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Faculty of Humanities, Social Science, and Education – Centre for Peace Studies

Vietnam – A general study of the triangulation toward change: social movements, economic development, and political changeover

An overview on the Vietnamese political development between internal movements and external constraints

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Acronyms

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CBOs	Community-Based Organizations
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
VUAL	Vietnam Union of Art and Literature
VUFO	Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations
VGCL	Vietnam General Confederation of Labour
VNA	Vietnamese National Assembly
VNASC	Vietnam National Assembly Standing Committee
VNGOs	Vietnamese non-Governmental Organizations
VUSTA	Vietnam Union of Scientific and Technological Associations

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Vietnam - a general study of the triangulation toward change: social movements, economic development, and political changeover

The 1986 Economic Reform (Doi Moi) can be considered a watershed in Vietnamese history. The resulting development has also had a notable impact on society, where a more solid economic base has enabled the development of the middle class, a necessary condition for the growth of civil society. While the political system still defends a collectivist model, economic liberalism is bringing the Vietnamese people closer to a growing form of individualism.

This thesis aims to study the political change taking place in Vietnam. The analysis was based on a thorough systematic review, including the main articles and data on the topic. The analytic perspective adopted was that of polyarchy, which acted as a lens subsequently used to answer two questions. First: What are the points of contact between economic development, political liberalization, and civil society? And second: What political factors lead to the consideration of Vietnam as a polyarchy?

Finally, through a consideration of the internal and external contexts in which the country is situated, the thesis proposes a partial re-evaluation of the Vietnamese one-party model, making proposals for future trends in civil society and government behaviour.

Keywords: Vietnam, Human Rights, Economic Development, Doi Moi, Civil Society, Electoral System, Political Liberalization

Foreword

This brief foreword is intended to clarify the aims of the thesis and the ideas the author has about the main concepts employed in the dissertation.

The original idea was to study the eventual role Vietnamese civil society might have in the transition from an authoritarian to a more liberal, democratic regime. All these concepts would then have been embedded together in a triangulation where, at every corner, a mutual reinforcement mechanism between the presence of a more autonomous civil society, strong economic development (after the Đổi Mới reform) and marked political reforms could be expected to be found. The study was thus intended to test the supposed increase in independence that Vietnamese civil society has gained in the last decades, thus further complicating its relationship with the government. However, due to various limitations and an initial bias in the analysis, the research was difficult to carry out and needed a refinement in the focus of analysis as well as in the research questions themselves. In fact, initial knowledge on the topic was biased due to a misconception of the term “democracy” and the democratic process itself. Amongst the different theoretical approaches to democratization, modernization theory initially got credit for its smooth inferences. However, this revealed itself not to be the case in general, nor for Vietnam in particular. Specifically, a thorough analysis of the concept of *democracy* has revealed how a Western idea of the term would have affected all the design of the original project, from the formulation of its research questions to the elaboration of the data. The following clarification is intended to avoid in the reader the common misinterpretation of democracy as:

- 1) The best and most representative form of government; the most equal and just system for every citizen; the inevitable and ideal final stage that every regime should aim for; and,
- 2) The political process that is intrinsically associated with a marked economic development.

The first point is inherently related to the second. The assumption that high levels of socioeconomic development favor the transformation of a hegemonic regime into a polyarchy favors a misleading association between socioeconomic level and “political development” (Dahl 1971, Chapter 5). This assumption spread after the economic triumph in the aftermath of the Second World War, when a general trend of research tended to highlight how a minimum level of socioeconomic development was the precondition for every transition

toward a democratic model, and how such a level of development necessarily birthed democracy.

As the scholar Dahl (1971) showed in his seminal book, this linear equation is too simplistic and does not take into account several variables. First of all, as the author explains, modernization theory hardly accounts for a multitude of deviant cases: for example, it disregards both democratically oriented countries under the minimum required threshold considered to bolster democracy, and those undemocratic countries above such per capita income level. Further, it is not possible to assume such a relationship as unidirectional. So, critics of this theory affirm that data gathered so far does not sustain with any degree of certainty the hypothesis that a high level of socioeconomic development is either a necessary or sufficient condition for what is generally meant for democracy, nor the converse hypothesis that competitive politics is either a necessary or sufficient condition for a high level of socioeconomic development (Dahl 1971, p. 71). Further, it is hardly possible to establish a causal relation between democracy and socioeconomic level since it is nearly impossible to define what an “advanced economy” makes possible *by* its performance and what it requires *for* its performance. In fact, there are some variables that were generally considered as merely a genuine *consequence of* a democratic transition, whereas they could be rather seen as a necessary *condition for* it.¹ For instance, a more sustained form of economy requires a more educated labor force, hence an average higher level of education and, in turn, a reduction of illiteracy. So, if an educated population could be seen as a common trend of democratic countries, it would be equally true that an advanced market needs a more specialized labor force in other political regimes as well.

Such a problem was addressed by another prominent scholar, Giovanni Sartori (2008), who underlined how it is true that a democracy with a weak market is a politically poor one, but the opposite is not always the case: there are several examples of “nondemocratic” countries with a strong internal and external market. In fact, as China is seeking to prove on

¹ These aspects are best rationalized in Dahl’s book (1971) and essentially regard the level of development, the degree of equality and inequality for different variables, governmental effectiveness, internal cleavages, and the state’s capacity to exercise foreign control. As it is said before, these variables are merely considered as a consequence of the democratic system by those who adhere to the Modernization Theory. Other scholars, as Dahl for instance, point out how it is difficult to infer a causal relation between the kind of regime and the above variables. Hence, without a clear causal relation, it is not clear what aspect comes first in the causation. Hence, it is commonly thought that an *interaction*, or *synergy* between both aspects is the most likely option.

the Eastern stage, a market economy may even exist and flourish without (or, alternatively, preceding) a democracy. This, for instance, was also the case in Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea pre-democratic transition. Further, in other contexts, the adoption of the democratic system can be counterproductive—as it was in Latin America, where an import substitution and a protectionist policy, along with a “deficit” market model, lifted consumption levels above those of both domestic production and citizens’ earnings.

The conclusion to this premise may thus be understood such that this thesis totally abandons the idea that democracy is the preferred and most efficient political model. What is important for a well-functioning system is not the implementation of the “democratic package” with Western features, but rather only the adoption of the elements that best fit the history of a given country. Leaving aside the democratic discourse, it is hence possible to assess the performance of various states according to some common elements. One of the elements that has been found to positively impact the economy, for instance, is the closeness of the political apparatus to its citizens. The opposite also holds true: when a detachment to the State, culture, or party affiliation occurs, the economy is going to suffer for several reasons. It is in this respect that some scholars explain the current crisis of countries that are traditionally regarded as democratic—by showing the elites are now detached from their surrounding socioeconomic environment. Their identification is no longer with their fellow citizens, but toward other upper-class members around the world: they have risen to a global dimension, bolstering this kind of economy and forgetting the actual needs of the people (Lasch, 1995). On the other hand, non-democratic countries such as Vietnam may present a tighter relationship between citizens and the Party. This is because, historically, there have been mediating figures between the central government and the normal citizen, à la the Chinese bureaucratic model that was present in the North. This, in turn, allowed a widespread diffusion of the state apparatus in the country and a greater responsiveness of the government to the people’s needs and problems with an effective feedback system. In the same Vietnam for instance, the difference in the economic performance between the North and South can be justified by looking at the pre-socialist tradition as well as cold-war era politics, where the northern Dai Viet region adopted a Chinese bureaucratic model, and the southern Khmer region a Cambodian one. The first model was based on the village council, elected by popular male suffrage, which coordinated taxation, public goods provision, conscription, and record-keeping. In the Khmer model, the village council was not present and, as in India, a patron-client relationship dominated (Dell & Al., 2018). The result was a greater closeness between

the peasantry and the local administrative personnel in the North, which facilitated not only the relationship with the central government, but the economy as well.

To conclude, there is not sufficient evidence to sustain the claim that democracy is the “best” model nor that it is conducive to better market performance. Alternative regimes offer a great deal in this sense, with deviant cases that sometimes outperform democratic countries under certain variables. It is hence more convenient to talk about *polyarchy* instead of democracy, thus avoiding the dichotomous polarization between what is democratic and what is not. An honest classification should present a vast array of variables and degrees to which a country could be classified, and the concept of polyarchy, as explained in later chapters, best represents the nuances of various regimes.

1. Introduction

The idea behind this thesis comes from a personal and academic interest in the Southeast Asian Region in general, and the nexus between civil society engagement, political change, and economic development in particular. For the reasons presented in the following paragraphs, Vietnam has been chosen as a case study. I chose to focus my analysis on this country because it has recently emerged as a key player in Southeast Asia and, along with other factors, it would be very current and appropriate to make a contribution in this sense. Strategically located at the heart of the Asia–Pacific region, Vietnam is home to a population of 88 million people and a promising economy that has registered an average annual growth rate of around 7% over the past decade. Since adopting the “Doi Moi” (renovation) policy in the late 1980s, Vietnam has also been pursuing an active and constructive foreign policy aimed at diversifying and multilateralising its external relations. Vietnam’s quest for deeper international economic integration and a greater political role has therefore brought the international community an opportunity to engage the once-pariah state in building a peaceful, stable, and prosperous regional order (Le Hiep, 2012). This brought Vietnam to make a transition from a rigidly orthodox Marxist-Leninist state and intransigent member of “the socialist camp” in a sharply divided Cold War international system, to deep engagement with globalization in a world no longer clearly divided into friends and enemies.

Vietnam is ranked 84th of 192 countries for political stability, raising the question as to whether it is currently at risk of political instability (The Global Economy, 2020). As such, the leadership in Vietnam has been challenged by social, political, economic, and environmental turmoil in recent years. Its Party-state has underestimated a series of social unrest incidents, such as anti-China protests and other demonstrations related to increasing social tension on land compensation, resettlement, environment pollution, and industrialization (Bui, 2014). These have placed the government in the position where strategic actions must be taken soon in response to the public’s claims for interrelated human rights, including the right to know (in the anti-China protests), the right to information, and the right to health (in environmental unrests) (Tuong, 2014). Internal instability and the ever-growing presence of Vietnam on the international stage have contributed to leading the Party-state to new thinking and values in governance. This change in politics found space in the building process of the socialist law-based state: in this stage, there has been a “gradual spread of human rights discourse into political, social and legal spheres from which it was previously excluded or had a minimal role” (Bui 2014, p. 89).

1.1 Literature Gap

After a brief literature review, several thematic clusters related to Vietnam's political and economic development in the last decades were identified: articles about the Doi Moi economic strategy adopted in 1986, the debates leading up to and following constitutional reviews (mainly in 1992 and 2013), and civil society's engagement for more human rights. However, there is a great gap in the analysis that civil society actors played during these processes. Both economic and political research has only been explained from the state point of view, without taking into account the problems and needs it faced in relation with its society. Considering that political, social, and economic aspects of Vietnam are now also individually well-known in English academic literature, the need to study the linkages between these angles has become more evident.²

The new study framework I propose is a triangulation between economic reforms, political development, and the role of civil society. A preliminary definition of civil society may be "the realm of autonomous and active associations which bridge the gap between individuals and political institutions of representation". Because it would be impossible, and analytically erroneous, to find and study a causal relation between the request of more rights from civil society and governmental action, it is worth analyzing whether and where a positive interaction can be found. Rights on property, for instance, have been granted in Vietnam upon civil society's request (Vu & Kien, 2016), and the State has also recognised the need to endorse the new private market sector (Nørlund, 2006). These examples show how the process towards a more civil libertarian state is not a one-way process, but rather, the result of a synergy between different factors. The lacuna I wish to fill will develop from an analysis of civil society's aims, the needs behind their requests, and their forms of organization. With the addition of civil society to the analysis, there is an erosion of the state's image: it is no longer represented as a socialist organization that grants rights "from the top downwards", but rather is depicted as the framework within which civil society acts

² For the economic aspect, see: Edwards, V., & Phan, A. (2014). *Managers and Management in Vietnam: 25 Years of Economic Renovation (Doi Moi)*. London: Routledge. For the development of the middle class: Marshall, V. N., & Al. (2014). *Reinvention of Distinction: Modernity and the Middle Class in Urban Vietnam*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. Lastly, for the social reforms: Taylor. (n.d.). *Social Inequality in Vietnam & the Challenges to Reform*. ISEAS- Yusof Ishak Institute.

and expresses itself. This new role is also more suitable with the transition from a collectivistic view of human rights—with its predominance over individual ones—to the embedding of national jurisdiction within an international, more universalistic conception of such rights. As this explanation implies, the hypothesis of this research does not consider the middle class, or civil society, as the necessary precondition for a state's development in a liberal direction. Nor can we say that, without this societal category, we would have had the same results.

Due to the extreme environmental complexity that marks modern organizations and the interconnections between their parts, every change at every state level is potentially affected and conditioned by other components. The economic theory of the “open door”, for instance, would not have found implementation without the entrance of Vietnam into the international capitalist market and an internal middle class capable of sustaining local industries and demands (King, 2008). The admission to the international stage, in turn, required a minimum level of rights provisions and an adjustment to international law (Vu, 2016). Given this introduction, I can now present the research question of this thesis.

1.2 Research Questions

The basic idea behind the project is to analyze the economic and social development of Vietnam during the last forty years. This could be done through looking at how Vietnamese society has affected state policy in general—in particular, through the lens of pluralism. As it will be further explained in the next paragraphs, attention will be given to civic associations, with a particular focus on VNGOs.³ Starting from the literature on the topic, the thesis analyses the interaction between government, VNGOs, and economic developments in the country.

The basic assumption at the foundation of this research is that, during the last few decades, a solid middle class arose in Vietnam. This is the result of a series of economic reforms the country embarked on: maneuvers which improved both development and living standards (King, 2008; Gainsborough, 2002). Despite the concepts of middle class and civil society indicating two different spheres of society, it is generally demonstrable that the former presupposes the latter. The definition and relation between these two concepts will be explored in more detail in the next chapters, but it might be preliminarily said that “middle

³ For a complete list of acronyms utilised in this thesis, refer back to the “Acronyms”, page 3.

class” may be defined using economic or social indicators. Economic indicators are usually the most common formulas and regard measures concerning the distance from the median, the range of the distribution, the distance from the poverty line, and purchasing power (Reeves et al., 2018). It must be clarified, however, that since 1990, Vietnam has explicitly allowed the development of civil society, including via the emergence of non-governmental organizations (Hsiao, 2018; Bui, 2013).

Depending on the theoretical lens one adopts, civil society may be deemed a state-policy challenging actor, a promoter of social reforms, or a partial supporter of the authoritarian rulership.⁴ As a result, it may be seen as the main driver toward either democracy or a different polyarchical regime, or as a supporter of the political system in power (Wischermann 2013, 2018). If civil society is conceived as a driver toward democracy, modernization theory is an applicable theoretical approach in this sense. It assumes that modernization is a social movement where society starts a process of transformation from a “traditional” to a “modern” form. This transition brings changes to three interrelated levels: economy, politics, and social structure. Regarding the political level, modern governmental systems in this condition should display a higher level of differentiation and functional specialization, adopting a rational procedure in decision making. As societies modernize, the centralized bureaucratic systems and political powers start founding themselves on law rather than on power. The political system is thus expected to become more open, leading to an increase in democratic consciousness among the people (Cao, 2009). At first glance, Vietnam seems to put the theory of modernization in practice with its recent and significant development. However, the general aim of this thesis is to study where Vietnam’s modernization is going. This thesis does not adopt the classic modernization theory but a polyarchical approach instead. This is due to two main aspects: Modernization Theory has proven itself not only to be biased, but also to be an inferior tool of investigation when compared to polyarchical thinking. As it will be better clarified later in Chapter 2, modernization theory exaggerates the importance of socioeconomic levels. Historically, this is because economic data has generally been more available compared to those related to objective or subjective inequalities (Dahl 2007, Chapter 8). It is equally true that “only the

⁴ The adjective “partial” is intended to say that it is not possible to reason in a binary way. Thus, it would be unjust to label civil society as entirely devoted to promoting human rights or to supporting the party system. In every society, there are some sectors which behave differently according to their interests.

most fragmentary comparative information is available on the beliefs of political activists in various countries, particularly in countries with hegemonic regimes” (Dahl 2007, p. 206). So, many countries were classified as democracies just because of the availability of economic indicators compared to countries elsewhere. The difference between modernization theory and a polyarchical approach is also due to their respective conceptions of democracy itself. As a short premise, it is worth defining the notion. In basic terms, every system that shows to be completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens and is characterized for public contestation and inclusiveness may be labelled as a “democracy”. However, where modernization theory conceives of the democratic system as the final step every regime should aspire to, polyarchy researchers believe democracy simply represents one end of the scale of political systems. In these terms, democracy is just a hypothetical system that “serves as a basis for estimating the degree to which various systems approach this theoretical limit” (Dahl 2007, p. 2). So, polyarchical thinking relies on several social indicators to classify the democratic level in a certain country. However, at this point, it suffices to say that the main difference between the two approaches is on how democracy is conceived per se (the most common political system vs. a hypothetical stance) and in relation to the specific case study (the most desirable form of government vs. one kind of government). Using a modernization approach, only those indicators that are most representative for, or more common in, a democratic system would be analysed. However, both the literature and the current state of affairs of Vietnam suggest that civic organizations are not carrying out democratic reforms, nor are there strong movements for this transition (Wischermann 2003, 2018). Instead, evidence is consistent with the classical theory of polyarchy.

The research questions of this project are so intended to contribute to analyzing this phenomenon. The aim is to look at why a democratic transition in Vietnam is not going to occur in the general terms by which the concept is generally conceived. A preliminary answer is noticeable in the particular economic reforms Vietnam embarked on, as well as the distinct nature of NGOs and their relationship with the government. To understand the importance of civil society and civic organization in the Vietnamese path toward pluralism, it is better to come back again to the concept of democracy itself. The definition of democracy is not unitary and may be applied to different social spheres. In its most common terms, it has two primary conceptualizations. As aforementioned, democracy is a kind of government based on elections and civil liberties. In this realm, we find classification in procedural democracy, liberal democracy, and polyarchy. In a more sociological sense, democracy is also conceived as “a type of society with economic and social equality and no class or group oppressing

another or living at the expense of others” (Kerkvliet 2014, p. 427). Labels for this taxonomy include substantive democracy, broad democracy, and non-liberal democracy. With these considerations in mind, it should be easier to understand how civic organizations help the analysis to understand what accounts for this gap between the past or present system and a pluralistic order under a more sociological definition of the term. In fact, if every political status quo is maintained and reinforced through the diffusion of ideologies, doctrines, and beliefs, then civil society may help to change the political course. Sometimes, in fact,

the likelihood [of] [...] democracy developing often depends in part on the extent to which groups, associations, organizations and other social interactions can form, thrive, and become alternative sources of ideas, information, and inspiration to what regime authorities and organizations provide and promote (Kerkvliet 2014, p. 429).

With these concepts and the theoretical framework that is presented, the research questions that guided the research are formulated as follows:

1. What are the points of contact between economic development, political liberalization, and civil society?
2. What political factors lead to the consideration of Vietnam as a polyarchy?

1.3 Limitations

This project presents two main limitations due to the chosen method of investigation, i.e., qualitative analysis of the literature. As a first point of discussion, it may be said that the “reuse of qualitative data may be hindered by the secondary analyst’s lack of an insider’s understanding of the social context within which the data were produced” (Bryman 2012, p. 586). The lack of the insider’s understanding is here amplified by two other intertwined factors: the distance from the state under analysis, and the lack of knowledge of the Vietnamese language. The other point is that a research implementation with a survey or an interview may have added the actor’s perspective to the analysis—in this case, an interrogation of civil society. So, on one hand, secondary data analysis has the advantage to elaborate on all the unexplored material from the large and unwieldy sets of data that are generated by quantitative researchers. On the other hand, however, a mixed method may have helped to more deeply explore the research questions. In this particular case, for instance, a questionnaire may have helped to bypass many official representations of the Vietnamese context by directly consulting the civic organizations on certain aspects related to the research

questions. Another related aspect is that much significant information is withheld by the Vietnamese government or local authorities.

A suggestion for future research on the topic may be to directly interview civic associations, thus avoiding the public restraint to share sensitive information. With the focus on civic organizations, it may be possible to study political change in an indirect way, hence looking at the kind of relationship between such organizations and the local government. The quality of the relationships, and thus the different degrees of conflict that are registered, may suggest how the government is dealing with the different and specific topics that are brought forward by the associations in question. Possible questions could be around what kind of relationships exist between them and the governmental apparatus, what kind of decision-making model is present at a state level, and whether it is replicated in those same civic organizations, etc. Further, it may be interesting to analyze which content and which content factors provide for the democratic or authoritarian (or a mixture of both) structures, practices, and attitudes (within different types of associations)—and, in case, why and how various types of associations strive for the survival of the authoritarian regime.

1.4 Relevance for Peace Research

To conclude, it is worth underlining the relevance of the topic to war and peace studies. It is interesting how Vietnam emerged from a period of extended conflict with great powers within a short period of time, and how this country managed the balance between economic growth and stability. In fact, despite its difficult geographical position when confronted with its proximity to China, it managed to develop whilst avoiding developmental weakness. In this regard, Doi Moi has also been advanced as a tool to promote both national well-being and regime security. Because of that, Vietnam's strategic policy, under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), has been subject to conflicting interests, especially instances in which a policy may be favorable for national well-being but harmful for regime security, or vice versa.

For example, deeper international economic integration and further market liberalization are likely to bring Vietnam greater prosperity, but they have also alarmed a number of CPV conservatives who see them as threats that might cause the country to deviate from the socialist path or undermine the party's rule. (Le Hiep, 2012)

What is interesting regarding Vietnam as a case study is that it was able to start a peace and societal process simultaneously. To do so, Doi Moi reform played a major role. On one hand, in fact, it helped Vietnam to create a solid middle class, the prerequisite for an

active civil society. This drastic change of the economic paradigm served to ensure that the country's economy would grow to the point where a stronger compact could be forged between the government and the citizenry. In order to maintain its legitimacy, in fact, the government and the Party have been urged to pay attention to people's needs: access to public services, information, and opportunity to improve their lives. This discourse is especially true for the middle class, which is developing its sense of class unity and identity and using it to advance demands to the Party (Revilla, 2016). On the other hand, the state managed social movements in a war-to-peace transition context. Its contrast with the US before, and with China later, led the state to find internal unity and external independence in order to manage a hostile external environment.

1.5 Dissertation outline

Chapter 1 has provided an introduction to this thesis, briefly outlined the context around which the research questions fit and presented some hypotheses as well. The chapter also discussed limitations of this thesis and explained the relevance for peace research.

Chapter 2 provides a general academic conceptualization of key concepts such as those of "civil society", the "middle class", and "polyarchy". The chapter further explores the main theories and approaches on the argument, e.g., the domains-based approach, the structural-functional approach, and the actors-centred approach.

Chapter 3 is the background and literature review chapter, where the main articles on the topic are discussed. Here the research is divided into thematic clusters, among them those regarding Vietnamese class distinction and political leanings, as well as constitutional revisions and rule of law.

Chapter 4 provides an explanation and justification of the employed methods and methodological framework for this research. Hypotheses are also presented here.

Chapter 5 constitutes the second part of the study. Here the focus is on the geopolitical framework around Vietnam. In particular, the difficulty to combine internal socio-economic reforms with external problems, such as those with China, is explained.

Chapter 6 constitutes the main corpus of the thesis, where findings are discussed in relation with the hypotheses of the project. This chapter explores how Vietnam, contrary to the assumptions of modernization theory, is not going to adopt a democratic model but a polyarchical framework instead. The chapter also presents final comments by briefly connecting the situation of the case after the timeframe of the research.

Chapter 7 summarizes and concludes the whole thesis, based on the previous chapters.

2 Conceptual framework

This chapter is intended to explain and justify the main concepts around which the thesis is developed. The discussion can be seen as divided into two parts, where the first is devoted to the specification of the subject, i.e., civil society, and the second gives an overview of the concepts of democracy, modernization theory, and polyarchy.

In the premise of the opening part, a parallel between the notions of middle class and civil society is provided. This comparison hopes to clarify the differences between the two concepts and which societal aspect they are focused on. A general definition of middle class is then followed with what is considered to be middle class in the Vietnamese case. At this point, the idea of civil society with a general overview about the organizational system in Vietnam is introduced. Then, the analysis is directed to who the actors of the inquiry are and how they differ from other entities.

In the second part, the concept of democracy is better explained in order to understand two related elements: polyarchy and modernization theory. Both approaches are defined separately and then confronted. The chapter concludes by clarifying why polyarchy is considered to be a better tool to investigate the Vietnamese case study rather than the more simplistic concept of democracy.

2.1 Premise to the definitions of middle class and civil society

Before going further with the definition of middle class, it is important to specify why this concept needs to be outlined, comparing it to that of civil society and looking at what points they have in common. First of all, it must be said that there is no agreement over the general definition of middle class and civil society. Both notions vary according to the scope of the research, and whether they are analysed in relation with the state, with other classes, according to their level of income (See appendix 2), credentials, culture, etc. Thus, it is hardly possible to give a clear-cut distinction between middle class and civil society. What is important to stress preliminarily, is that they are strongly intertwined for the same conditions they are favoured by (e.g., economic development), and for their intentions. However, the concept of middle class is generally employed when an economic division of societal strata is suitable for the scope of the analysis; civil society, on the other hand, inherently brings with it an attitude generally characterized by activism in favour of political change or for the benefit of society itself.

Due to the space limit and the focus of the thesis, only a general explanation of “middle class” will be given. However, it is worth saying that the three main categories by which middle class may be commonly defined are (Reeves, 2018)⁵:

1. *Cash*: economic resources, income, wealth, freedom from poverty
2. *Credentials*: educational achievements and qualifications, occupational status
3. *Culture*: attitudes, mindset, behaviour, self-definition

In the kaleidoscope of definitions of the middle class, each approach tries to answer specific questions from a certain angle. Whereas occupational status or education may be emphasized by sociologists, philosophers and anthropologists tend to analyze broader concepts of culture, education, power, social behaviours, etc. On the pragmatic side, economists use definitions and formulas related to wealth, income, and level of expenditure. So, distinguishing between different specializations, it is possible to identify different clusters of questions which, in turn, lead to different diagnoses of trends, reforms, and challenges—which each specialization ultimately tries to make predictions about.

2.2 Definition of middle class

The most common connotation that the middle class assumes in political analysis, especially in studies about democratization processes, is as the main economic driver, the major booster for the domestic market, as well as the source of an economic take-off in developing states (Diez, 2016). However, the middle class is itself the result of a process of economic development and is strongly dependent on the market economy. In fact, what is generally considered as an “advanced economy” both makes possible the growth of such a class *by* its performance and requires it *for* its performance. In fact,

an advanced economy not only can afford but also requires the reduction of illiteracy, the spread of universal education, widespread opportunities for higher education, and a proliferation of means of communication. Not only can it afford to produce an educated labor force, but it needs one: [...] engineers, technicians, scientists, accountants, lawyers, managers of all kinds. (Dahl 2007, p. 76)

This feature may be indicated by several aspects, e.g., the level of average daily consumption per capita, which is clearly higher for certain echelons of the population (World Bank, 2016).

⁵ Once the middle class is defined according to pre-established criteria, it is important to fit it into the context of analysis. It should be important to consider it in relation to the state and among other classes of the same environment.

For some scholars such as Moore (2010) and Lipset (1963), however, the middle class has an ambiguous role in the process of democratization, because it might have interests that collide with governmental efforts for democratization. However, this interpretation of history is at odds with the modernization theory which found its basis in Weber and Pearson's thought and generally argues that there is a direct link between civil society and economic development.⁶

2.2.1 Middle class in the Vietnamese case

In the Vietnamese language, the concept of middle class is quite uncommon or barely publicly expressed. In its place, however, and due to the economic turnover that has marked Vietnam since 1986 with the new Doi Moi policy (*Đổi Mới*), an emergent class has been defined as the “new rich class” (*Nhà giàu mới nổi*), or as the “wealthy upper class” (*Giới thượng lưu*) (King 2008, p. 73). Both definitions are comprised in the broader expression of *middle level* (*âng lớ'p trung liêu*). So, it is interesting how the marker here is immediately based on disposable income and economic power, and not primarily on social prestige. In a society where there has been a compression of the traditional middle class under the Communist Party of Vietnam, and thus a state with a bipolar division between the working class and the elite class (with the latter closely tied with the Party), the country's opening up to the global dimension via the Doi Moi allowed the rise of a new class made up of private entrepreneurs (Bélanger et al. 2014, pp. 1-15). It must be considered also that this is not only a Vietnamese situation but a *leitmotif* in the history of several Southeast Asian countries with a socialist past (Hsiao, 2018).

As briefly introduced in the premise, the composition of the middle stratum has changed during the implementation of Doi Moi policies; this led to the rise of new actors due to the space allowed by the new market economy. In fact, before Doi Moi, the term *administrative middle class* was used to label that part of society with a certain income, privileges, and social prestige in a way between the political elite and the ordinary people (Heberer 2003, p. 63). Also, it is possible to include in the milieu designated by the term all the people gravitating towards the Party: people that, due to their functions, were supported by each regime and were provided with material privileges, such as scientists, artists, writers,

⁶ See, for instance: S. N. Eisenstadt, 1966, *Modernization: Protest and Change*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.; Ali A. Mazrui, 1968, 'From Social Darwinism to Current Theories of Modernization. A Tradition of Analysis', *World Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1.; J. P. Nettl and Roland Robertson, 1968, *International Systems and the Modernization of Societies. The Formation of National Goals and Attitudes*, London.

model workers, war veterans, etc.⁷ With the economic turning point of 1986, a process of social re-stratification began: entrepreneurs and the self-employed of all kinds started to be associated with this group. Mainly as a spontaneous result from the social policies of the 1980s, these new social groups have been firstly recognized, then tolerated and endorsed by the Party-state. As expressed by the scholar Bui: “In that context, various forms of ‘civil society’ exist and perform a role which the CPV finds useful for societal control alongside other types of organization, particularly the mass organizations,” and “[The] Vietnamese Party-state has employed both a cooptation strategy and a Gramscian concession to maintain its existing hegemony over popular ideas, values, and norms in governance” (Bui 2013, p.2). In this point of view, civil society is performing the typical role of Leninist institutions: “mobilizational instruments of the authorities by transmitting official policies and laws to society” (Stromseth, 2013).

It is important to note that this ongoing process of stratification does not allow a unified, organized class with class consciousness. For this and other reasons, many scholars prefer talking about strata and not class, which is a less flexible and more closed indicator (King, 2008). Also, depending on the parameters one decides to use for the grouping process, the membership to one group or the other may be variable. For instance, in both China and Vietnam, the new group of entrepreneurs do, in terms of income, and so too in economic prestige, fluctuate on a scale between upper-middle and top-level incomes. However, the same category has no political influence, it is not still socially recognized. Hence, in terms of social estimation, this stratum should be put in the lower-middle part of the scale. A great schema of changing class interests under Doi Moi is given by Gainsborough, who divides Vietnamese society into five classes (Gainsborough 2002, pp. 697-702):

1. Large Landowners
2. The Peasantry and Rural Workers
3. The Urban Working Class
4. The Bourgeoisie
5. The Salaried and Middle Class

This latter category is defined by the author as:

⁷ I.e., individuals who functioned in the Party’s decision to open the Vietnamese market to the globalized world, with a cultural strong influence from the outside among the others.

Professional state employees holding positions of responsibility in the bureaucracy and state enterprises, although there is likely to be some overlap with the capital-owning classes or bourgeoisie. A rather newer group in this category would be professional Vietnamese employed by foreign companies. [...] some scholars were emphasizing an emerging gulf between groups such as this and the state, arguing that people were increasingly organizing their lives without reference to the party. (Gainsborough 2002, p. 710)

2.2.1.1 Difference between middle class and middle stratum. The concept of “class” in Vietnam is problematic. Social (economic) stratification is quite a new phenomenon in post-reform Vietnam, and it used to avoid a linguistic heritage of class as associated with the colonial and postcolonial eras. In pre-revolutionary terms, “petty bourgeoisie” (*tiểu tư sản*) was used to appeal to educated urban professionals (lawyers, teachers, doctors) who did not necessarily espouse values associated with middle classes. So, society is preferably divided into strata, since most Vietnamese consider the concept of class as a categorization in occupational terms (Earl, 2014). Similarly, the concept of “middle level” (*trung bình*, indicating an average household income) is ambiguous and, still, it does not embrace the ensemble of values that are usually associated with a certain educational attainment or occupational status. Research has shown how the two concepts of “middle class” and “middle level” do not overlap, but instead form a matrix. One could be judged a middle class member in terms of income, but a working class member according to occupational criteria (Nguyen-Vo, 2008, as cited in Earl, 2014, p.22). It may also be possible that the government itself avoids directly mentioning the “middle class”, using the anodyne term “middle stratum” since “class” has considerable political baggage. As it is better explained above, scholars bypass this situation by focusing on social practices, income levels, occupation, education level, political power and social networks.

2.3 General academic conceptualization of civil society

The year 1990 marked a turning point in the analysis of the relation between the state, its organizations, and civil society. Whereas modernization theorists of the 1960s and the subsequent generations that followed (like neo-Marxist and neoliberal thinkers) focused on the state and on the forces behind its aspiration to make progress, the new political trend in the 1990s turned its attention to what is generally defined as “political culture” (Hyden 1997, pp. 3-4). This expression detaches itself from structuralists theories because, in the development discourse, it attributes greater space to human agency even if, at the same time,

it recognizes that human choices are mediated by state or market institutions. This shift in analysis was derived from the acknowledgement that the state alone, in particular democracy as a form of government, could not lead to durable economic growth. By the 1980s, the idea of the state thus shifted from what has been defined as a “rational instrument” to an “instrument of exploitation”, bringing attention to local communities and institutions. It is in this framework that civil society is recognized for its role as the supplier of the state’s lack of organization. As the scholar Goran Hyden declared: “Democracy requires organization, organization requires an interest in public affairs” (Hyden 1997, pp. 3-4). In this respect and for the functions it has been given, civil society is defined as: “a sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements and forms of public communication” (Cohen & Arato, 1994, as cited in Powell, 2007, p. 2). In other terms, civil society is “that part of society that connects individual citizens with the public realm and the state. Put in other words, civil society is the political side of society” (Hyden 1997, p. 5). However, other scholars such as Hasenfeld and Gidron go beyond this, stating that civil society does not pursue only a political goal, but it is also divisible into three dimensions:

First, there are apolitical civil society organizations such as social clubs and self-help organizations. Second, there are civil society organizations that have explicitly political goals of either a transformative or reforming nature that includes various local and national social movement organizations such as civil rights, anti-abortion or anti-globalisation. Third, there are civil society organizations that legitimate and reinforce state regimes and policies through their programs and activities, for example, voluntary hospitals and social service agencies. (Powell 2007, p.3)

2.3.1 Contextualization of the associational life in Vietnam

For the last 20 years, the rapid expansion of civil society may be seen as linked to the renovated economy and the diversification of employment, business, and communications. As per the reduction of government restrictions in the 1980s, voluntary organizations and associations now comprise “mutual assistance groups, marketing networks, consumer groups, sports teams, charity organizations temple and church fellowship, disabled people’s associations and health and fitness groups” among others (Kerkvliet 2018, p. 433). However, in this broad realm, it is important to note that only a small part has engaged in direct confrontation with the Party-state. As stated by Kerkvliet: “What is relevant is engagement

with, not confrontation *against*, the political system” (Kerkvliet 2018, p. 434). That is, engagement refers to every form of interaction where particular interests are advanced along with moderate reform proposals. This process occurs in a framework where there are advantages both for associations and for the political process as a whole. However, there are some civic groups such as the Việt Tân which hope that their engagement, along with economic development, is going to bring about what is called “bourgeois democracy”. In Marxist terms, these groups are those whose operative principle is protecting the state and the bourgeois order, and everything is subordinated to that objective.

Nevertheless, it is not easy to define what organizations and associations constitute civil society. A great starting point to have a more thorough idea of civil society’s role in Vietnam, its values, its impact, and the environment where it grew is given by the scholar Irene Nørlund (see Appendix 1). Despite her (now) outdated data, her analyses remain applicable. In her view, civil society is defined as “the arena outside the family, the state and the market where people associate to advance common interests. An arena that is wider than just the sum of a particular set of organisations and associations” (Nørlund 2006, p. 33).

Further, it is also possible to define the social civic sector as

[...] The field where collective efforts, social movements, activities of civic organisations and social networks take place. This is also the field where non-profitable activities, policy advocacy, welfare and charity activities are seen. The civil sector may target economic, educational, healthcare, welfare and sporting activities. This sector is an entity that rallies the collective efforts of organisations, movements and networks. It is a component of the greater social system. (Nørlund 2006, p. 124)

2.3.2 Structure of the Vietnamese Organizational System

The structure of the Vietnamese Organizational System could be seen as a hierarchical pyramid (see table 1) where, since the first National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1935, the greatest role has been played by mass organizations. These organizations are the main tool at the apex that keep the central government responsive to the population, thanks to an extensive and widespread net of such organizations at every level of the society. The coordination of this broad apparatus is held by the *Vietnam Fatherland Front*, a political coalition directly led by the Communist Party of Vietnam. This institution represents the political base of the people’s administration, and its main task is to “materialize the Party’s guidelines and policies, strictly abide by the Constitution and laws, supervise the operations of the State agencies, people-elected delegates, as well as State officials and

employees” (No. 14/1999/QH10). The Fatherland Front, in practice, takes form in what are officially labelled as *Socio-Political Organizations* which comprise the Women’s Union, the Farmer’s Association, the Youth Organization, the War Veterans Association, and the Worker’s Organization. Each of these organizations counts several million members and they still have a strong grip among the population. At this level, there are also three main umbrella organizations under which other organizations are affiliated. Among these umbrella bodies, three organizations are particularly important: the Vietnam Union of Scientific and Technological Associations (VUSTA), the Vietnam Union of Art and Literature (VUAL) and the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO). These branches may be seen as a bridge between the central government and other Community-Based Organizations (CBOs). Each of them, in fact, counts several member associations and, in affiliation with other similar associations, they give structure to the *Socio-Professional Organizations* body which, in turn, is conducive to Party-state control. Getting closer to the bottom of the pyramid, the situation is different for the VNGOs and other Social Organizations in general, whose relations with the state are no more linked to the Fatherland Front, but rather are mediated by the Provincial or other District People’s Committees. At the very bottom of the associational hierarchy, however, there are Community-Based Organizations, the scopes of which are only to coordinate activities within neighborhood groups and family clans. Due to their narrower realm of maneuver and power, most of them are not even registered as usually occurs in every state—nor is their relation to the state mediated by an indirect affiliation to other organizations.

2.3.3 Application of the concept

Taking into consideration the above definitions of civil society and the contextualization of Vietnamese organizations within the state apparatus, this section is intended to explain how these organizations differ from each other, and what kind of relationship they generally have with the state. Valuable observations for future research are also offered. These observations are the result of an intense analysis of the organizational work and represent what has not been included here due to time and resources limits. The classification of organization will be delegated to the method and methodology chapter: here, a general overview of the main characteristics and problems is offered.

2.3.3.1 Relation between the state and civil society. As it regards civil society’s relationship with the state, it must be said that, with the economic turning

point in 1986, Vietnam's priority was that of fostering middle class economic growth, while seeing civil society as a "necessary evil" to accomplish that. Its presence within Vietnamese society pre-dated the acceptance and recognition of the government. As a social force, in fact, civil society proved its presence even before the market-based reforms launched in 1986. As a theoretical concept, however, it has only recently been transplanted into the government's public political discourse (Bui, 2013). Since the late 1980s, the emergence of civil society has been noted as a new and particular phenomenon characterizing state-society relations in a mono-Party and authoritarian state dominated by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). Although the central government has always been highly reserved concerning political reforms, as it is better described above, economic reforms have been correlated with visible social changes. Among these changes, was a process of relaxation of controls toward civil society. The space that created a restoration of this class is due to the symbiosis of a traditional Marxist-Leninist structure and a market economy. (Bui, 2013). In other words, a more liberal form of the market required a society able to sustain economic growth. This led civil society through a transition from the status of totally ruled by the state-Party, to that of "tolerated", "endorsed", and then finally recognized by it. It serves for the state to fill a gap, playing a role both in the governance network and in national development. In practice, the state recognized its presence while still looking at it with suspicion, thus accepting the dual challenge of piloting the market economy while handling civil society's push to a political and social liberalization. In this sense, the CPV has found it useful to use the various forms of which civil society exists for societal control; for example, by organizing it into specific organizations (Bui, 2013). Nevertheless, with time, civil society gained more space and autonomy, having now the potential to run beyond the government's control and its capillary control.⁸

2.3.3.2 Structure of the organizations. Regarding the nature of the organizations, it is worth saying that their aims and relationship with the administrative apparatus depend on the city in which they are located. In fact, some studies have shown how regional contextual factors affect the way these agencies behave with the government. It is possible to affirm that, in general, the relationship between civic and

⁸ This process is similar to the "political liberalization" described later in Chapter 6. Once a certain phenomenon is politically approved and socially recognized, it is difficult for the government to take a step back. This mechanism is also known as a "mechanical detent".

governmental organizations is more relaxed in the South than in the North. In the evaluation about the presence of problems in dealing with the authorities, northern organizations have declared higher percentages of difficulties than southern ones (Wischermann 2010, 2011). This means that conclusions should take into account the various kinds of specific and region-related contextual factors, such as closeness to other umbrella organizations or the government. Further, even if the overall trend depicts a more tense situation in Hanoi, the quality of the relationship also depends on the specific kind of organization as well. In this regard, Mass Organizations present an overall high level of conflict with the Socio-Political Organizations they are affiliated with. This tension is derived from the additional tasks these organizations have been given in these last two decades, whilst still enjoying the same limited status by the Party-state. Nevertheless, NGOs and Business Organizations are the ones that display the most problems with the central authority. NGOs for instance, are in the same position as Mass Organizations, i.e., providing services that the state does not render any longer. However, unlike the latter, they must rely on Government-funded programs—thus complicating their position. Business Organizations, on the other hand, reported friction with Governmental Organizations seeing as their financial independence characterizes them as potential competitors to important Party-led economic, social and political plans (Wischermann 2010, 2011).

With this basic understanding of the relationship between Civic and Governmental Organizations, it is evident how it is desirable to include associations closer to the Party-state apparatus *and* others more representative of the ground level, the aims of which center on accomplishing everyday needs. Also, it would be important to include Research Institutes and Scientific and Technology Organizations because of their status as quasi-governmental organizations, since they receive financial support from the state, “at times functioning as part of the bureaucracy while at other times carrying out independent policy research and advocacy” (Taylor et Al., 2012). On the other hand, NGOs and Volunteer Groups were included in the table as they represent the best way to understand the process of normalization in the relationship between Civic and Governmental Organizations. This is because the growing number of NGOs—and, to a lesser extent CBOs, Volunteer Groups and Social Enterprises as well—is a testament to the wider array of ways society has started to express its requests, needs and opinions; this advancement brings a stark contrast to the state apparatus, which has remained almost the same since the early 1990s. It is not

surprising then that the interaction between the two realms is producing more conflicts nowadays than before, when the relationships between them were considered as more “easy” (Wischermann, 2010).

In sum, in this thesis any organization is considered, a priori, as a civil or non-civil association. It would be nearly impossible as a foreign researcher to make a clear-cut taxonomy with a top-down approach. A valuable point for future research may be to directly ask civil society actors whether or not, and to what degree, they consider themselves and the organizations they represent as an active part of civil society. Firstly, giving the word to the members of such organizations would allow us to bypass the exclusion of those associations which may not be classified as “civil” but whose contributions to the social life of the country should be recognized and documented. Secondly, in accordance with the results, it would be possible to trace inferences about the two patterns: between those who classify themselves as civic actors and declare to know the general meaning and implications that the term civil society has, and those who do not display such recognition.

Table 1

Classification of organizations according to their nature and area of interest

<i>Classification</i>
Research Institute
Scientific and Technology Organizations
NGO
CBO / Volunteer Group
Social Enterprise
Others

2.4 Polyarchy – Brief introduction to the concept

The word “polyarchy” identifies processes and institutions of the kind of representative democracy that spread in the 20th century. The word gained success when it was affirmed in the vocabulary of political science by Robert A. Dahl (2007) and Charles E. Lindblom (1977). What makes polyarchy unique as a type of democracy is its political institutions, which distinguish it both from non-democratic regimes of every kind and from the first republican and democratic forms, e.g., the Athenian democracy and the Italian

Republic during the Middle Age and Renaissance. Though some of its political institutions were adopted by many countries during the 19th century, only New Zealand adopted universal suffrage before the 20th century.

2.4.1 Polyarchy – Political institutions

At a very general level, polyarchy can be defined as a political order characterized by two general characteristics: citizenship is extended to the majority of adult members of the community, and citizenship rights include the opportunity to oppose the holders of the highest offices of government. These constitute the two axioms around which Dahl developed his research and are thus distillable to: inclusiveness and public opposition. The first of these characteristics differentiates polyarchy from more exclusive systems of government in which, although opposition is allowed, governments and their legal oppositions are restricted to a small group, as was the case for example in Great Britain, Belgium, Italy and other countries before universal suffrage was introduced. The second characteristic differentiates polyarchy from regimes in which citizenship, although extended to the majority of adult members of the community, does not include the right to oppose the government; this is the case in all modern authoritarian regimes (Dahl 2007, chapter 1).

By better specifying these two general characteristics, polyarchy can thus be defined, in its ideal form, as an order characterized by the presence of eight political institutions (See Appendix 3). Using such a scale of indicators, we can compare and list different regimes according to their inclusiveness and public contestation. The above-mentioned guarantees are the following:

1. Elective representations: control over the government's political decisions is constitutionally entrusted to representative bodies chosen by the electoral body.
2. Free and fair elections: Elective representations are designated through elections conducted periodically and fairly, where coercion is relatively rare.
3. Universal suffrage: the right to vote is recognized practically to all citizens who have reached the age of majority.⁹

⁹ As we mentioned earlier, universal suffrage typical of polyarchies was only introduced in the twentieth century. Even in countries that had adopted other institutions of polyarchy, women were almost always denied the right to vote; it was, in fact, a question of male polyarchies. It must be said, however, that even in the latter a series of restrictions based on race, wealth or level of education deprived certain categories of male citizens of the right to vote.

4. Right to compete for public offices and positions (passive electoral right): practically all adult citizens have the right to stand for elective government offices, although the age limits set for eligibility may be higher than those established for suffrage.
5. Freedom of expression: citizens have the right to express their opinion, without incurring serious sanctions, on political issues in a broad sense; they therefore have the right to criticize the parliament, the government, the regime, the socio-economic order, the dominant ideology.
6. Alternative information: Citizens have the right to seek alternative sources of information. There are also alternative sources of information that are not under the control of the government and enjoy the protection of the laws on freedom of expression.
7. Right of association: In order to exercise their rights, including those mentioned above, citizens finally have the right to form relatively autonomous organizations or associations, including independent political parties and interest groups.

These seven institutions ensure that governments follow certain fundamental procedures; consequently, polyarchy is sometimes referred to as procedural democracy.¹⁰ More importantly, polyarchies guarantee a very broad set of rights necessary for each of these institutions: in this sense, polyarchy is also a form of substantial democracy. It is important to emphasize that all these properties characterize *real* rights, institutions, and processes—not just nominal ones; as research has shown, these properties, with some simplification, can be specified in a sufficiently concrete way to allow an independent observer to classify most countries based on the actual presence of each of the institutions of the polyarchy.

These classifications can be combined to provide a measure, or scale, of polyarchy: at one extreme there will be authoritarian forms of government, in which none of these institutions are present, at the other extreme, forms of government in which all are present; that is, the real polyarchies. Defining a polyarchy measure or scale can be useful for many purposes: among other things, it can serve to identify the conditions that generally favor or hinder the possibilities of development and stability of the polyarchy in a given country.

¹⁰ For instance, this is the case of Kerkvliet, B. J. T. (2014). Democracy and Vietnam. In Routledge handbook of Southeast Asian democratization (pp. 438-453). Routledge.

2.5 Democracy and polyarchy – Reason for adopting the concept

According to the definition proposed above, polyarchy is therefore a specific form of government. However, it is also a form of democracy—probably the most important and certainly the most widespread form that democracy has assumed in the course of its long and discontinuous history in the field of political ideas and practices. In any case, polyarchy is the characteristic form that democracy took in the 20th century. Now it is worth asking what, then, is the relationship between polyarchy and democracy. Although many today, accustomed to the institutions of polyarchy, are inclined to establish an identity between polyarchy and democracy, there are good reasons for considering polyarchy not as the only form of democracy, but rather as simply one of the forms that democracy can take.

One reason for adopting this view is that, even in the 20th century—and certainly in earlier eras—there were political systems which, despite the absence of some of the institutions of polyarchy, *appeared* to be just as “democratic” as polyarchies, if not more so. After all, the term “democracy” first appeared in classical antiquity to designate those systems of popular government that the Greeks introduced in many of their city-states, for example in Athens around 500 BC. However, we can therefore legitimately assume that “democracy” and “polyarchy” mean different things. Another reason why polyarchy should only be considered a historical form of democracy lies in the fact that we can very well imagine how a specific polyarchic government—that of Italy, say, or that of the US—could be more democratic than it currently is. In fact, what we call democratic governments are often criticized for being insufficiently so, or for violating democratic principles (Sartori, 2008).

What these and other implicit conceptions of democracy seem to have in common is the idea of a group of people who govern themselves as politically equal; a self-governing *demos*; an association making collective decisions that its members are obliged to stick to; in other words, citizens who govern themselves through a democratic process. On the basis of this conception of democracy, what conditions will a political system have to satisfy in order to be considered fully democratic? Five appear to be the necessary and sufficient conditions for a fully democratic government process between politically equal citizens. In simplified and formalized form, these conditions can be listed as follows (Sartori, 2008):

1. Effective participation.
2. Equality of vote.
3. Opportunity for an adequate understanding.
4. Final check on the programs.

5. Extension of citizenship.

Although these conditions can be specified in more detail, they nevertheless allow us to draw many important conclusions. In the first place, these are necessary conditions for a democratic process between politically equal citizens that is characterized as an ideal or as fully achieved. Second, almost certainly no political system has ever fully satisfied these conditions. Thirdly, consequently, all real democracies have remained far—often very far— from the ideal democracy. Fourthly, however, at various times and in different places, certain political systems have come closer than others to achieving a process of democratic governance (Sartori, 2008). Historically, these systems have been called democracies (in some cases republics). Polyarchy is one such system. The seven institutions of the polyarchy aforementioned in Section 3.4.1 appear to be necessary, although not sufficient, conditions for a democratic government process to take place in large political systems such as a nation-state.

2.6 Modernization Theory – General definition¹¹

The contemporary social sciences make extensive use of the term “modernization” to indicate a process of large-scale change that brings a particular society—generally national—closer to the characteristics considered to be proper to modernity. The most significant aspects of modernity are identified at the economic level in industrial development, at the political level in the affirmation of democratic institutions, and at the cultural level in growing secularization, which is accompanied by an expansion of the freedom of choice of individuals in social relations. The use of the concept of modernization, which has established itself above all since the Second World War, has basically followed two distinct directions. The first focuses above all on the study of the origins and paths of modernization in Western societies: Marx, Durkheim, and Weber who, albeit in different forms, tried to grasp the distinctive features of modern society. However, the studies of the last few decades mainly belong to what could be called “comparative historical sociology of modernization”. The second direction followed by studies on modernization also asserted itself in the last post-war period, preceding the historical-comparative approach by a few years. The issue, in this case, is to analyze the characteristics of the “backward” countries and the problems they encounter in an attempt to get closer to the characteristics of a modernity typical of the more

¹¹ Also referred to as “development theory”.

“developed” societies. At the basis of this line of studies, is the idea that Western modernity constitutes a challenge that inevitably pushes less developed societies on the path of social change. However, within this guideline, the approaches followed are very different (Inglehart & Welzel, 2009).

Regarding the specific socio-political studies, this modernization theory has come to consider political democracy as the culmination of political development. Seymour M. Lipset (1959) found the existence of a close relationship between levels of socio-economic development and political democracy. Lipset's thesis was variously interpreted and criticized, also because it lent itself to a multiplicity of readings. At least three were possible, and were made: a causal reading, according to which socio-economic development produces political democracy; a probabilistic reading, according to which it is probable that, once certain levels of socio-economic development are acquired, political democracy will assert itself; a reading linked to the existence / survival of democracy, according to which, once achieved in any way, even by external imposition, political democracy has enormous possibilities of duration, especially if it is established in systems already developed from the point of socioeconomic view (Lipset, 1959). Przeworski and Limongi (1997), who are supporters of the latter interpretation, add another observation based on in-depth statistical research: “What destabilizes regimes are economic crises, and democracies, particularly poor democracies, are extremely vulnerable to poor economic performance” (Przeworski & Limongi 1997, p. 169). After having variously, but also vaguely, defined the goal of political development as the achievement of a stable and possibly democratic regime, scholars tried to understand how European political systems had developed and what lessons could be drawn from non-European examples (Sartori, 2008). However, due to space limitations, this is not the place to discuss such these last notions.

2.6.1 Critiques of Modernization Theory

The theory of modernization has been subjected to several and consistent criticisms since the late 1960s. We will consider them by analytically distinguishing some of the main assumptions of the theory on which they focus. However, it must be kept in mind that this operation inevitably involves some forcing as there is no well-defined theory of “modernization,” but rather a variety of approaches that are not always completely consistent with each other.

2.6.1.1 Inevitability of development and ethnocentrism. As a first point, modernization theory has been criticized for its empirical weakness, accompanied by an undue

tendency to generalize starting from the Western experience. Modernization theorists are concerned, above all, with the optimistic idea of inevitable development. This idea is strongly criticized in the light of the concrete historical experiences of Third World countries which, having rapidly passed the phase of enthusiasm for the conquest of political independence, encounter strong difficulties from an economic point of view and are often hit by serious social and political challenges. Hence the conclusion that development is by no means guaranteed and that failures and blockages can occur in the process of modernization (Eisenstadt, 1973). However, the criticisms also regard the values of the theory of modernization: The same values are considered to be influenced by an “ethnocentric” vision which, in turn, leads to consider the Western experience not only as inevitable, but also as a positive model to which “backward” countries should adapt to improve the conditions of their societies (Bendix, 1967).

2.6.1.2 Tradition and modernity as opposing models. A second element of the first studies on modernization concerned the conception of traditional and modern society as opposing models, made up of interdependent elements. Also in this case, the scarce historical-empirical foundations led to an underestimation of the concrete diversity of traditional societies, whose image ended up being deductively reconstructed by contrast with the characteristics of modern Western societies. Criticisms attack both assumptions of this image (Bendix, 1967).

First of all, the remarkable historical-empirical variety of traditional societies is emphasized; then, it is highlighted how cultural and structural elements, both traditional and modern, are present to varying degrees and in different combinations not only in the societies of non-industrialized countries, but in developed countries as well. For instance, family and parental ties or religious beliefs persist, albeit with different weight, in modern societies themselves. Conversely, values oriented towards achievement and entrepreneurship or bureaucratic structures that function according to universalistic criteria can also be found in traditional societies (Bendix, 1967; Tipps, 1973). Critics do not believe that, in a modern context, differentiation must necessarily proceed in all spheres. So, the change towards modernity of one of them would not necessarily entail the adaptation of the others according to a sequence already verified in Western societies. In short, a “selective modernity” can be developed, which concerns the means of communication or the demand for consumption or military structures, but which may not extend to the productive sphere or the functioning of political institutions, etc. Modernization processes of this type are frequent on the historical-empirical level, and it is not certain that they lead to modernity as defined by the model (Tipps, 1973).

2.6.1.3 Economic conditioning and the dependency approach. Thus, we come to the third aspect: the idea that relations with the outside have a predominantly positive value for the countries that need to modernize, that is, that they act as a stimulus to the forces of change seen as essentially endogenous. In this point of view, contact with modern societies is a powerful solvent of traditional society, in the sense that it stimulates the modernization of cultural orientations and social structures, triggering mechanisms of irreversible change. On a more markedly economic level, this theory insists on the advantages that can come from technological diffusion and from international aid. But this approach overlooks the fact that the progressive insertion into the international market also entails constraints for economic development. It is more difficult than in the past to start an industrialization process: this is because, in order to compete with the industry of the more developed countries, a higher level of investment and a greater accumulation of capital is now required. On the other hand, backward countries typically specialize in producing raw materials and agricultural goods with low-skilled, low-priced labor. They end up exporting low-cost products that are exchanged for high-cost industrial products from developed countries. Therefore, the capital resources necessary for development are not formed, while competition from the already consolidated industries of other countries undermines less competitive artisanal activities (Cardoso e Faletto, 1969).

2.6.1.4 Change as an endogenous evolution. Another series of interventions questioned the model of evolutionary change based on structural differentiation. The reference to this model is not present in equal measure in all approaches to the study of modernization, but only in some of them more specifically influenced by structural-functionalism, according to which the key mechanism—which is valid for any type of society—is constituted by the process of structural differentiation. The thrust to establish more differentiated roles and social structures derives from the growing dissatisfaction with the functioning of a specific structure and, therefore, from a search for greater efficiency that takes the form of a higher functional specialization of the new structures that replace the previous one. Change is therefore seen as a process of adaptation of society, considered as a system of interdependent elements, to the physical and social environment. According to structural functionalists, it is possible to identify more or less evolved structural types, on the basis of the degree of structural differentiation and, therefore, of the ability to adapt to the environment and control it. At the apex of these stages are modern Western societies (Parsons, 1966).

We can distinguish two types of criticisms of these assumptions. The first remains substantially within the functionalist tradition but underlines how differentiation does not necessarily involve the expected increase in efficiency, because it can be accompanied by integration problems that determine phenomena of instability and lead to a subsequent arrest of modernization. The second order of criticism is more radical and involves the idea that it is possible, on the basis of past historical experiences, to establish an evolutionary sequence that may also be valid for the future. This idea is questioned because it presupposes a conception of society as a tendentially closed and coherent system, as an organism whose future state can be predicted on the basis of its structural characteristics at a given moment (Bendix, 1967). Instead, it is emphasized that change is not only an endogenous process of adaptation but is conditioned by the relationships between society and the external environment, an environment that constantly changes with historical development and which therefore places constraints and offers different opportunities. The stimuli that come from the external environment are not only positive, as the theorists of modernization claim, and they are not only negative, as the additionist approach believes. The former does not take into account the fact that the external environment can lead to internal reactions in modernizing societies, which do not necessarily follow the experience of Western societies; the latter are attentive to the economic constraints that come from the international division of labor, but they lose sight of the endogenous factors (Bendix, 1967).

2.6.1.5. Neoliberalism and the TINA stance. In the 1990s – early 2000s, the United States and United Kingdom were on the front line advancing the neoliberal model. This position got particular credit after the Soviet Union’s collapse and brought about what is referred to as American “triumphalism”. Margaret Thatcher legitimized and disclosed with the now famous expression, “there is no alternative” (TINA). However, the general optimism of this model started to wane when Argentina disconfirmed this model for the first time. These days, China is another great example of how economic growth may follow different paths. China is just the most notorious example of how development does not follow the liberal iron-clad law, nor does it confirm the idea that certain types of modernization and democracy inevitably follow economic development. Obviously, Vietnam is challenging that theory as well. According to Polanyi’s famous ‘double movement’: “while on the one hand markets spread all over the face of the globe...on the other hand a network of measures and policies was integrated into powerful institutions designed to check the action of the market relative to labor, land and money” (Polanyi, 1957, as cited in Munk, 2003, p. 499).

2.7 Summary

The theoretical framework adopted for this thesis is slightly different from the classic approaches that have markedly characterized the greater discussion on the topic. After a profound and thorough literary review, it has become evident how it would be too simplistic to study the changing political discourse in Vietnam with a “westernized” idea of democracy. The chapter is also intended to caution the reader about the correlation between economic development, political liberalization, and the growth of a civil society. Further, since Vietnam is hardly going to be a fully (ideal) “democracy”, it is hence impossible to identify *causality* between such three elements. So, their *(cor)relation* should be studied from a different point of view.

To conclude, it is worth saying that the thesis differentiates itself on two points. The first is that it shows how modernization theory is flawed in the case of Vietnam. The second is that it is highly useful to look at the concept of “polyarchy” as opposed to “democracy” as an endpoint to the interactions between civil society and governance in the country.

3 Literary Review

The articles I chose to present here are representative of the lack of attention regarding the role of civil society in several aspects of the state. The chapter is thus intended to introduce some strengths and weaknesses of the literature on the topic. After a solid theoretical basis, I chose to summarize here the main trend of questions behind most analyses. Research questions for future studies on the topic are then proposed.

The literature is mainly divided into two thematic clusters, the first one devoted to class distinction and political leanings in Vietnam whereas, in the second half of the chapter, those articles on the rule of law and constitutional revisions are briefly analyzed.

3.1 Class distinction and political leanings

Regarding the sociological identification and definition of middle class in Vietnam, King's *The Middle Class in Southeast Asia* (2008) and *Professional Middle Class Youth in Post-reform Vietnam* (2008) provide interesting insight. Finding such a definition that is specific to Vietnam has proven elusive. Most of the time, in fact, the Vietnamese "new rich category" is presented as a residual or subclass in the broader southeast scenario, and it is defined only through comparison with those present in other countries (Hsiao, 2019). Even in these articles mentioned, this social category is defined in materialistic terms of status, for the education and buying power that characterizes its members, or through the borders that differentiate it from other categories. However, the definition that the scholar tries to elaborate on depicts the middle class as a passive agent. These members are presented only through their differences with actors from other social categories and are not actively placed in relation to the state. In addition, for the reader the role of civil society is uncertain, and it is not clear whether the author conceives it as different from the concept of middle class or not. As we have seen, even if in the real context the distinction is far from being sharp; the two terms have different nuances and state different roles towards society. Again, middle class is basically understood as a stabilizing and moderating force that guards against authoritarian tendencies, while civil society is a force for the development of democracy and its maintenance (Kauffman, 2018). This distinction is useful for the aim of this thesis, which tries to depict more skilled workers as the main active actors in a liberal society, the main force behind the transition from a socialist state towards a new, more embedded model in the international environment.

This notwithstanding, there are two valuable points in King's articles. The first great

observation is the heterogeneous feature of the middle class. Thus, one should not look at it as one single liberal movement that pushes for a more democratic system, but as a fragmented group like every other social class. King describes this phenomenon as an opposition between a “well-educated, rational, democratically minded and generally liberal [middle class and a] security-oriented, anxiety-laden, state-dependent and generally conservative [one]” (King, 2008). In a similar fashion, Hsiao (2018), analyzes this concept within Thai society. In his article, the author suggests that:

This willingness of the middle class, activists, and civil society more generally to abandon basic democratic principles contradicts the ideal established in the literature. [...] It seems that only a greater recognition that civil society cannot be above politics, but must be fully engaged with politicians and the political process, which can lead to a better outcome. (Hsiao, 2019)

Nonetheless, one should not see this dualism as an anomaly, since this is a characteristic present in every society. The interesting point here is to study what reasons and needs sustain the two parts in their struggle. A seminal contribution to this point was given by Moore’s *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (2010), where the author explains how and why, in every society and in every time, there is always one conservative part which tends to defend its old privileges, and another one—more liberal—which asks the state to defend and sustain some sectors of the market.¹² We should look at how this schema has been translated to Vietnamese society. More specifically, every study that takes account of this social fragmentation should be guided by these questions: *How can we define and study the composition of the two ideologies (liberal and conservatives)? What are the interests they try to defend? What are the meanings to do so? What tools are more effective?* The answer is always complex and not straightforward. In the Vietnamese case for instance, even if the evidence of a transition towards private sector employment may suggest a liberal advantage, the result is not obvious. Even in a time of rapid social and economic transformation a stagnant social ladder is apparent. In fact, there appears to be a strong continuity in employment and education between the current generation and its predecessors (King, 2008).

¹² The agrarian society is traditionally considered the most conservative one whilst that related to commerce and industry usually displays more liberal behaviors.

3.2 Constitutional revisions and rule of law

Regarding constitutional revisions that marked Vietnam in these decades, seminal works include Thiem's *Deconstructing the "Socialist" rule of Law in Vietnam* (2014) and Gian and Kien's *Constitutional Debate and Development on Human Rights in Vietnam* (2016). Both articles are state-centric and attempt to explain how the Vietnamese state was able to embrace internationally recognized governance values within the doctrine of the socialist law-based state. Even if, until a certain period, the law was considered to represent the will of the ruling class, the authors devoted their analysis to what force brought the law to change in accordance with widely accepted international standards, subsequently giving the state more stability, transparency, accessibility, and constituency. The answer may likely be found in civil society. In this respect, two other sub-questions may be presented: What differences may we find between civil society and the elites? To what degree is civil society embedded in, or participates in, the decision-making process? In line with this research, there is now strong evidence of great commitment in human rights studies in Vietnam, through universities, government agencies and activist organizations (Vu, 2016). How can we combine this civil society's commitment with a state characterized by a strong ruling party? And, more importantly: What are the factors and the elements that have thus far avoided a clash between government and civil society? How are tensions, if there are any, resolved and managed? The last two questions are fundamental to find and study all the elements that started a more or less pacifist transition, from a communist state towards a more liberal one (Dahl, 2010). These elements, and whether they will be found, could be a valuable tool for future research that might aim to find a correlation in other state settings or could be implemented in future pluralistic and peaceful transitions. I'm aware that this thesis is not sufficient to provide all this information, but I hope to give a contribution in some way.

4 Methodology and theoretical framework

This chapter is intended to explain the ontological and epistemological perspectives that have guided, at different levels, the entire project—from the elaboration of the research questions to the interpretation of the data that were collected.

Regarding the nature of the research, it can be considered as *qualitative* due to several factors alongside where I stand as a researcher and for the objective of the research (Bryman, 2012). However, even if the project is qualitative in general terms, quantitative data were used to contextualize and support the theory on the topic and the research questions that motivated the analysis.

The synergy between qualitative and quantitative approaches was conducive to both inductive and deductive reasoning. On one hand, the research began with deductive reasoning, since theories and previous research on the topic formed the knowledge where the research questions were defined. On the other, an inductive approach was evident in the design of the conceptual framework and in the construction of new general themes after data collection.

This chapter is intended to explain this latest aspect, focusing on the research design and approach first, and reflecting upon the positionality and reflexivity as a researcher after. Throughout the same chapter, the limitations and challenges of the approach that has been chosen and how these were dealt with will be reflected upon.

4.1 Case study design

The basic idea of the study is to analyze how and in which terms Vietnam is changing at a political level. The peculiarity of this research is that political transition¹³ is mainly studied looking at political acts (of any sort) with a focus on the relationship between civic organizations and the government or other local, administrative authorities. This analysis, in

¹³ I would like to let the reader linger on the subtle differences between the ideas of *change* and *transition*. I personally believe that, in the first case, the idea of “change” expresses a new situation with no immediate judgement or comparison of any sort to a previous condition. On the other hand, the concept of “transition” inherently brings with it the idea of shift from one point to another. Since, in the Western world, this movement usually has positive connotation—for example a movement from a certain political or social condition to a better one—its uncritical adoption may be hazardous without contextualization. So, since I do not believe that democracy should be a better or the best form of government, I thus use the two terms interchangeably with no positive connotations.

turn, fits the definition of Yin (2003, p. 13), who describes the case study as “...an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.” Considering again all the above factors, this case study may be further defined as an *instrumental* case study, where “the case helps us understand phenomena or relationships within it, the need for categorical data and measurements is greater” (Stake 2010, p. 77).

This research does not only focus on previous research on the topic and a fact-check of the latest governmental actions; a focus on secondary qualitative data is present as well. These specific types of data will be further explained and elaborated in the subsection dealing with other forms of data.

4.2 Theory and research

The following paragraphs are intended to explain what theories were used for this project and how they are connected to the data that were gathered. In particular, two types of theories guided the thesis. The first one, at an ontological level, refers to what is considered to be a “grand theory”. The latter, closer to the interpretation of data at an epistemological level, is a theory of the “middle range” (Bryman, 2012).

Regarding epistemology, it must be said that an epistemological issue “concerns the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline” (Bryman 2012, p. 27). In the next paragraphs, the criteria on how the state and civil society are conceived both in general and in the specific Vietnamese case, and how the relationship between them could be studied, will be further investigated. The general approach that guided the conceptualization is that of *interpretivism*. According to this theory, all actors are connected by a constant interaction in which they continuously reshape social meanings. Everything in the social realm has no meaning per se, but rather is attributed a certain value or definition by the actors who use or display it. This meaning basically remains the same until social actors replicate the same pattern of behaviour. However, new values and relationships are generated when there is a new action from the main actors (Bryman 2012; for an insight into the topic see also Foucault, various works). In this case study, for instance, an interplay between actors at a macro-level¹⁴ has led civil society to ask for more human rights; this, in

¹⁴ Between the new position of Vietnam in the international state, i.e., between other states, the Vietnamese political apparatus, and society as a whole.

turn, has forced the state to *change* the previous normative framework, going to constitutional reform in 2013. Nevertheless, this epistemological approach is sometimes criticized because of its “third level” of interpretation (Bryman, 2012). In fact, this position is usually connected to a qualitative analysis, where the researcher interprets their findings that are already based on others’ interpretations of the reality they live in.

As for ontological concerns, constructivism was thought to be the best option in line with the interpretivist stance. Under a constructionist lens, social order—as a spectrum of values that gave sense to reality—is not a fixed entity, but it is in a constant state of change instead. This is because relationships between individuals and values are constantly re-shaped and negotiated. According to Bryman:

Constructionism is an ontological position that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. It implies that social phenomena and categories are not produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision. (Bryman 2012, p. 33)

In research terms, this means that it is important to consider how social reality is the result of an ongoing accomplishment between social actors rather than something static, external to them. This operation may be done using *categories* and *indicators* to “categorize” the specific social reality under analysis. In this particular project, this is done through a qualitative analysis of the literature.

4.3 Method - qualitative analysis of the literature

In accordance with the theoretical approach and the limitations of this thesis, a qualitative analysis of the literature on the topic was thought to be the best methodological option. As previously stated, however, the final interpretation of data is integrated with a fact-check and interpretation of the latest major political decisions and social movements/requests.

Some implications must be considered to better understand this choice. In Vietnam, many official documents or records are not translated into English, so it would be difficult to work on a large amount of data in this way. Further, many data are unrepresentative for the whole country; in fact, there are many differences between the cities and the inland regions. For instance, some parameters that measure the new wealth of the middle class are difficult to obtain because Vietnam is still largely a cash economy, and the personal income tax-collection system is in its infancy. Further, eventual primary data analyses have to carefully consider the current political state of affairs, avoiding privacy problems or, worse, leaks of information.

Nevertheless, qualitative analysis of the literature has its own advantages. In fact, it is possible to conduct a secondary analysis of the data, thus allowing the researcher to use data that were neglected by the primary investigators; further, new interpretations of the same data may be possible, especially in light of new events and considerations that were not included before.

4.4 Premise to the theoretical framework – Ontological conceptualization of civil society and the state

At this point, it is worth looking at how civil society and the state are conceived at a higher, ontological level. The reasons behind the adoption of an actors-centred approach will then be presented.

Civil society, and civic organizations as its organizational form of action, are not considered as inherently leading to a more liberal form of government. Even though there is no doubt about a political change within the Vietnamese Party system, the study has found no reliable proof regarding a shift toward a “complete” democratic form of government. Civic organizations, in turn, could not be considered *ex ante* as different, in their nature, from the governmental structure. From a top-down perspective, this is because every state could be seen as the aggregate form of its citizens and, so, there is a continuous interplay between them and the state. At the societal level, people largely share the same culture—hence attitudes, beliefs, and practices that are brought forward by the state. The same practices that everyone brings in their everyday life in their individual form, are the same values that, in turn, may be found in the aggregation of people, and so within communities, groups, and those same civic organisations (Szydło & Bukłaho, 2020). Forming a vicious circle, these thus become the same principles that justify the centralized form of government that defines the Vietnamese polity. In specific, it would be trivial to consider the Vietnamese government as opposed to, and founded on, different values than those which regulate civil society. If that were the case, it would not be understandable and explainable how the one-Party system may be legitimized and sustained by its people. Every form of government, independently from its nature, needs a certain minimum level of consensus. If this is lacking, even in dictatorships, the government inevitably falls.

To conclude, it is very unlikely that the political level and the civil society are founded on and share different values and ideas. As it is clear from the evidence, people tend to mimic the same state hierarchical system in their organizations (Hofstede, 2011); doing so, they are more prone to justify governmental actions, since the same collectivistic view is reproduced

within the society. Moreover, such political change is analysed by looking at the nature of the relationship between the government and civic organizations with a focus on how such relation is facilitated in case problems do occur (Hofstede, 2011).

Once the concept of civil society is clarified, it is necessary to specify how the second element of this thesis—the state—is ontologically conceived. It is important to remember again that the thesis aims to study the contextual political change on one hand, and the room of maneuver that civic organizations are now given on the other. To do so, an actor-centred approach is here a valuable tool because it allows studying the correlations of abstract processes on institutions (polity change) by examining their impacts on particular actors, in this case on civic organizations (Marks, 1996, p. 34). The state is here considered as only the stage, the institutional framework, in which politicians pursue their goals. As human beings, politicians share the same *zeitgeist* or spirit of the time, as the members of civic organizations. So, when particular polities are justified according to the concepts of “national interest” or “state interest”, it is important to consider them as an abstraction that does not belong to any objective reality. Thus, political change may be seen as the result of particular political actors’ actions. In this process, they *interpret* the legal framework they are embedded in whilst they are *subject* to other macro forces, such as the international context. Disentangling the idea of authoritative decision-making, for instance, it is possible to approach this process whilst distinguishing between political rules and political actors. Whereas rules serve as constraints for the political actors, they may also be changed by those actors when they no longer fit the surrounding context (Marks, 1996, p. 5). In Vietnam, one practical example about that is the changing discourse on the primary function of the law; this shift in mentality finds expression in the legislative impasse since 2005 about the Law on Demonstration (Luật Biểu Tình). All the debate around the draft of such law, which has not yet been approved, testify to a transition in the conception of the law from a regulatory device for social control to rights-enhancing legislation towards recognition and safeguard of citizens’ right to assemble and protest (Wang and Truong, 2020).

To conclude, whereas the Communist Party could be seen as the principal actor in the Vietnamese system, from an actor-centred perspective the Party-state apparatus is the place where domestic, local instances and international politics meet. Hence, it just provides the context of rules for authoritative decision making and, therefore, it is not an actor in and of itself. On the contrary, head political leaders are the ones that collect and merge all the instances in a process of continuous transformation.

4.5 Comparing different approaches

The three more common approaches in the analysis of the relationship between civil society and the political decision-making process are the domains-based approach, the structural-functional approach, and the actors-centred approach. Each of them is sustained by a different theory(s) and thus each may likely reach different conclusions when faced with the same subject of analysis. This is because every analysis is based on different premises, and thus considers differently the objects of its investigation and the relations among them. In this particular case, civil society and the state may be perceived differently and may be given diverse expectations depending on the particular theory; for instance, while the structural-functional approach reflects the classic view of civil society as leading toward democracy, the actors-centred approach limits its focus to the operational features that are displayed by civic organizations and the quality of its relationship with the local government (Wischermann, 2010). The choice of the theory at the basis of the investigation, and the approach to organizing the analysis, is hence particularly important because it shapes the method and methodology behind the inquiry. Moreover, while a certain methodology leads to how the issue is perceived, the resulting method reflects how the analysis is going to be conducted and the data elaborated. Likewise, even if it is not possible to discern a priori a sound method from a poor one, it is equally true that some methods may bring about inferences that do not reflect the reality they aimed at describing.

The *actors-centred approach*¹⁵ differs from the other approaches because it considers civil society in a more dynamic view, detaching itself from static conceptualizations based on the logic of domain. According to Uphoff and Krishna's concept of *continuum*, such dynamism is because the subjects of investigation are not conceived as fixed entities, but as a mode of interaction (Uphoff and Krishna, 2004). Thus, civic action is seen as the relationship between the state and its people, between the latter and the market, and all the values and norms that give meaning to these interactions that, in the end, shape culture. In practice, civic actors are not considered as such with a "top-down" analysis by scholars who may be partially or totally unfamiliar with the local culture; rather, the decision is posed to the actors themselves. The focus is thus shifted to what Vietnamese actors call civil society and what, in

¹⁵ This approach has been elaborated for the first time by scholars from the Social Science Research Centre Berlin, namely Dieter Gosewinkel and Dieter Rucht, Shalini Randeria, Sven Reichardt, Paul Nolte, and Jürgen Kocka.

their opinion, constitutes civic action and motivates them to engage in civic organizations. In this regard, further research with such an approach may directly ask civic associations about their relationship with the state and other governmental organizations, how they perceive such relationships, and how it has been changing over time.

4.6 Theoretical framework – Middle range theory

The theory at the basis of the actors-centred approach is an ensemble of analyses from different academic fields, here on the specific case of civil society action. The most important contributions in this sense are given by Parsons (1971) and Giddens (2013) from a sociological perspective, Offe (2000) for a political science view and Habermas (1991) regarding the philosophical aspect. All these authors agree to consider every society as divisible into sub-systems such as the economy, the state, and the private sphere. Every group is equipped with specific means of social coordination that, in turn, help it to coordinate its action with others' and differentiate the nature of the relationship depending on the active agent who displays it. As Wischermann states, “[civil society] realizes and manifests itself in social interactions which draw boundaries within and without” (Wischermann, 2010, p.10). This means that boundaries are placed *within* the same categories of civil society depending on the point of view of the observer and the time the analysis is referring to. Also, edges are present outside the civic category to differentiate it from the other values that coordinate the categories of 1) the market, based on exchange and money-based transaction, 2) the state, founded on political-administrative institutions with power and rule regulating their interaction, and 3) family and kinship, based on closeness and personal relations. All of the above-mentioned authors agree that every mechanism is present at various degrees in all three subsystems, even if there is always a dominant marker (e.g., money in the market sphere, power in the state sphere, and civil society action in the third sphere). However, not all scholars adhere to the assumption that civil society belongs to the third and private sphere: this could be solely reserved for the family, and a fourth sphere could be added to accommodate civil society. Thus, considering civic society action as “a specific type of interaction which takes place in the public sphere, but also in other spheres” (Wischermann, 2010, p. 10), reveals the definition of *action* and *interaction* given by Gosewinkel and Rucht:

This action and interaction are founded on respect vis-à-vis the right to exist and the room for development of other persons and groups – a right which has its limits at the point where others' rights and collective goods are going to be violated. Such recognition is neither based on morals nor motivated by affections or emotions. It is

based on the advantages of persuasive power that cooperation offers [...] Integrative and coordinating powers derive from the more or less abstract insight that peaceful coexistence and readiness to compromise offer enormous advantages. On the practical level such recognition crystallises in procedural rules, i.e., the acceptance of certain ways of dealing with others. A sphere of interaction with such rules could be called civil society. (Gosewinkel and Rucht, 2004, as cited in Wischermann, 2010, p. 10, 11)

The central point for every study is thus proving empirical validation about mutual recognition behind civil society action. There may be different reasons for the shared acceptance of mutual recognition as the foundation of societal action; it could be seen as a general commitment to justice and reason, or there may be more faith-based rationales, moral-related obligations, or others.

4.7 Group selection and elaboration of data

The choice of an adequate subject for the analysis has followed a matrix of three criteria: type of actor, its differentiation, and its geographical positioning.

For the first criterion, it was necessary to establish what parameters to follow to determine who could be considered suitable for the purposes of the thesis. In this regard, the division of society into economic classes was discarded while, considering the scope of the project, the best choice was found by focusing on the different levels of commitment toward society along with a relation with the state apparatus. Thus, for the reasons and concepts that are presented in Chapter 2, civil society members were considered the best candidates: they may struggle for a social change—hence act as bearers of certain social values—or they may act to maintain a certain status quo. Nevertheless, this division between a more liberal and traditional section is present in every society and not identifiable a priori. Thus, even if civic actors are generally thought to be liberal value-bearers, eventual replication of the state system in the participants' organization hierarchy and decisional model is not to be considered a bias per se (Wischermann, 2016).

During the interpretation of the data, the other criterion that was considered is strictly intertwined with the first and regards the specific division of civic organizations in their nature (foundational characteristic) and area of interest. The two criteria together should keep an adequate level of representativeness between the study and Vietnamese civil society in general. On a more specific level, a closer look at the Vietnamese associational life realm has shown at least four main organizational types:

1. Research institutes

2. NGOs
3. Community based organizations (CBO) / Volunteer groups
4. Social enterprises

From this realm, it must be said that all research centres dedicated to the study of socio-political trends were excluded from the analysis. This is because it is more likely they are familiar with this topic and, thus, they may bias the data. Further, both institutes affiliated with (or subsections of) local universities and other private or international institutes were included in the first category. This latest division was done because it was interesting to see eventual differences between those entities that are closer to the state apparatus (universities) and those that are not. As in the case of geographical positioning, the hypothesis here was that a governmental affiliation should have shown fewer troubles in the relationship with the apparatus. For all these categories, a sub-classification can be done regarding their area of interest. However, this aspect is comparable to the situation present in most other countries—there are organizations committed to human rights, environment, gender, entertainment, housing, legal support services, labor rights, health, education, economic development, etc.

As the last criteria in the selection, geographical positioning could not be overlooked. In the interpretation of data, it was necessary to consider the position of the specific organization's headquarters and its main site of action. However, this point was particularly important not just for the representativeness of the data, but for answering the research questions themselves. It is essential to consider the clear social and political differences between the two main North-South regions in the country. As we have seen from other research, Hanoi-based organizations tend to be closer to power and, thus, show more problems in their relationship with the government (Wischermann, 2003, 2010, 2013).

4.8 Self-reflexivity

Especially in studies of a qualitative nature, researcher background can be a challenge. In fact, this challenge applies to the whole process of the research project: from the formulation of the research questions to how the data is presented and analyzed. Here, two aspects are particularly relevant for the researcher: do not have preconceptions and be reflexive. Regarding the first point, a more extensive explanation may be found in the foreword. The basic idea is that, as a theoretical approach, democracy is not considered here to be the final end of political developments nor the best context for economic development (Dahl, 2007). There are too many counterexamples or deviant cases not to believe that. So, reflexivity is explicitly linked to this point, meaning being sensitive about how my cultural,

political and social status affects the research (Bryman, 2012, p. 393). In this regard, being reflexive also means detaching from the social and cultural background to design the project with as few preconceptions as possible, and being open to any possible result, including those which go against the initial hypotheses.

4.9 Summary

This chapter aimed at explaining what the ontological and epistemological position behind the conceptualization of civil society, the state, and the relationship between them is. Interpretivism was considered to be the most suitable stance for the first aspect, whereas constructivism played a great part in defining the above concepts. The method that was chosen to investigate the research questions is a qualitative analysis of the literature, without detaching from the current political and social state of affairs.

The data analysis and interpretation are presented and discussed in the next section of the thesis. In this next part, the thesis will move on to its major part, with a critical confrontation between the initial hypothesis and empirical results.

5 Contextual framework - Vietnamese relation with China

This chapter is intended to give a more thorough background of the case study in order to fully appreciate the current social and political environment. The discourse is developed into two parts, where the first is more focused on the internal decision-making process, and the second gives more attention to the external environment that influenced the Vietnamese economic and political strategy.

After a glimpse of Vietnam's history, the focus will shift to how Vietnam attempted to move further away from its conflict years by promoting internal unity through economic growth. In this regard, it must be noticed how the Vietnamese strategy for economic development is particularly interesting, since it had to avoid both the USSR model on one hand, and the Indonesian nightmare on the other. In the first case, the need was felt to avoid a great effort, in both the political and economic spheres, that could risk a state collapse. However, Vietnamese political leaders were also conscious that just guaranteeing internal growth and stability is not a guarantee of legitimacy per se, as was shown by the fall of Suharto government of Indonesia in 1998 after the Asian Financial Crisis.

The second section will give space to the external surroundings Vietnam had to face during its reform process. Among others, particularly relevant are the tensions caused by China's rise and the South China Sea Situation.

Despite the fact that the analysis of this thesis is not entirely focused on these aspects, it is important to present them in order to understand in what situation all the reforms at hand took place; in particular, what Vietnam had to do was to manage internal frictions without transposing this stress to its outwards strength.

Figure 1

Political map of Vietnam

CỘNG HÒA XÃ HỘI CHỦ NGHĨA VIỆT NAM



Figure 2

Main ethnic groups in Vietnam

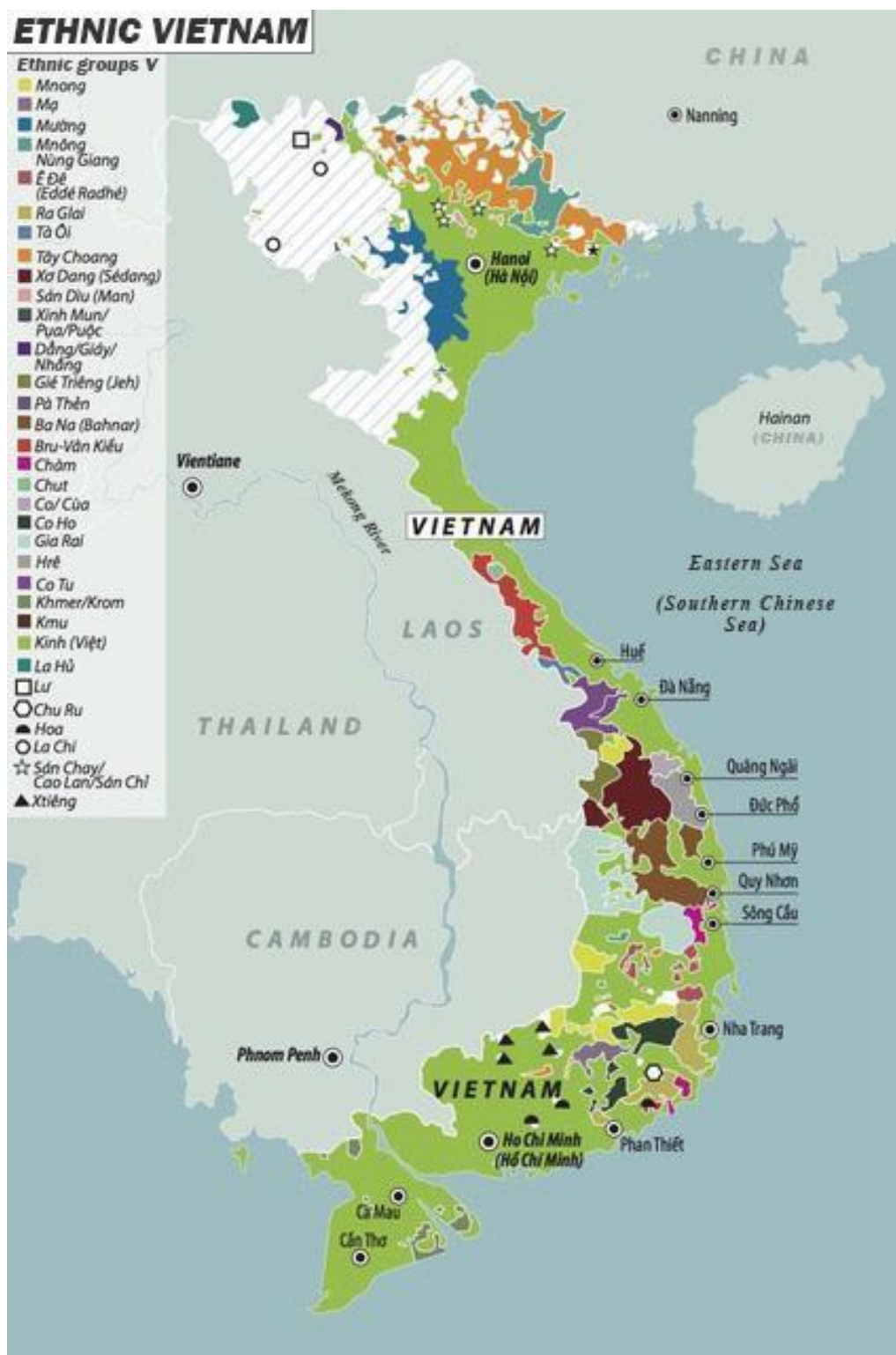


Figure 3

Southern Chinese Sea



5.1 Historical roots – ethnic resistance from Chinese assimilation

Vietnam is the land of the *việt*. The word Vietnam is thus made up of *Việt* and *Nam* which, together, means the country of the *southern* *việt* (Ngọc, 2015, in Botsford et al., 2015).¹⁶ In a multi-ethnic mix, the *việt* people lived with other groups in a territory that stretched from the south of the Yangtze River in present-day China to the northern part of present-day Vietnam. Among the many groups of the *việt* people, those who lived further south created a cultural identity in the Red River basin during the Bronze Age, before the formation of the Chinese empire. The latter, created in the third century BC, absorbed all the ethnic groups of the territories mentioned, but the southern *việt* people resolutely retained their national identity, resisting assimilation despite centuries of Chinese domination followed by numerous conquests (Montessoro, 2002).

After the second century BC however, the first Vietnamese state was dominated by the Chinese empire for nearly a thousand years. The Vietnamese had to wage a constant struggle to preserve their Southeast Asian identity and not be “Sinized”. In the 10th century, they managed to obtain national independence, preserving it for 900 years until 1880. For over two thousand years, the dynamic of acculturation with the dominance of Chinese influence has translated into a double movement of repulsion and attraction towards the rich and varied culture of the Empire of the “Center”. It was in this way that together with Japan and Korea, Vietnam was integrated into the cultural system of East Asia under the strong influence of China (Botsford et al., 2015).

5.2 Political similarities with China – curb to social and political change

The current Sino-Vietnamese relationship is very complex and has its roots in a long history of shared traditions and Vietnam's efforts to adapt to the constraints imposed by its great neighbor. Both countries face the variables that result from social modernization and great economic thrust, but Vietnam is more vulnerable to them than China because it is a smaller country and because its leadership is less united. The first force is in fact the popular push for democratization, which has a mainly internal impact, while the second is nationalistic enthusiasm, which has an effect above all on foreign policy.

¹⁶ It is interesting to draw a parallel with the name Yugoslavia: Jugo (South) and Slavic (country of the Slavs) together mean “the country of the South Slavs”.

The two countries share similar socialist ideologies and rhetoric and are ruled by Communist parties with comparable views on internal authority and international relations. However, an important difference between Vietnam and China today is that while China's central leadership appears cohesive and strong, the Vietnamese leadership appears divided and weak. The important positions in the Vietnamese government are distributed by balancing representatives of the North and the South: the current general secretary of the Party and the president of the National Assembly are from the North, the president and the prime minister are from the South. Each of these figures has a political clientele and a personal consensus base within the Communist Party: a system of cross-vetoes has developed over the past twenty years that prevents a single personality from consolidating their personal power and exercising strong leadership (Schuler, 2021).

This situation has led the Vietnamese Communist Party to lean on the Chinese one, from which the former draws inspiration to counter the threats of the global economy and the demands for political pluralism. In this situation, fear is a rapid and obvious transition to a form of political pluralism that would cause Beijing to meddle in Vietnamese politics. The fear is in fact that, if the social and political reforms in Vietnam preceded similar reforms in China, Chinese intervention could be risked. To conclude, it can be said that the *Đổi Mới* favors (like any other capitalist economic growth) individualism, which can erode and destroy Vietnamese cultural identity, which is based on collectivism. This does not mean approaching the viewpoints of modernization theory because, as previously mentioned, economic growth alone is not enough to sustain a transition to a polyarchic form. Be that as it may, Vietnam's problem now is to find a way to harmoniously combine Western individualism and traditional Eastern collectivism.

5. 3 The South China Sea dispute

Since the launch of *Đổi mới* in 1986, in order to facilitate economic development, Hanoi has placed as its main foreign policy objective the “creation of a favorable international environment and facilitating conditions to serve the cause of national construction and defense” (Nguyen 2007, p. 42). In the South China Sea (in Vietnam, the East Sea), this principle translates into the peaceful resolution of disputes. Vietnam therefore behaves like the weaker part in an asymmetrical relationship with China: it tries to defend its national interests without compromising good relations with Beijing. The resulting policy is therefore a mixture between involvement and balance.

In turn, the involvement can be of two types: direct or indirect. In the first place, *direct* involvement consists of bilateral dialogue with Beijing. Hanoi argues that maritime issues have become one of the most discussed topics in discussions among leaders during high-level visits to China. In addition, the two countries established the Vietnam-China Commission on Bilateral Cooperation in 2006 and a network of channels between their respective parties, militaries, border provinces, and government agencies that handle maritime affairs, fisheries, etc. Vietnam and China also conducted direct negotiations on unresolved disputes: in October 2011, during the visit of the Communist Party Secretary General Nguyễn Phú Trọng to Beijing, the two countries signed the Agreement on Guiding Principles for the Resolution of Maritime Issues, in which they undertook the acceleration of demarcation of and cooperation regarding the Gulf of Tonkin, and to consolidate cooperation in less sensitive sectors such as marine environmental protection, maritime scientific research, search and rescue operations, and the prevention of natural disasters (Nhan Dan Online, 2013).

Some Vietnamese analysts are convinced that, by raising South China Sea disputes in high-level debates, these can become an urgent foreign policy priority of Beijing, encouraging its leaders to consider the issues in the broader framework of bilateral and regional relations, as well as better manage competition between various Chinese interest groups—a major source of recent tensions. Such initiatives are also expected to increase mutual trust and reduce misunderstandings between the respective interest groups. Secondly, indirect involvement manifests itself in the attempt to work with other ASEAN members thus involving Beijing in multilateral debates on the South China Sea in order to bring it to implement the Declaration of Conduct and, eventually, to draft a new one. This is a central point of Vietnam's strategy, which has worked to ensure that the organization maintains a minimum of consensus—despite divergent interests and external pressures—at least on the protection of freedom of navigation, regional stability, respect for international law, and maintaining the centrality of ASEAN in the regional architecture of security and the evolving economy (Thủy, 2015). In this regard, Vietnam has been trying to enhance the ASEAN engagement with its neighbors Cambodia and Laos in order to curb China's rising influence. This mediation, however, serves a self-interest to preserve Vietnamese national security. Hanoi has faced for many years an enduring trust deficit within the ASEAN concert. Nevertheless, Vietnam remains committed to ASEAN, as its chairmanship in 2020 demonstrates (Thu, 2021).

These two approaches provide Vietnam useful channels for working with China, but they are not sufficient to prevent Beijing's government from pursuing its claims. For example,

the indirect involvement, in order to be effective, requires China's will to respect the common will in Southeast Asia. And, in the case of direct involvement, the competition has been particularly acute in recent years between the Chinese and Vietnamese coastguards, which are placed to protect resources such as fisheries and hydrocarbons; the two countries have not yet set up dialogue mechanisms in these areas (Thủy, 2015, in Botsford et al., 2015).

To conclude, it must be said how Vietnamese foreign policy brings about the country's adoption of a stable, friendly political relationship toward China. This is likely to continue to occur despite China's increasingly aggressive stance in the East Sea. However, this kind of diplomacy is a delicate task for the Party, since it has to balance external security with internal anti-China sentiments among the Vietnamese population. This operation is particularly evident in Vietnam's adamant effort to balance China with the West (US but now EU as well) while not getting too close to either (Knödler, 2021).

5.4 Summary

Addressing Chinese assertiveness in Southern waters, by combining involvement with balance, is still regarded as the most effective strategy for defending Vietnam's national interests while maintaining a peaceful and non-confrontational relationship with Beijing, in order to increase Vietnam's role in ASEAN and to promote cooperation with other great powers. The strategic margin of maneuver in Hanoi has not yet reached its limits, especially in two aspects: the use of international law and the deepening of relations with the other countries concerned. If the other balancing tools fail to stop China from meddling in Vietnamese national interests, Hanoi can seriously play the legal way as a final peaceful card.

Regarding the internal front, political liberalization is strongly demanded by the population and eventually necessary to avoid an economic backlash (Thủy, 2015, in Botsford et al., 2015). However, such a shift is not going to occur spontaneously nor in a short time frame. The central Party has to carefully look at China during this transition, because of its historical political closeness with its neighbor not to waste its bilateral ties with Beijing.

6 Impact of single-Party elections — Opportunity to formulate preference

This chapter concludes the dissertation on the concept of democracy and contextualizes it into Vietnamese circumstances. It specifies how Vietnam also differs from neighboring China in its path of social modernization, as feudal dismantling and the struggle for independence coincided here.

Finally, an analysis of political change in this country will focus on the opportunity to formulate preferences. In particular, a closer look will be given to the freedom to form and join organizations, along with freedom of expression and the right of political leaders to compete for support. The chapter closes the thesis with a re-evaluation of the Vietnamese political system—a necessary re-evaluation that takes place by separating its path of political liberalization from ideological or cultural liberalization.

6.1 “Democracy” in Vietnam

To understand the role that the Vietnamese party has had in Vietnamese society, and how it is viewed by its citizens, we need to take a look at Vietnam’s struggle for independence. The historical analysis of the original functions and struggle of the Party makes it easier to understand how the concept of democracy has a different value in this region compared to how it is generally understood, and to which we refer to Chapter 2. Since this is not the proper place for an examination of this magnitude, which has already been analyzed in depth by other scholars, only the main points will be reported here.

Taking up Moore's thesis on the social origins of dictatorship and democracy (2010), it is clear that Vietnam is a very particular case. The peculiar element of its context is that, unlike the states analyzed by the historian, Vietnam’s struggle for independence and national unification coincided with the dismantling of the feudal class.¹⁷ It should also be noted that this process took place in a non-industrialized and markedly economically undeveloped country. As can be understood, the reactionary spirit towards imperialist politics, but above all against the feudal class, did not originate from the peasant masses, from the people; rather,

¹⁷ In reality, there is a slight temporal discrepancy dictated by priorities: first a struggle was carried out against the French colonialists, and then the feudal dismantling proceeded. After the Revolution of August 1945, the representatives of the king’s power, the mandarins, and the previous French and Japanese administrations were removed. Only after the battle of Dien Bien Phu were the landowners deprived of their privileges on a national scale, at which time the agrarian reforms were also launched.

there was a dismantling of it from the top. Unlike other states,¹⁸ due to the economic structure of Vietnam, there was no merchant class capable of joining the political class in the process of feudal dismantling. In this transition phase, when a social class with strong economic power but irrelevant from the decision-making point of view is formed, an alliance is created with the previous political elite in the opposite situation: indeed, endowed with legislative power, but without capital. Although Vietnam has a large coastline, there has not been a commercial union of ports as in neighboring Japan, for instance. In the Vietnamese case, it was the Party that imposed a social and economic reorganization, in a way that was probably more violent than what happened in Italy and Japan before the establishment of fascism.

Analyzing the testimony of General Giap (1968) himself, these two struggles, against the imperialist French on the one hand and the landowners on the other, had to proceed in parallel due to the particular situation of the time. The reasons that led to the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 were dictated by a special context of necessity and urgency,¹⁹ a historical unicum that favored the establishment of Marxist-Leninist regimes around Vietnam as well.²⁰

The party, therefore, always justified its goal of liberation and unification through a democratic national revolution. Giap (1968) never clarifies what he or the Party means by the adjective “democratic”. However, two meanings of the term are recognizable in his writing. In the first place, the concept of democracy is placed side by side with that of class, in a triangulation between the army, the Party and the peasants, where all are supported by the same ideals and are moved to reunify Vietnam for the same reasons. Here the concept of democracy therefore indicates the purge of Vietnamese society from the group of landowners who, due to their status, cannot fully share the point of view of the peasantry-workers. In this sense we can understand the concept of people’s war expressed by Giap (1968)—a war

¹⁸ The best-known case is perhaps England; see Moore (2010).

¹⁹ It has been seen in other studies that this is the classic context that is advanced as an excuse to delay or stop some reform processes of a social, economic, or political nature. This logic applies to all forms of social restructuring; see Peterson (1992).

²⁰ The most obvious cases are those of the Soviet Union and China. Although all three countries pursued similar goals, each did so according to its own peculiarities. China was a semi-feudal and semi-colonial state like Vietnam; however, it had a much greater demographic density and a more functional bureaucratic system (even though it was already in crisis). The Soviet Union, on the other hand, presented a different economic tenor.

otherwise described as a “democratic national revolution”.²¹ In this sense, the aim was to eliminate what was defined as the “essential social contradiction”, that is, the opposition between the *whole* of the Vietnamese nation to the imperialists and the feudal lords.

The second meaning of “democracy” in this context is deeply linked to the organization of the Vietnamese political-decision-making system. In this sense, the (presumed) equal importance of all members and organizational nucleus within the decision-making pyramid must be highlighted. According to this scheme, it could be said that, while the ultimate decisions were scrutinized by the Party, their origin did not have a fixed point, since there was continuous feedback between the ground level and the political level. The Party, made up of ordinary people, had to continually be attentive and responsive to the needs of the people. Such a high level of efficiency in responding to needs came about thanks to a great capillarity of cells, through the organization of Party congresses at different levels. In this regard, General Giap (1968) argues that: “It is important here to emphasize the need for a constant adjustment between the responsibility of the heads at the executive level and the leadership of the Party Committee, in accordance with the principles of collective leadership and individual responsibility” (p. 129). He continues, “The relationships between cadres and combatants, between superiors and inferiors, [...] are relationships based on political equality and class fraternity” (p. 132).

Although these terms have decidedly flattered and propaganda-like tones, we understand the difference between this concept of democracy, and the one more widespread in other parts of the world; while in the West “democracy” assumes the connotations of political equality between different social classes, in the Vietnamese context it becomes class equality to shape politics.

6.2 Impact of single-Party elections and legislatures for democratization

The first aspect that deserves to be analyzed is the degree to which elections affect authoritarian stability in the particular case of a democratic transition. The premise that needs to be made is that, basically, it is the Party that exercises weak or strong control over the Legislative Assembly according to the political situation of the moment, thus ensuring the

²¹ The party is therefore depoliticized because any political form would lead to a “bourgeois”, and subsequently individualistic conceptions, which would distance the Party from responding to the real, concrete needs of its own people.

survival or suppression of political proposals based on the party's political line. In this context, when the government wants to settle an issue, it acts directly on the legislative agenda.

In regimes of this type, rather than the one-party Legislative Assembly directly legitimizing this transition, it instead uses soft propaganda to hinder this process (Schuler, 2021). Even if there is no spontaneous movement towards a multi-party system, if a transition were to occur, there is evidence that it would be towards democracy (Brownlee 2009; Schuler, Gueorguiev, and Cantu, 2013, as cited in Schuler, 2021, p. 199). However, even if the VNA is not likely to lead to a form of democracy in the Vietnamese case, its role in political liberalization is more complex (Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2015, as cited in Schuler, 2021, p. 200). In fact, *political liberalization*, unlike democratization, does not require a change of regime. The political system can indeed liberalize or deliberalize without making a drastic transition to another type of regime. In this situation, for example, the various candidates can look for new forms of association and express their points of view more. This phenomenon arises from the fact that the greater the division within the party, the greater the space for debate. This room of maneuver depends on the stability of the government and is modulated directly by the Secretary General according to particular political conditions. When the government is going through a crisis, political rhetoric could undergo a tightening within the Assembly, reducing the space for discussion. On the contrary, in times of political peace, the need to resort to such rhetorical means is diluted. In these political fluctuations, some reforms may pass, with the future government facing difficulties in repealing them. In fact, while the space for dialogue changes over time, depending on the stability of the government, the reforms that are approved by the Legislative Assembly suffer the effect of the detent. It has already happened that the Party has introduced control measures to support short-term political logic. However, once the political climate changed, these new institutions were not dismantled. An example in this sense can be that of the public vote of no confidence, through which the Parliament wanted to introduce control over the prime minister (Reuters Staff, 2013). This phenomenon has specific political reasons. The Party, evidently, has less difficulty in maintaining and controlling the institute than dismantling it and suffering the insult of public opinion. A similar principle was expressed by Dahl's second axiom, in which the author explained the costs of tolerance towards the opposition. According to this axiom, "the likelihood that a government will tolerate an opposition increases as the expected costs of suppression increases" (Dahl 2007, p. 15). In this positive correlation, "opposition" can be replaced with the concept of political reform.

So, ultimately, it is clear that a democratic transition is unlikely to be implemented through the agenda of the Legislative Assembly, whilst a growing political liberalism can arise through the introduction of political reforms. These, even if they originated and aim for specific political contexts, are difficult to dismantle due to costs in terms of public opposition.

6.3 Opportunity to formulate preferences

As we have seen previously, the level of democracy may be assessed using different indicators. These may change names, but all focus on three aspects: the degree to formulate preference, the capacity to signify them, and the opportunity to have them weighted equally in conduct of government (See Appendix 2). With a specific focus on the first aspect, the current state of affairs of different aspects will now be described: the freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression, the right of political leaders to compete for support, and the availability of alternative sources of information.

6.3.1 Freedom to form and join organizations

This point is perhaps the most complex and controversial. Freedom of association mainly involves three areas:

1. Labor Unions
2. Human Rights Organizations
3. Political Parties

In the current state of affairs, this freedom is formally guaranteed by the Article 25 of the Constitution, which specifies that:

Citizens have the right to freedom of speech and freedom of the press, and the right of access to information, the right to *assembly*, the right to *association*, and the right to demonstrate. The Law shall prescribe the exercise of those rights. (DEA, 2013)

The last sentence of the above article clearly states that specific laws below the Constitution regulate different spheres of associational life.

Regarding labor unions, it must be said that, in practice, freedom of association is not allowed. Every category of organization is understood within other umbrella organizations.²² In the labour case, for instance, every association is listed within the Vietnam General

²² The three main ways to register an organisation in Vietnam are: 1) Formal registration 2) Stamp 3) By-law. Every single form of registration implies different regulations and laws to follow.

Confederation of Labour (VGCL). However, the situation drastically changed in January 2021, when independent worker representative organizations became legal under the Worker Representative Organization (WRO) (Buckley, 2021). In the new Labour Code, the WROs are referred to as “grassroots worker representative organisations” (*tổ chức đại diện người lao động tại cơ sở*) or as “enterprise-level worker representative organisations” (*tổ chức đại diện người lao động tại doanh nghiệp*) (Bộ luật Lao động 2019, as cited in Buckley, 2021, p. 83). These representative organisations are now allowed to engage in collective bargaining and organized strikes at the enterprise level. This latter aspect was a strong traditional feature of Vietnamese workers as a way to advance better labouring conditions. The aspect was so rooted that the state abandoned the traditional labor union schema thus creating the WRO. The ultimate goal of these organizations is to reduce the number of strikes through a “harmonious labour relation (*quan hệ lao động hài hòa*) between the state and the workers (Buckley, 2021). For some scholars like Buckley (2021), this is an attempt to put working protests in a normative framework, making it easier for the state to control such phenomena. In particular, the scholar states that:

Rather than being a progressive step forward, freedom of association reforms are an attempt by capital to reduce labour militancy. Workers have been using effective forms of self-organised, wildcat militancy for two decades, which have led to significant improvements in terms of wages, conditions and national policy.

Concurrently, Vietnam’s “hyper-liberal” capitalism is the same neo-liberalism which has served to totally undermine independent trade unions in places where they were once effective. Because existing forms of resistance have worked in Vietnam, workers have not been demanding independent organisations. Rather, such demands have come from capital. (Buckley 2021, p. 80)

With a closer look at the data, it is impressive how well working demands were met during strikes, with a success rate over 90 per cent (ILO, 2017, as cited in Buckley, 2021, p. 81). These strikes brought significant changes, such as wage rise, minimum wage, and legal reforms. However, the same data must be critically considered. I believe these data just represent the final stage of the decisional pyramid. It is true that strikes are now allowed, but they must be previously approved by the VGCL after passing through a number of lengthy bureaucratic procedures. The instances may be thus rejected for a variety of reasons by the control organization. So, it would be highly possible that the same VGCL just approves those strikes whose demands are already agreed to be granted by the same organization. So, data may be biased in the sense that we can see only those “successful” strikes that have been

allowed, ignoring all the rejected demands. A weighted analysis in this sense should show a much lower percentage of successful strikes.

So, at a first sight, this normalization of working conditions comes from outside the Vietnamese One-Party system. In this sense, liberal political economy pushed the Party toward a more comprehensive system. Assuming this premise, it would imply that the same mechanism may apply to other spheres of society such as freedom of expression and to human rights activists. Also, if it was the case of a detent effect, it is possible to affirm the government is orienting itself slightly toward a political change.

Regarding the formation of human rights associations, this practice is still prohibited. In early 2019, The United Nations Human Rights Council organized the Human Rights Cycle III, where Vietnamese delegates attended the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). In the report that was issued, it is said that “since the previous review, Viet Nam has made great efforts to improve its law, institutions, and policies on human rights, providing a solid framework that has yielded encouraging achievements in practice” (Ministry of foreign affairs, 2019, as cited in Vietnam Human Rights Report, 2020, p. 5). As it will be described in the next Chapter, civil society in Vietnam must be interpreted in the triangulation between the state and the market economy. The same discourse helps us to understand how, in the current state of affair, it is implausible to foresee a transition toward political pluralism.

6.3.2 Freedom of expression

This is a particularly hot topic in Vietnam. Regarding freedom of press and access to information, independent or privately-owned media are still prohibited by the Vietnamese government. Strict control is also exerted over radio, television, and printed publications (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Freedom of speech is formally guaranteed by the article 25 of the 2013 Constitution, which says:

The citizen shall enjoy the right to freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of the press, freedom of access to information, and freedom to assemble, form associations and hold demonstrations. The exercise of these rights is guaranteed under the law.

(DEA, 2013)

However, although a range of human rights is guaranteed by the Constitution, the Criminal Code contains numerous provisions that the Government uses to prosecute those people whose ideas “go against the Party way”. These operations of conviction are now substantially transposed online. In fact, over two-thirds of the Vietnamese population (64 million people) now have access to the internet (Amnesty International, 2021). Now, with the capillarity of

social media, Vietnamese people are provided with a platform where they can express their opinions and share ideas, an opportunity most Vietnamese had not enjoyed before. While this opening to the world has brought greater opportunities to get a variety of information, express one's thought, and exercise human rights, it also provided Vietnamese authorities with an efficient means to conduct surveillance over its people's feelings and, eventually, means to target government critics as well.

From an economic point of view, this greater internet connectivity is due to the migration of some companies, such as Yahoo, to Vietnamese soil. This brought a considerably high revenue to the disposal of the Vietnamese government.²³ However, on the other hand, this new situation represented a challenge for the Party, which started in 2006 by enforcing a variety of dispositions to curb political activism and dissent online—an example being the law on cybersecurity that was passed in June 2018 by Vietnam's National Assembly (Humans Right Watch, 2019). Sometimes additional methods that fall outside the legal framework are still used, such as online harassment, intimidation, physical assault and prosecution. On October 25th, Facebook signed a document with the Ministry of Information and Communications where the company²⁴ will be committed to limiting anti-state posts (BBC, 2021).

To conclude, the internet and digital media should have been a great chance to transform political practices in Vietnam. Until now, the internet and social networks have become the battleground where the government continues to reinforce its power and where Vietnamese citizens express their dissent. However, despite the above conditions, the internet remains a place difficult to control, thus providing digital tools with which to share ideas and achieve valuable information: the essential basis of a confrontation with the government and, eventually, political change.

6.3.3 Right of political leaders to compete for support

Even on this point, Vietnam does not display much freedom, even if some changes occurred during these last years. Self-nominated delegates find structural obstacles in their competition against party members. These obstacles are present both in how competitiveness

²³ In 2018, Facebook's income from Viet Nam neared US\$1 billion—almost a third of all its revenue in Southeast Asia. Google earned US\$475 million in Vietnam during the same period, primarily based on YouTube advertising (Amnesty International 2021, p. 11).

²⁴ This regards all the services within the Meta Platforms.

is regulated and in the “structure” (*Cơ cấu*) of the legislature. This is the same structure that impedes free and fair elections, due to the five-gate veto system. To understand this point, it is important to have a look at the Vietnamese electoral system.

Vietnam’s political power structure is organized into three pillars: The Communist Party of Vietnam, the government, and the National Assembly. This last institute serves as the country's parliament and its duties are the same as its homologue: passing new laws or amending existing ones. However, its peculiarity is in its election of the Party's president, the prime minister, and the judges of the Supreme Court (Knödler, May 21, 2021). Its fundamental role within the system is thus writ clear. The administrative elections follow strictly defined guidelines and bring about the appointment of deputies of the National Assembly as well as members of the People’s Councils at every level—provincial, district, and communal. So, in every voter turnout, people choose candidates both for the local People’s Councils and for deputies of the National Assembly.²⁵ These votes are then transformed into counting towards the nominee of the Party's members (Knödler, May 21, 2021).

Vietnamese elections have been held every five years since the reunification of the two regions in 1976. The country has a bloc voting system in which each district is assigned two or three seats according to different criteria and in which voters can express as many preferences as their district has seats. Competition is assured by law, because each district must have two more candidates than seats available.²⁶ Political competitiveness is generally regulated by the 2015 Election Law whilst specific important details are decided by the Central Election Commission²⁷ (*Hội đồng bầu cử Quốc gia*) and provincial election boards (Schuler, 2021). It is here that both the number of candidates and who exactly appears on the ballot are decided. Technically, this number depends on the population count and on the level of the voting—that is, whether elections are held at the provincial, district, or communal level and is from time to time decided by the Central Election Commission. Here, a principle of competitiveness is given by the fact that the above Commission sends candidates nominated by central institutions to compete against those candidates that are provincially nominated.

²⁵ It is interesting how, Unlike in most other countries, voters do not mark the candidate they want to vote for, but rather cross out the candidates they do not want to vote for.

²⁶ See paragraph 6 of Article 57 of the 2015 Election Law. *On election of deputies to the National Assembly and People’s Councils* in the bibliography.

²⁷ Sometimes referred to as the “National Election Council”.

However, this procedure is flawed because the VNASC, which is juridically superior to the Election Commission, is entitled by the law to decide how many delegates each province receives. Even if the population is the main guideline, the Standing Committee grants some provinces more delegates than others. Considering that the Election Law also fixes the minimum number of delegates at six, it must be said that this brings forth an evident underrepresentation of some provinces (Schuler, 2021). Malapportionment is generated in the nomination of the provincial leader representative in the CPV Central Committee, but it is then also replicated in the Party institutions as well. So, despite the fact that every province is autonomously divided into districts and there are more candidates than seats available, this is only a nominally “competitive” electoral system. This is because the Electoral Law is continuously rewritten by the VNASC according to the specific governmental goals for the upcoming elections.²⁸

The other point that hinders candidates from competing is their independence. In terms of representation, pluralism is broadened by the presence of two types of delegates: non-Party members and self-nominees. The latter may be either Party members or non-Party members. There is also a residual category of candidates who are both non-Party and non-self-nominees. These are those who are chosen by organizations under the Fatherland Front. In the end, it is the VNA, under the supervision of the VNASC, that is entitled to this appointment (Schuler, 2021). Both kinds of delegates are necessary for giving the National Assembly a veneer of credibility. In this framework, self-nominees are essential for the democratic rhetoric, according to which anyone could become a delegate, thus increasing the degree of choice (representativeness) of voters. As the former VNA Office vice-chair Nguyen Sy Dung said, “Democracy not only depends on the percentage of self-nominees elected, but also depends more on the ability to choose. If there are more self-nominees then voters will have the more opportunity to choose” (Chau, 2016, as cited in Schuler, 2021, p. 53). Even if this discourse may be true in general terms, it finds strong and exponential difficulties in the election process. In the 2021 election, out of the 499 elected officials, only four were self-nominees and just 14 were non-Party members²⁹. The latter represent just 2.8% of the total number of

²⁸ The law was amended or rewritten in 1980, 1992, 1997, 2001, and 2015 (Schuler 2021, p. 51).

²⁹ It is worth noting how self-nominees are non-Party members as well. So, of the 14 total non-Party members that were elected, 4 were self-nominees and 10 were other candidates advanced from other organizations. To distinguish the two, self-nominees are sometimes indicated as “independent”.

candidates, whereas self-nominees count for 0.80%. Both figures show a dramatic drop from 2016, in which self-nominees represented 5% of candidates, and the number of non-Party members was 21. However, it is more impressive to look at how non-party or self-nominated members are “purged” during the election process (The Vietnamese Magazine, June 14, 2021; IFES, May 23, 2021).

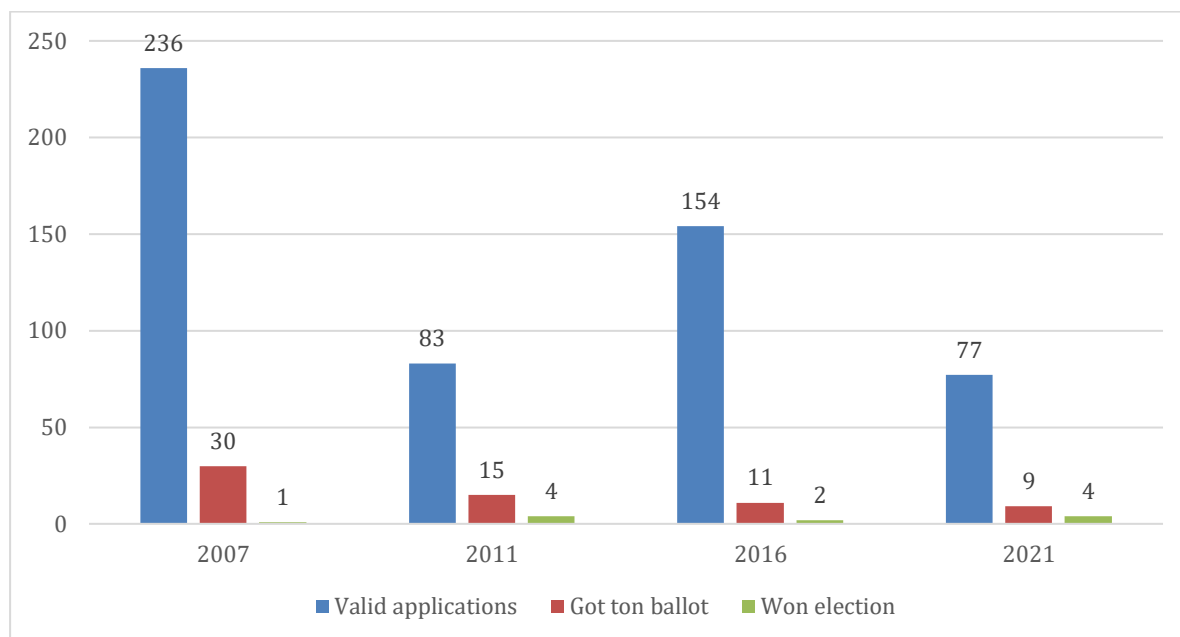
Since the governmental and other important institutions’ members are drawn from the centrally nominated candidates, it is extremely important for the Party to control this vetting process. The entire procedure of selection is divided into five steps (See Appendix 4). The first negotiation (*hiệp thương*) regards the incoming structure of the VNA itself. It is the VNASC which decides the apportionment of the 500 seats into different quotas (Schuler, 2021).³⁰ So, the first negotiation results in a list of various demographic groups and organizations that will be presented.³¹ Also, in a matrix, the same VNASC decides in which composition these quotas should be partitioned between the Fatherland Front, the government, and the local Party apparatus. It is extremely important to notice how there is no guideline of this latter point in the Election Law; the allocation is extremely biased in favour of the Party. If we overlap what is stated in the Election Law with the VNASC partitioning, non-party members and self-nominees are extremely disadvantaged. Article 89 of the Election Law says that 10% of the total seats are allocated to non-party members. However, this situation represents only what they can achieve in theory (On election of Deputies [...], 2015). As it is described above, in the 2021 election, they accounted for just 2.8%.

In the second stage of the negotiation, once positions are allocated, the various organizations (central, provincial, district, and communal) nominate individual candidates for VNA positions. In order to have political competitiveness, the number of candidates must be higher than the equivalent seats. It is at this stage of the process that self-nominees are allowed to submit their applications to run for elections.

After the nomination of candidates in the previous step, the third and fourth gates are devoted to their actual selection. In every meeting the qualifications (*tiêu chuẩn*) and

³⁰For a more detailed analysis of the data, see: Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2021, May 25).

³¹At least 18% of total official National Assembly candidates are ethnic minorities (Article 8, Par. 2); 35% of total official National Assembly candidates are women (Article 8, Par. 3). 10% vacancies out of total National Assembly deputies elected at the early term (Article 89, Par. 1) (On election of Deputies [...], 2015).

Table 2*Self-nominated candidates in the VNA*

Sources: Radio Free Asia 2021, May 22; Schuler, 2021; The Star 2021, June 11; VietnamNews 2021, March 20.

Table 3*Matrix of possible candidates' position*

	Self-nominated	Non-self-nominated
Party member	Candidates advanced by the Party both for running the election and for challenging against non-Part self-nominated candidates	Candidates directly proposed and sustained by the Party
Non-Party member	Independent candidates not affiliated with the Party nor with other umbrella organizations	Candidates nominated by those organizations linked to the Fatherland Front (FF) or by the FF itself.

competences of the candidate are assessed, and only those who meet the criteria are voted for. Here, non-Party members in general and self-nominees must participate in a meeting with neighborhood voters. This is the stage where many independent applicants are removed from consideration, as it is left to the Party to decide whom to invite to these meetings. So, the Party may exert pressure on independent candidates through the selection of attendees to the meeting, who usually are members of mass organizations like the Fatherland Front. Results show how members of mass organizations, and the party are more likely to be invited and the meetings compared to unaffiliated (See Table 2.1 and 2.1 in Schuler 2021, p. 57).

During the last and fifth gate, the third negotiation takes place. Here, the Fatherland Front engages a new assessment of what emerged from the meetings with coworkers for the centrally nominated candidates and with voters from the neighborhood for the self-nominees. The result is a provisional list of candidates for the elections that is sent to the Central Election Commission. This second stage serves just as a double-check prior to again sending the list of candidates to the provinces for the official ballot (Schuler, 2021).

6.3.3.1 Further reflections on the Vietnamese political system. A careful look at Vietnamese elections shows how this system has profound contradictions from a polyarchical point of view. However, several considerations must be done prior to leaving the reader to conclusions.

First of all, VNA's elections just represent a predictable result after the Party congress at the beginning of the year. Once the political line is decided after Party members are elected, there is not great room for maneuver for the following parliamentary elections. This is particularly evident at the poles of the vetting process. Here, the upcoming structure of the VNA is partitioned, leaving little space to self-nominees during the first negotiation, and a final "sifting" is made by the Central Committee before sending the final list of candidates for the ballots. It is especially in these phases that candidates have no voice in the selection procedure. Everything is commissioned to institutions close to the central Party such as the VNASC, which justify their preferences as "the best choice for the state". So, it is true that all these mechanisms are made to preserve the Party's privileges.

However, it must be recognized how the same system seeks to maintain a high level of representation of the Vietnamese population. This is done on two fronts. First of all, it is peculiar to see provincially named candidates concurrently listed on ballots along with centrally proposed candidates. This is intentionally made to respect regionalism without losing the central grip, thus avoiding a two-tiered society. Further, for the same principle, every social class must be represented. This aims at defending different social proposals and

needs at parliament. Secondly, although there are no official quotas, there is great opportunity for minorities to be represented. Every year the percentage of seats held by women is around 35%,³² whilst ethnic minorities approximately comprise at least 18%. It is thus discernible that a matrix of social interests receives considerable consideration.

6.4 Summary

In conclusion, this chapter demonstrated that anomalies exist within the Vietnamese system. However, a vision detached from the democratic model allows us to see positive elements. To have a more neutral view, therefore, we should separate the concept of political liberalization previously expressed from what could be defined as an “ideological liberalization” process. The ideological rigidity of the Party is aimed solely at the preservation of its structure—like any political system, polyarchic or not. This is coherent with the foreword of this thesis. All the elements that hinder the free expression of civil society must therefore be interpreted in this sense: as an attempt to stifle any form of political delegitimization. The fact that this control has only a political nature can be seen from the support of requests that apparently seem irreconcilable with an authoritarian regime; requests from the same civil society that are approved or tolerated by the Party, such as those regarding the environment or human rights.³³

³² This data is quite impressive, considering that the global average percentage of women in the Parliament is just 24%. In Asia, there is a dramatic drop, where it is registered as 19%. Italy for instance, which has quotas for women in the Parliament, registered 36% in 2019 (UN Women, 2020).

³³ A clear example of those demands which at first sight seem incompatible with an authoritarian regime, is that of the same sex-marriages, which are symbolically recognized.

7 Why Vietnam is not a full polyarchy — Some political predictions

This chapter is intended to give a final overview to what was discussed in the previous chapters. In the first part, the difference between the concepts of polyarchy and pluralism are clarified. Contrary to commonly thought, the two terms, despite being correlated, do not indicate the same phenomenon. Polyarchy is then considered in relation to the Vietnamese political system. In the second part, it is again explained why and in what ways the Communist Party of Vietnam has legitimized civil society, and what role it has in the process of political liberalization. The chapter then concludes with a prediction of future trends in civil society and government behaviour.

7.1 Pluralism and Polyarchy

In order to understand its differences and points of contact with that of pluralism, and how Vietnam may be considered in relation to them, let us first revisit what “polyarchy” is, exactly. The concept of polyarchy was systematized for the first time by Dahl and Lindblom as a *process* toward the ideal form of democracy (Dahl, 1984). For Dahl, democracy has never been fully achieved and represents an unattainable form of government. In addition, polyarchy may also be analyzed as a set of *institutions*: as a type of regime, as a product of democratizing nation-states, as a necessity for the democratic process, as a system of control by competition, and as a system of rights.

On the other hand, the concept of pluralism is essential to explain the social and political changes after the transition in scale from the *city-state* to *nation-state* level. As explained in Chapter 2, the city-state is the stage where democracy found its highest form of development. On the contrary, the latter and new paradigm fully realized itself with the Industrial Revolution, when industries started to require ever more skilled labour. This, in turn, brought a social differentiation into organizations, associations, clubs etc—all aggregates of people with the same interests and requests. It was hence this situation that brought forth a shift from a *monistic* form of democracy toward a *pluralist* one. In this regard, Dahl (1984) wrote that “polyarchy requires a considerable degree of social pluralism — that is, a diversity of social organization with a large measure of autonomy with respect to one another” (p. 232). So, the expansion of social interests broke down the previous typical local unit of the city-state, paving the way from a fairly homogeneous society in race, ethnicity, religion, language, status, wealth etc. toward a functional specialization (Dahl, 1984).

All things considered, it could be affirmed that Vietnam is still anchored to the city-state model in a sense. The ideal of a *common* good, typical of the city-state perspective, has always been at the center of Vietnamese political activity. In a Marxist-Leninist paradigm, this ideal is particularly strong, due to the state's pervasiveness into people's lives. It is more difficult then for the Vietnamese Party to accept diversities that may tend to prevent citizens from perceiving or pursuing common interests, thus weakening social cohesion and political consensus (Dahl, 1984). The presence of recognized subgroups would lead them to advance their particular interests by organizing themselves into political associations. At present, this is hardly possible in Vietnam, since the Party exerts control on the VNA to preserve its power. Nevertheless, despite the fact that political pluralism is not going to be adopted, social pluralism is present. As it is discussed in the thesis, economic reforms gave birth to evident social changes. Among these novelties, there was a process of relaxation of controls toward civil society. It was the symbiosis of a traditional communist model and a market economy that created the space for a civil society class restoration (Bui, 2013). In these conditions, the liberal market is responsible for civil society's elevation from the status of totally ruled by the Party-state, to that of "tolerated", "endorsed", and then finally recognized by it. Nevertheless, this class not only served to sustain economic growth, but helped the central government to fill an administrative gap, thus also playing a role in the governance network. In other terms, the state organized the class' presence while still looking at it with suspicion, thus embracing the dual challenge of stirring the market economy while framing civil society's push toward political and social liberalization. In this sense, the government has found it useful to take advantage of the various roles civil society performs for societal control; for example, by organizing it into specific organizations (Bui, 2013). Nonetheless, with time, civil society gained more space and autonomy, having now the potential to run beyond the government's direct and capillary control.

With these considerations in mind, it could be hypothesized that Vietnam's late economic development and its historic predominantly commercial or agricultural economy may have retarded the process of social inclusion in pluralist terms. Just as well, a second hypothesis could be that the ideal of a common good, a communion between the Party and the citizenry, is much stronger than society's general trend towards fragmentation. This need to focus on a nation-shared common good is a stimulus to impede centrifugal, disruptive forces. However, this thesis is not especially concerned with this latter aspect.

7.2 Mobilizing and complementary role of civil society

As aforementioned, it is demonstrable how the prominent role of certain groups of civil society is to counterbalance state power. Civic organizations represent the best way through which citizens can cooperatively and collectively express their needs. However, it is also true that this mobilizing role is certainly more difficult in single-party systems. In this regard, there is evidence on how the proliferation of NGOs in Vietnam, after the economic reforms, failed to mobilize civil society as a whole because of its close ties with the state as well as its donor-driven and urban-based characteristics (Gray, 1999, as cited in Nguyen, 2021, p.113). It is important to note here how civil society may bring political liberalization not necessarily through direct confrontation. For instance, “civil society can act as the collective effort to supervise the state’s actions and protect vulnerable groups rather than as a source of regime-change movements” (Nguyen 2021, p. 113). When it really assumes the form of collective will, it can benefit from political weakness putting pressure for a reversal of unpopular decisions. This increasing effort that civil society exerts towards advancing proposals has led the Party to list it “as one of 27 ‘dangerous tendencies’ that deteriorate the integrity of Party members and threaten the regime’s existence” (CPV, 2016, as cited in Nguye, 2021, p. 114). This fear of the central apparatus indirectly demarcates the more prominent status that what we can call an “active society” is striving to achieve. In this sense, if civil society is considered as an independent actor between the state and the market, then the Party’s statement is fully reasonable.

7.3 Summary

This Chapter showed how Vietnam cannot be considered a polyarchy in a broader sense. Nevertheless, pluralism is present in the relations between the central government and civic associations. These, in turn, have proven how it is possible to start a political liberalization process without a direct confrontation with the Party. In fact, there is evidence of reversals of unpopular policy decisions. When civil society does not suffice for these scopes, grassroots activism further spurs on society in general.

To conclude, it is highly unlikely that civil society will bring political pluralism in the foreseeable future. However, its constant and evident effort, is not only preventing the government from making arbitrary decisions, but will also probably lead to a recognition and conservation of civic rights in the following decades.

8 Conclusions

This thesis aimed at explaining which factors may account for political change in Vietnam, using the concept of polyarchy as an analytical lens. This approach guided the analysis on Vietnamese people's capacity to formulate preferences, with a focus on the institutional guarantees that should be present in every government in order to approach the idealistic democracy. In this regard, it is demonstrable how the Vietnamese government is not going to display a more polyarchical form of government in the short-term. This is due to several factors. On the external front, the adoption of a multi-party, or a more "politically liberalized" system, may create friction with Vietnam's neighbor: China. It would be difficult for Beijing to publicly justify an eventual Vietnamese transition toward another political model from a government that, on the whole, testifies to a strong social and economic development. Internally, political change in the form of "justice", "civilization", and "democratization" remains a sensitive debate since it is feared that it will facilitate political pluralism, thus threatening the stability of Vietnamese one-Party apparatus.

It was then shown how there is evidence that the Vietnamese Assembly is not pushing for political change. However, once certain institutions are approved (such as the veto system), their removal by the party is very unlikely. This is perhaps the greatest element that may help the government to move away from structural inertia. It is presently unclear for how long economic development will sustain social stability. There is the risk that an eventual economic bottleneck brings a governmental legitimization, as was shown by the fall of Suharto government of Indonesia in 1998 after the Asian Financial Crisis. One way to avoid this phenomenon in Vietnam is for the Party to abandon its fixation with the present model and its strict ideologies about the economy and state-society relations. This approach will no longer help in generating the flexibility needed to modernize institutions and economic structures.

To conclude, real progress can be made through a consensus basis where a plurality of interests is recognized and evolves from a productive dialogue. This would be a valid strategy towards the creation of a stabilizing force based on shared interests rather than fixed ideologies that fulfill self-serving interests. Resistance concerning the separation of powers, civil society, and political pluralism should be debated in an open and sympathetic form, respecting Vietnamese practices and culture.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1

Types of Vietnamese Organizations included in category.

Category	Types of organizations included in category	Relation to the state	Vietnamese definition
Mass Organizations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Women's Union 2. Farmers' Association 3. Youth Organization 4. War Veterans Association 5. Worker's Organization (VGCL) 	Fatherland Front	Socio-Political Organizations
Professional Associations and Umbrella Organizations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Umbrella organizations like Red Cross, VUSTA, VUAL, Cooperative Alliance, etc. 2. Professional Associations 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fatherland Front 2. Registered with an umbrella organization, Center or provincial organization 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Socio-Professional Associations 2. Social and professional associations; some belong to the NGOs
VNGOs	Charity Research NGOs Consultancy NGOs Educational NGOs Health NGOs	VUSTA, Line Ministries, Provincial or District People's Committees	Social Organizations, NGOs
Community-based Organizations	Service and development or livelihoods-oriented Faith-based organizations Neighborhood groups Family clans Recreative groups	Indirect affiliation to other organizations or Civil Code Many are not registered	Rural collaborative groups Faith-based organizations Neighborhood groups Family clans

Source: Nørlund 2006, p. 11.

Appendix 2

Middle class defined by the level of income

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Formula</i>
1. <i>Distance from the median</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Two-thirds and twice the national medians, thus from 67 to 200 percent of median income (Pew Review Center, 2015) b. Income band of 50 to 150 percent around the median (Krueger, 2012) c. 75 to 125 percent around the median (Birdsall et al., 2000)
2. <i>Range of the distribution</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Three quintiles measure (in the middle) (Easterly, 2001) b. Two quintiles measure c. Second -and third- income quintiles (Reeves & Busette, 2019) d. Third and fourth quintiles (Alesina & Perotti, 1994)
3. <i>Distance from poverty</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. 150 percent of the poverty level (Rose, 2016) b. 300 percent of the poverty level (Sawhill & Haskins, 2009)
4. Absolute <i>purchasing power</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Income between \$11 an \$100 daily per person (2011) - widespread measure b. \$50 daily expenditure per person (2005) (Kharas, 2018) c. Daily expenditure between \$2 and \$10 in developing countries (2005) (Banerjee & Duflo, 2008)

Sources: various authors

Appendix 3

Dahl's table — Some Requirements for a Democracy among a Large Number of People

For the opportunity to:	The following institutional guarantees are required:
I. Formulate preferences	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Freedom to form and join organizations 2. Freedom of expression 3. Right to vote 4. Right of political leaders to compete for support 5. Alternative sources of information
II. Signify preferences	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Freedom to form and join organizations 2. Freedom of expression 3. Right to vote 4. Eligibility for public office 5. Right of political leaders to compete for support 6. Alternative sources of information 7. Free and fair elections
III. Have preferences weighted equally in conduct of government	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Freedom to form and join organizations 2. Freedom of expression 3. Right to vote 4. Eligibility for public office 5. Right of political leaders to compete for support <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5a. Right of political leaders to compete for votes 6. Alternative sources of information 7. Free and fair elections 8. Institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference

Source: Dahl 2007, p. 3.

Appendix 4

The “five gates” system of vetting

Gate 1 — First Negotiation	At this stage the 500 hundred seats are partitioned into quotas — Non-Party members are marginalized
Gate 2— Second Negotiation	Once the structure is set, organizations nominate candidates (more candidates than available seats) and self-nominees submit their applications
Gate 3 and 4 — Meeting with constituents and with coworkers	Candidates’ qualifications are assessed by their coworkers for Party members and by the neighborhood for self-nominees
Gate 5 — Third Negotiation	The Fatherland Front evaluates the provisional list of candidates and expresses its opinion to the Central Election Commission. The CEC sends the final and approved version to the provinces for the ballot.

Source: This is a systematic review of Chapter Two of Schuler, 2021.

Figures

Figure 1. Ngọc, H. (2015). Storia e Geopolitica del Vietnam. *Limes*, 29(8), 116-125.

Figure 2. Ngọc, H. (2015). Storia e Geopolitica del Vietnam. *Limes*, 29(8), 116-125.

Figure 3. Ngọc, H. (2015). Storia e Geopolitica del Vietnam. *Limes*, 29(8), 116-125.

