation as coming in three waves, or three major surges in history, the first beginning in the early 19th century and the third being a current event.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Berger, 1986; Dahl, 1971; Huntington, 1984; Lipset, 1959; Papaioannou & Siourounis, 2008; Schumpeter, 1950; Skocpol, 1979; Sørensen, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> As summarised by Lee (2002, p. 823).

one is the “Asian values” thesis.<sup>4</sup> Prominent proponents of the thesis—such as former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his Singaporean counterpart Lee Kuan Yew—contend that the “Asian values” make the Western model of liberal democracy undesirable, if not detrimental, to the stability and prosperity of East Asian societies.

The “Asian values” thesis, however, tends to be used as an argument to defend semi-democratic rule in certain countries. At the broader regional level, it becomes an inadequate intellectual endeavour to explain the region’s dynamics of political democratisation. Certain East Asian societies such as South Korea and Taiwan did transition successfully into liberal democracy despite their longstanding embedded traditions of “Asian values”. These two are textbook cases supporting modernisation theory, as both started their democratisation process after reaching upper-middle or high levels of per capita income following decades of robust economic development.

The global spread of free markets and democratization’s ‘third wave’ have ensured that modernisation theory—albeit now appearing in looser and hybrid versions of Lipset’s original research agenda—continues to inform many a government policy towards the developing world. Observations from Asia and elsewhere in the world, however, lend support to the argument that a single theoretical formulation cannot account for the diverse circumstances under which regional regimes operate, as well as their embrace or rejection of liberal democracy. While the level of a country’s socio-economic development may offer an important indicator as to how and/or whether it will democratise or remain undemocratic, the most plausible answer can more likely be found in each country’s specific political, historical, socio-economic and cultural conditions.

## THE CASE OF CHINA AND VIETNAM

As far as China and Vietnam are concerned, the economic reforms that the two countries have pursued over the last 30 years or so have significantly improved their citizens’ living standards in general and per capita income in particular. Table 1 provides some key democratisation-related development indicators as identified by modernisation theorists, especially Lipset (1959) that are likely to have benefitted from the reforms.

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<sup>4</sup> Although there is no consensus on the definition of the term, its core tenets include: the central role of family as the focal point of social organization; the precedence of community interests over individual ones; the preference for consensus rather than confrontation through representative systems in making political decisions; the emphasis on social cohesion and harmony achieved through moral principles and strong government, which in turn produces economic growth and development (Robison, 1996, pp. 310-311).

**Table 1. Some key development indicators for China and Vietnam**

Year	China	Vietnam
<b>GDP per capita (PPP in current US dollars)</b>		
1991	890	792
2001	2,612	1,709
2011	8,322	3,574
<b>Total share of industry and services in GDP (%)</b>		
1991	75.5	59.5
2001	85.6	78.5
2011	90	79.9
<b>Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above)</b>		
1990	77.8	87.6 (1989)
2000	90.9	90.2
2010	95.1	93.4 (2011)
<b>School enrolment, tertiary (% gross)</b>		
1991	3.0	1.9
2001	9.8	9.4
2011	24.3	24.4
<b>Urban population (% of total)</b>		
1991	27.3	20.6
2001	37.2	25
2011	50.5	31

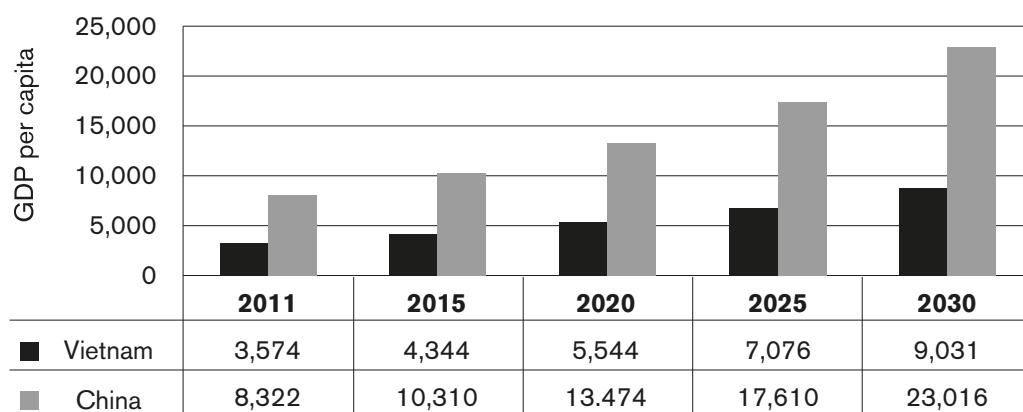
Source: World Bank's World Development Indicators database <<http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>>, accessed 26 Feb 2014.

As seen from the table, these key “social requisites” for democracy in both China and Vietnam have strengthened over the last 30 years. These include the growing levels of wealth (indicator 1), industrialisation (indicator 2), education (indicators 3 and 4), and urbanisation (indicator 5). In other words, in undertaking their economic reforms, China and Vietnam are moving closer to the type of democratic transition depicted by classical modernisation theory. Together with these socio-economic developments, the political environments in the two countries have also become significantly more relaxed. Individuals now enjoy a much greater level of civil liberty and the two

ruling communist parties are also experimenting with certain political reforms, perhaps in reaction to a rising independent civil society which illustrates that the political regimes are increasingly being challenged from within. As such, Vietnam and China now stand out as the most likely candidates for the next “wave of democratisation” in the region, although how it will happen and how long the process will take are issues that are more likely speculative, prescriptive even, rather than definitive at this juncture.

Among the four abovementioned indicators, the level of wealth expressed in terms of GDP per capita is often used by researchers as a major predictor of democratisation. As both Vietnam and China have not democratised yet, looking into the growth of GDP per capita and its possible future movements in both countries can provide some useful clues on the possibility of this future scenario. Figure 1 shows the two countries’ GDP per capita in 2011 and its projections up to 2030.

**Figure 1. GDP per capita (PPP, in 2011 US dollars) of Vietnam and China, 2011-2030**



*Source: The 2011 figures are retrieved from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators database <<http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>>, accessed 26 Feb 2014. The projected figures are the author’s own estimation based on the assumption that, ceteris paribus, the average annual GDP growth rates of China and Vietnam during the 2011-2030 period are 5.5 and 5 per cent, respectively.*

It should be noted that the projected figures are based on a rather conservative estimation that in the period 2011-2030, Vietnam’s and China’s GDP will grow at annual average rates of 5 per cent and 5.5 per cent, respectively. The actual growth rates may be higher if the structural reforms introduced in the two economies lead to expected or better performance targets and/or outcomes.

The economic development of both Vietnam and China have thrust the two countries past what is commonly known as the 'democratic transition zone'<sup>5</sup>—a range of GDP per capita income between \$1,001 to \$6,000 (in 1985 dollars) or \$1,802 to \$10,805 (in 2011 dollars).<sup>6</sup> Political scientists have observed that autocratic regimes face increasing odds of regime change as income rises, and chances of maintaining autocracy decrease further once a country's per capita income exceeds \$6000 (PPP, 1985 dollars).<sup>7</sup> China is expected to exit this zone by 2016 and Vietnam in the early 2030s. This prospect has prompted a number of scholars to predict that the present form of government in the two countries, especially China, will not be able to survive.

For example, in a controversial book published in 2001, Gordon Chang predicted that the People's Republic of China would collapse within a matter of five to ten years, bringing down with it communist rule (Chang, 2001). Although Chang's arguments are mainly based on economic grounds, such as the inefficiency of state-owned enterprises and the problems embedded in the country's fiscal system, they can also be used to imply that modernisation can contribute to the complex forces driving change within the regimes and societies of the two countries. Meanwhile, in his 2007 article, Rowen predicts that if China's economy and the educational attainments of its population keep growing, China will be "correctly classed as belonging to the free nations of the earth" by 2025 (Rowen, 2007, p. 38). Drawing more directly on modernisation theory, Liu and Chen (2012) also argue that reasons rooted in the economic development trajectory, cultural change, political leadership trends, and the global environment will cause China to embark on the democratisation process around 2020.

These predictions, however, are over-optimistic at least under current developments. So far, there have been no credible signs that either China or Vietnam is going to democratise any time soon. China, in particular, is presenting a serious test to the modernisation hypothesis as it will have exited the purported 'democratic transition zone' with no prospect of a regime change within the next five years. The divergence of the case of China from the general trend proposed by modernisation theory may not necessarily invalidate the theory. In the long run, after exiting the zone, there's also little ground to believe that China will revert to a stricter form of authoritarian rule. Instead, it is likely that the communist regime will have to embrace further political reforms, both to facilitate economic development and to respond to mounting democratic pressures generated by the economic reforms themselves. All these developments, in turn, may yet pave the way for the ultimate advent of democratisation. The same can also be true for Vietnam.

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<sup>5</sup> Proposed by UNDP (2002) and Przeworski & Limongi (1997).

<sup>6</sup> The conversion into 2011 dollars in this paper is done by Areppim's Mathematics & Financial Calculators, available at <[http://stats.areppim.com/calc/calc\\_usdlrxdeflator.php](http://stats.areppim.com/calc/calc_usdlrxdeflator.php)>.

<sup>7</sup> Source: The Diplomat, 1 October 2012; Accessed 11 April 2014; Available: <http://thediplomat.com/2012/10/is-chinas-communist-party-doomed/comment-page-5/>

## AUTHORITARIAN PERSISTENCE IN VIETNAM AND CHINA

So why has communist rule persisted in China, defying predictions that the country's encounter with market forces or (Western) liberal institutions would bring about inevitable democratic change? This is a question that has intrigued scholars as well as China observers.<sup>8</sup> While China's robust economic growth since the late 1970s is obviously a key factor sustaining communist rule, the country's "authoritarian resilience" can also be attributed to the CCP's ability to adapt by introducing limited and well-tailored political reforms aimed at promoting good governance and raising the efficiency of the state apparatus, such as the institutionalisation of succession politics; the emphasis on meritocratic rather than factional considerations in the promotion of political leaders; the differentiation and functional specialisation of institutions within the regime; and the establishment of institutions for political participation (Nathan, 2003). In particular, the introduction of direct village committee elections since the late 1980s can be seen as a strategy to boost "grass-root democracy", thereby easing pressures for democratisation at higher levels.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, explanations for the persistence of the communist one-party state in Vietnam have focused on the VCP's claims to legitimacy based on its historical role in liberating and unifying the country as well as the successful economic reforms under *Doi Moi* which have significantly improved the living standards of large segments of the population.<sup>10</sup> These factors have provided the VCP with grounds to justify its monopoly of power. Gainsborough (2012) also attributed the VCP's resistance to liberal political reforms to the country's political culture being based on elitism and paternalism. Such a political culture tends to encourage authoritarianism and reject reforms that may pave the way for the political participation of the masses. As elitism and paternalism are deeply rooted in Confucianism, this cultural prism can also be applied to account for the CCP's unwillingness to undertake liberal political reforms.

Furthermore, when examining China's "socialism with Chinese characteristics" or Vietnam's "socialist-oriented market economy", one finds that rent-seeking has become a dominant behaviour in both regimes through which the elites take advantage of economic reforms to enrich themselves as well as their families and cronies.<sup>11</sup> Extraction of rents would be impossible without exclusive access to power and, therefore, they have a vested interest in safeguarding their monopoly on power. This rent-seeking impulse not only accounts for the widespread corruption in both regimes, but also underscores their resistance to liberal reforms that may deprive them of political and economic privileges.

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Miller, 2008; Nathan, 2003; Shambaugh, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> For analyses on the implications of village elections for China's domestic politics, see Epstein (1997), Shi (1999), O'Brien & Li (2000), and Pastor & Tan (2000).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Gainsborough, 2012; London, 2009; Thayer, 2009a, 2009b, 2011; Vu, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> For accounts of rent-seeking in China, see, for example, Lu (1999), Che (2002), Chen, Li, & Su (2005), and Ngo (2008). For a recent analysis of the behavior and its implications in Vietnam, see Vuving (2013).



The two regimes' ability to effectively repress opposition movements also plays an important role in the durability of their rule. In China, the repression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square pro-democracy demonstrations highlights the importance of the army and security forces in protecting the CCP. In 2012, China's budget for internal "stability maintenance", code words for regime security, even exceeded its budget for national defence (Li, 2013, p. 44).<sup>12</sup> In Vietnam, there is no disclosure on the budget for internal security, but there are indications that the VCP is highly reliant on the police and the army for regime protection. A significant number of seats in the VCP Central Committee is always reserved for representatives from the Ministry of National Defence and the Ministry of Public Security. For example, as of late 2013, 26 out of 175 full members, or 14.8 per cent, of the VCP Central Committee elected at the Party's 11<sup>th</sup> Congress in 2011 came from or were associated with these two ministries.<sup>13</sup> In revising the Constitution in 2013, the VCP even made a proposed amendment that the Vietnam People's Army would place absolute loyalty to the Party before its loyalty to the nation and the people. Although the proposal was finally rejected, it showed the Party's increasing reliance on the army to protect its rule.

## CONCLUSION: AN UNEASY BALACING ACT

Due to the reasons discussed above, there hardly exists any significant organised opposition movement in both China and Vietnam. Political dissidents and pro-democracy activists are routinely isolated, harassed, prosecuted, or pushed into exile.<sup>14</sup> Although such practices subject the two countries to international criticism, they certainly help maintain the two regimes' grip on power. Therefore, even if socio-economic developments pave the way in generating democratic pressures, the two regimes may well survive as long as they can maintain an effective strategy to respond to these pressures. Such a strategy includes both hard and soft aspects. Hard aspects include such measures as isolating or persecuting outstanding dissidents, preventing organised opposition movements from being established or being able to operate effectively inside the country, or even using security forces to crack down on mass pro-democracy demonstrations when necessary as showcased by the Tiananmen Square incident. Meanwhile, soft aspects primarily include the strict censorship of the Internet and the mass media, the co-optation of potential political opponents,<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Specifically, in 2012, the regime spent 679 billion yuan on defence and 702 billion on "stability maintenance".

<sup>13</sup> To put it in perspective, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has only three seats, the Ministry of Planning and Investment and Ministry of Finance one seat each.

<sup>14</sup> Reports on the repression of political dissidents, democracy and human rights activists in China and Vietnam can be retrieved from Human Rights Watch's website at < <http://www.hrw.org/asia/china>> and < <http://www.hrw.org/asia/vietnam>>, respectively.

<sup>15</sup> In China, the most relevant example for this is the CPC's decision in the early 2000s to allow private business people to join the Party.

and the implementation of restricted—if not cosmetic—political reforms to dissipate democratic pressures.

In addition, whether the two regimes can continue to maintain a positive socio-economic performance in the future will play no less a significant role in sustaining their rule, at least in the short run. Robust economic growth, while unlikely to eliminate democratic pressures altogether, may forestall the eruption of social discontent into revolutions that may bring down the two regimes. In the long run, maintaining healthy socio-economic development will not be a magic bullet that can help the two regimes stay in power forever. In pursuing a performance-based legitimization strategy, the two communist parties are indeed facing a dilemma. On the one hand, positive economic development is necessary to boost the regimes' legitimacy and stability. If the economy is stagnant or in crisis, they will face higher risks of vertical opposition in the form of street demonstrations and riots as well as horizontal challenges in the form of cleavages within the ruling elites (Tanneberg, Stefes, & Merkel, 2013). On the other hand, continued and robust economic development will create more conditions that are conducive to democratisation, such as a wealthier society with a larger middle class, a better educated population with greater political awareness, and a more dynamic and autonomous civil society.<sup>16</sup> In other words, although continued socio-economic development is desired for the two regimes' survival, it unavoidably sows the seeds of their self-destruction.

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<sup>16</sup> Some useful discussions on the role of the civil society in the domestic politics of China and Vietnam can be found in Tang & Zhan (2008) and Thayer (2009b).

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