



## A Vietnamese Perception on Democracy and Democracy as a Source of the Communist Party of Vietnam's Legitimacy

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### Abstract

This study aims to examine the perception of Vietnamese voters on democracy and democracy as a source of the Communist Party of Vietnam's legitimacy. The Communist Party of Vietnam, the dictatorial ruling party of Vietnam since the unification of the country in April 1975, has based their legitimacy on the claims that they liberated the working class through proletarian revolution, fought for the independence of the country, and has been developing the economy of the country so as to give Vietnamese better standard of living. However, as waves of democratization sweeping the world and democracy is usually perceived as a more preferable system than dictatorship by the people, the Communist Party of Vietnam has been attempting to maintain their legitimacy by putting a lot of effort in presenting themselves as a democratic regime. In order to study Vietnamese perception on democracy and democracy as a source of the Communist Party of Vietnam's legitimacy, the author surveyed more than one thousand Vietnamese in the course of two weeks after the 2016 parliamentary election of Vietnam. The respondents are Vietnamese voters who were selected using convenience sampling, one type of non-probability sampling. The outcomes were startling but not surprising, the majority of Vietnamese voters expressed disbelief on the country's political situation in general and government's transparency and accountability in particular. Respondents also revealed that they prefer a more democratic and transparent regime. Most respondents also prefer democracy, arguing that being democratic plays a critical role in economic development. However, according to them, a multiparty electoral system is not the most important criterion for democracy. Some respondents showed a great deal of tolerance to the Communist Party despite acknowledging its bad governance and widespread corruption, which may suggest that the Communist Party of Vietnam is still perceived to be obedient-worthy by a certain proportion of the population. These results suggest the relevance of recent economic growth, the rise of nationalism and, perhaps to a lesser extent, socialism as a state building ideology as sources of the legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Public Perception, Democracy, Legitimacy

### Introduction

At 7:32 p.m. December 26<sup>th</sup> 1991, the Soviet flag on top of the Kremlin was replaced with the Tricolor flag of Russia, marking the collapse of the Soviet Union. The long decline and consequently the downfall of the Soviet Union, one of the only two super powers in the world at that time had led to the breakdown of the bipolar world order had resulted in the collapse of more than thirty dictatorial regimes in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and East Asia (Huntington, 1991, p. 21) in the 1960s and 1970s. As one of the closest allies of the Soviet Union at that time, Vietnam was among the hardest hit, however, unlike many of its Communist comrades, the Communist Party of Vietnam survived this tumultuous period and managed to maintain its status as the *de facto* undisputed ruling political party of Vietnam. In large part, the survival of the Communist Party of Vietnam was the result of Doi Moi, a timely initiated economic reform. Facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles, hardliners within the ranks of the Communist Party's politburo chose to peacefully step down to make way for more open-minded reformers to initiative a series of new economic policies which shifted the Soviet-styled centrally planned economy to a more free economy branded *Socialist-oriented market economy* by the then Vietnamese government (Nguyen and Robinson, 2017, p. 19).



Although the revival of Vietnam's economy is often credited to Doi Moi, it was the tremendous amount of legitimacy that the Communist Party of Vietnam boasted even after a decade of economic mismanagement and constant war that enabled the party to carry out economic reform (Ibid). It is commonly agreed upon that legitimacy is vital to the survivability of any political regime in the long run, from despotic monarchies to pluralistic democracies. While scholars agree that effective authority or de facto authority does exist, it is political legitimacy that separates it from legitimate authority (Rawls, 2007, p. 124; Pitkin, 1965, pp. 991–999; Simmons, 1976, pp. 274–291; Raz, 1986, p. 46). The stability and resilience of the Communist Party of Vietnam seem to suggest that it does possess certain level of political legitimacy. Without its legitimacy, the party would have suffered the same fate that had befallen its counterparts in Eastern Europe, let alone admitted to its mistakes and embraced changes. Traditionally, similar to the Communist Party of China, main sources of the legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam derive from their proletarian revolution and their wars against foreign oppressors for national independence and unification (Hiên, 2015). However, more than two decades after the unification of the country with the generations directly participated in the wars slowly but surely replaced by new generations, the legitimacy of the Communist Party showed signs of erosion. Economic growth and improved living standards brought by the timely reform provided the Communist Party of Vietnam with a new source of legitimacy and relieved the party temporarily of the threat of social unrest.

20 years after the initiation of Doi Moi, the Communist Party of Vietnam faced what could be branded, perhaps, another legitimate crisis. This decline in confidence of leadership, first and foremost, reflected people's disbelief on corruption and nepotism scandals and their negative impact on the economy and the society. Corruption and nepotism, which have been a persistent and inevitable characteristic of politics of Vietnam (Business Anti-Corruption Portal (BACP), 2017), combined with the seismic impacts from global economic crises (Herr, Schweisshelm and Vu, 2016), most notably the 1997 Asian financial and the Financial Crisis of 2007–2008 have led to slowdown in economic development and erosion of public trust. Furthermore, Vietnam was experiencing the escalation of the South China Sea conflicts during which many Vietnamese expressed their disapproval of the government's reactions against what they call a series of Chinese aggression and provocation (Ives and Fuller, 2014). In addition, as the volume of trade and cooperation increasing, more and more investment and aid were being channeled to Vietnam from the West (PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), 2017a). Failing to ensure transparency, better governance, and betterment of human rights in return for investment and official development assistance would often draw criticism from the West, thus weaken the international legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Furthermore, the introduction and proliferation of the Internet in Vietnam not only allow for the efficient passage of commercial information but also would provide the populace with new channel through which they can freely discuss the Communist Party's bad governance, misuse of power, corruption, and violation of human rights which can have a negative effect on governments in not only domestically but also can reflect an ugly image of the ruling party in the world community if they are cast as illegitimate, violent, dishonest, or untrustworthy (Best and Wade, 2009). Best efforts of the government to censor the Internet proved fruitless as blockage can usually overcome with simple tools. With more than two third of the population having access to the Internet as of January 2017 and being one of the countries with the fastest Internet penetration growth (Internet World Stats (IWS), 2017), undoubtedly, the Internet is one of the most impactful factors to the Communist Party's legitimacy.



Despite the both the changing global situation and the domestic democracy movements, the Vietnamese Communist party managed to hold a relatively strong grip on the economic, social, and political life in the country. Facing new threats to its legitimacy, the party has been actively shifting its propaganda efforts to combat the perceived erosion of its legitimacy by attempting to emphasize its self-proclaimed democratic nature. However, with the exception of domestic Vietnamese scholars, most political observers and commentators disagree with this point of view (See Kerkvliet, 2015; London, 2014; Jeffries, 2011; Shiraishi, 2000; Thayer, 2014). Vietnamese people's perception on the legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam and that of democracy, however, has been a little touched topic as direct survey would often face difficulties posed by Vietnamese government. This paper aims to partly fill this gap by provide the readers with results of a survey on Vietnamese people's perception on democracy and attempts to examine democracy as a source of the legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam as viewed by Vietnamese three decades after the initiation of Doi Moi.

Democracy is a complex concept, to some, the only condition for democracy is fair and free elections to choose government. To other, however, in addition to elections, democracy entails a list of other conditions, such as the active universal participation of the populace in both politics and civilian life; human rights being ensured to all citizens; and a rule of law (Diamond, 2004). In this paper, the questionnaire, as later explained in details, is designed so what respondents could state their own opinion freely, and then evaluate the current situation of democracy in Vietnam based on that. As a result, their perception on democracy is their personal opinions on the criteria of democracy that they imposed themselves.

#### **Sampling and Implementation of the Survey**

##### **Research Area and Conceptual Framework**

Although much scholarship has been devoted to study post-Soviet dictatorial regimes, it seems that the extreme resilience of the Communist Party of Vietnam has not been paid its due attention. Among the factors that contribute to that enduring survivability, the legitimacy of the party is without doubt one of the deciding ones.

Von Soest and Grauvogel (2015) argue that a ruling regime's legitimacy could be classified into six dimensions, namely (1) political ideology, (2) foundational myth, (3) personalism which based on charismatic leadership, (4) international engagement, (5) procedural legitimacy, and (6) performance legitimacy. This classification is based on the difference between input-based and output-based legitimacy claims as suggested by Easton (1965; 1975) and Weber (2004). Furthermore, Von Soest and Grauvogel (2015) incorporated the procedural and international dimensions purposed by Burnell (2006); Kneuer (2013); Scharpf (1999); Schatz (2006). In those six dimensions, foundational myth, ideology, and personalism can be classified as input based claims, while performance is considered to be output-based, two added dimensions international engagement and procedures are not included in those two categories. This survey hopes to disenchant one of the dimensions of the party's legitimacy, namely its procedure legitimacy through examining the perception of Vietnamese voters towards democracy.

##### **Time and Sampling Method**

To evaluate Vietnamese people's interest in politics and perception on the political environment of Vietnam, the author carried out a survey in the two weeks after the 2016 National Assembly election of Vietnam. The survey used convenience sampling, one type of non-probability sampling. Non-probability sampling is the sampling technique where respondents are not selected proportionally with the population and convenience sampling is the most common type of non-probability sampling (Tansey, 2007). Although true random sampling



is preferable, convenience sampling was chosen due to its ease of use, cheapness, and simplicity. Furthermore, with a rather large population to sample, the author set out to collect as many responses as possible. With that in mind, the use of convenience sampling can be justified. Convenience sampling is also the least time-consuming sampling there is. Given the survey must be carried out within a short period of time right after the parliamentary election when public enthusiasm on politics is still high, convenience sampling proved to be the most advantageous method.

As mentioned earlier, the survey was carried out from May 24<sup>th</sup> to June 6<sup>th</sup> over the course of two weeks after the 2016 legislative election of Vietnam which was held on 22 May. The reason behind such timing was that people's enthusiasm about politics was expected to be higher during the period following elections and thus more likely to answer questionnaire related to that topic. The survey was created using Google forms and was conducted through phone calls and social network, mostly via Facebook. Respondents were contacted directly and asked to answer the survey, they are also asked to direct the author to political enthusiasts who might be interested in answering survey. Only one answer per person is accepted. In total, 1005 answers were collected during the course of the survey.

#### **Expected Shortcomings**

Nevertheless, convenience sampling does possess several inherent drawbacks which could negatively affect the creditability of the survey. Although in principle, any Vietnamese who are interested in politics can response the survey, the fact that the author relies mostly on social network to conduct the survey disproportionately affect the outcomes as only people with a Facebook account could be contacted. As of January 2016, Vietnam has more than 35 million monthly active Facebook users which accounted for nearly 40% of the population. However, the vast majority of Facebook users are 40 year-old or younger, which means that a significant proportion of the populace, mostly the elderly, could not be reached (Internet World Stats (IWS), 2016). Young people are generally more open-minded and as they were born after the Vietnam War, they tend to be affected less by the Communist Party of Vietnam's legitimacy which has been chiefly based on military victories over France and the United States. Another short coming of the survey was the misbalance between respondents from urban and rural areas. As of 2016, 64.5% of Vietnamese population lived in rural areas (Thắng, 2016). However, Internet penetration rate in the country side is much lower than that of metropolitan areas. Consequently, farmers and agricultural workers are not well-represented in this survey. Furthermore, governmental employees and Communist Party members often showed hesitation to, and in many cases, outright refused to response to the survey. There are 2.8 million governmental employees (Vietnamnet, 2016) and 4.4 million Communist Party members in Vietnam (Mai Anh, 2016); although these two numbers do, for the most part, overlap, it is logical to expect that these people were not proportionally represented in this survey. Consequently, if the questionnaire would have been carried out using true random sampling or systematic sampling, the results might have been somewhat different.

#### **Design of the Survey and Data Analysis**

The survey was designed to collect comprehensive information on Vietnamese attitude on democracy and elections in their own country. Based on the author's judgment, respondents may hesitate to answer questions which are deemed sensitive given the current political situation in the country, and as such, personal information which may lead to the their identification were not asked. The first cluster of questions, therefore, only aimed to confirm the bias expected by the author before the implementation of the survey without disclosing the respondents.



To confirm the aforementioned expected disproportion in the distribution of respondents' group age to that of the Vietnamese populace, respondents' age group was enquired in the first question. The respondents are divided into four age groups. (1) People who are under 18 are people are not allowed to vote legally according to the law, and in theory should not respond to this survey. Few, however, for reasons that they would later provide, managed to vote and as such their answers were included in the survey. (2) People who are from 18 to 30 were born after the initiation of Doi Moi in 1986 and firsthand experienced the drastic economic changes in the country throughout their life. (3) People who are from 31 to 45 are people were born and grew up at during the tumultuous period between the end of the Vietnam War and Doi Moi. Although they did not participate in the Second Indochina War as combatants themselves, they experienced the failure of post-war Communist economic policies and then the economic development brought forth by the establishment of market economy in Vietnam. As such, perhaps this generation is in the best position to compare the two systems. (4) People who are over 60 are the ones who directly participated in the Second Indochina War from both sides and tend to have very strong opinion about the Communist Party, either for or against it. Furthermore, most of them are retirees who could hold no important role in the Communist Party and the government and as a result, should be able to express their opinion on rather sensitive issues more freely. In the author's opinion, each age group represents a generation of Vietnamese which was marked by significant change and/or upheaval within the society. This would lead to notable differences in their mindset which would then be reflected in their answers.

The second question addresses the issue of under-representation of people who live in rural areas by giving the respondents three choices for their current location: urban Vietnam, rural Vietnam, and overseas. Location of the respondents may affect their educational level and interests in politics. Urban dwellers are expected to be more highly educated than their rural counterparts. Furthermore, overseas Vietnamese are predicted to be more open-minded about politics than people who are living in Vietnam. Respondents' occupation and whether or not they were working for the Vietnamese government was deemed sensitive information by the author and as such was not mentioned in the survey. However, in hindsight, a question should have been asked on whether or not a respondent works for the government or government-related organizations in order to confirm the theorized hesitation of governmental workers to answer the questionnaire. Nevertheless, of the seven governmental workers and Communist Party members known to the author at the time of the survey, five refused to respond.

The next cluster includes five questions which were designed with the aims to evaluate the perception of respondents on the current political situation of Vietnam and democracy as a source of the Communist Party of Vietnam legitimacy. In particular, the questionnaire examines Vietnamese people's criteria of democracy, preference of democracy over other political systems, and the validity of the single-party socialist republic framework. The survey was designed in a way that the respondents could freely express their opinions about democracy as a source of the legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam first by asking them what democracy is and whether or not they think the current political environment in Vietnam could be considered democratic. The survey then proceeded to examine respondents' point of view on whether or not democracy is relevant to the legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam by asking about their opinion on the relations between democracy and economic development and international influence. The respondents were also asked about how they feel about democracy in Vietnam or the lack thereof.

The first question in this cluster would enquire the respondents on the criteria on which they evaluate whether a regime is democratic or not. A rather comprehensive list which includes both essential criteria according to



definition of democracy by the United Nations (n.d.) such as universal free and fair elections, human rights, criteria which fall into a “gray zone” such as a functional multi-party system and equality of opportunity to everyone, and criteria which are considered to be redundant by the author like universal free education and health care was provided to the respondents. The question was designed this way to not only examine the perception of the respondents on democracy but also to evaluate their knowledge on this topic. The second question directly engaged respondents’ opinion on the current political environment in Vietnam by asking them to choose from one to ten, with ten represents a perfect democracy where people could practice state power directly and indirectly through their representatives and one means an absolute totalitarian regime, which perhaps resembles a feudal absolute monarchy. The third question asked the respondents about whether or not they think that being a democracy would be a prerequisite for a country to be economically developed and politically influential in the world and provided them with four options (1) Yes, democracy is crucial for a country to be economically developed and politically influential, (2) No, democracy is not crucial, but still preferable crucial for a country to be economically developed and politically influential, (3) No, being democracy has no relationship with being economically developed and politically influential, and (4) I do not know. The fourth question asked the respondents to express their satisfaction lack thereof with the current political regime. Respondents could choose one of the following answers (1) Very satisfactory, (2) somewhat satisfactory, (3) neither satisfactory nor dissatisfactory, (4) somewhat dissatisfactory, (5) very dissatisfactory. The last question examined respondents’ opinions on areas that they think the current regime needs improvement. The answers to this question echoed the answers to the first question of this cluster.

Another cluster of questions to evaluate Vietnamese perception on legislative elections, in particular the May 2016 National Assembly election was also included in the survey, but will not be discussed in this paper due to limitation in the scope as this paper concerns only Vietnamese perception on Vietnamese democracy and democracy as a source of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

### Results of the Survey

#### **First Question: What was your age at the time of the time of the election?**

The answers to the first question confirmed the expected disproportionateness between the demographic of Vietnam and the age distribution of respondents. Figure 1 and Figure 2 represent the age distribution of respondents and the demographic of Vietnam in 2016, respectively.

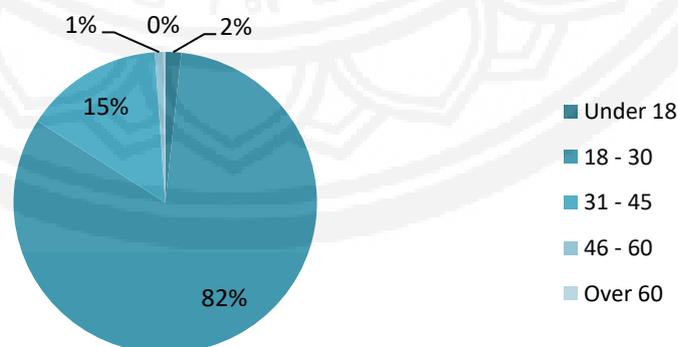


Figure 1 Age distribution of the respondents at the time of the election

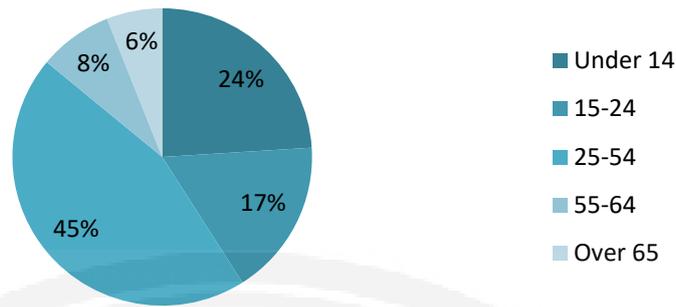


Figure 2 2016 Demographic of Vietnam (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 2018)

The vast majority of respondents were between 18 and 30 year old while another significant proportion belongs to the 31 to 45 age group. Only two percent and one percent of the respondents were under 18 and between 46 and 60 year old, respectively. No respondent was over 60. The disproportionately distributed age group could be explained using low penetration rate of Internet among the elderly (Adcombo, International Market Research, 2017). The statistics shown in Table 1: Age distribution of Facebook users in Vietnam matched with the results displayed in Figure 2.

Table 1 Age distribution of Facebook users in Vietnam

Age	Total	Female	Male
13 - 19	30%	15%	15%
20 - 29	45%	21%	25%
30 - 39	17%	8%	9%
40 - 49	5%	2%	3%
50 - 59	2%	1%	1%
60 +	1%	0%	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>35,000,000</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>54%</b>

**Second Question:** Where was your place of residence at the time of the election?

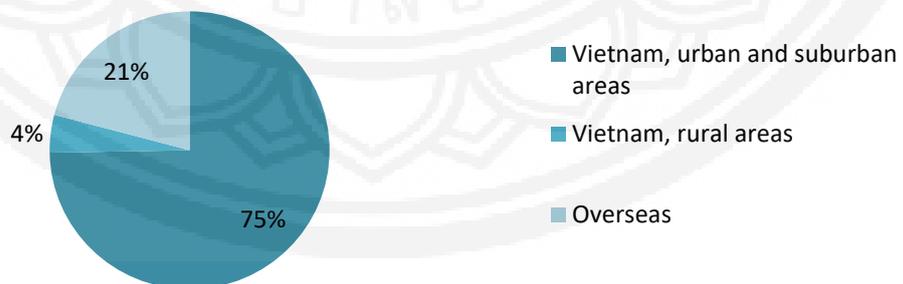


Figure 3 Location of the respondents at the time of the election

According to the results of the survey, three in four respondents were living in urban and suburban Vietnam at the time of the elections. The vast majority of the remaining one-fourth lived overseas. Only approximately 4 percent of the respondents responded that they lived in rural Vietnam when the election was held. This imbalance

in the location of the respondents was expected before the survey was carried out. As reported by Nielsen Rural Study 2014, Internet penetration rate in rural Vietnam among young people between the ages of 18 to 24 years old stood at 30 percent (Tuyet, 2014) while that in urban Vietnam was estimated to be around 95 percent (Cimigo, 2011). However, given the fact that in 2016, 64.5 percent of the Vietnamese population was rural dwellers, this level of disproportionateness came as a mild surprise to the author. Nevertheless, the answers to the second question confirmed another expected short-coming of the survey.

**Third Question: In your opinion, which dimension(s) are needed for a country to be considered as a democracy? Multiple answers allowed**

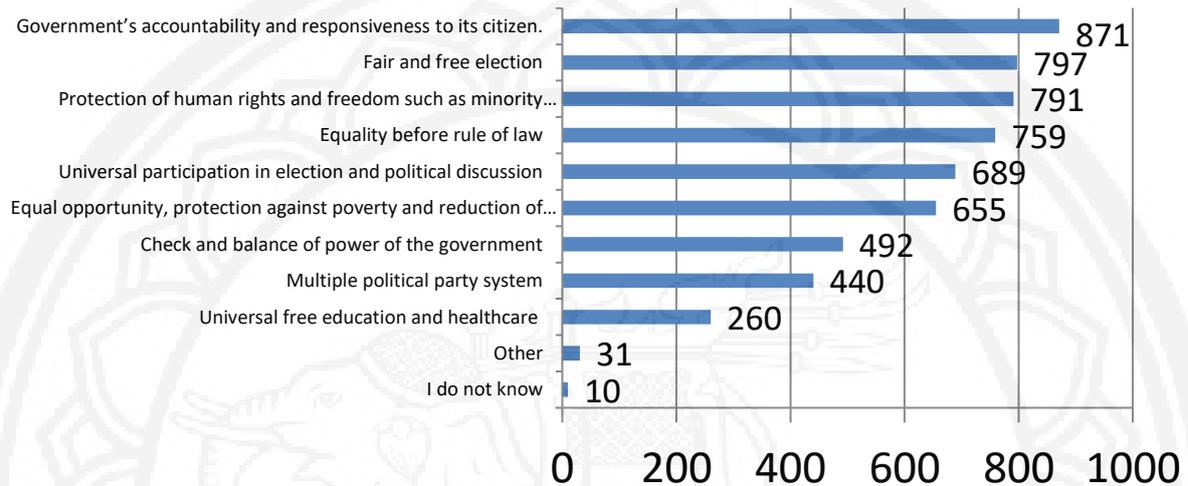


Figure 4 Criteria of a democracy according to Vietnamese voters

Answering the question which conditions are most needed for a country to be considered democratic, almost nine in every ten respondents replied that they prioritize accountability and responsiveness in a government, followed by fair and free elections and protection of human rights. Most respondents further added that they chose the conditions that, in their opinion, lacked the most in Vietnam. The 2016 National Assembly election came amidst a marine life disaster which devastated the livelihood of the people who live along the shoreline of several coastal provinces in Central Vietnam. The disaster was allegedly caused by the illegally discharged industrial waste to the ocean by a steel plant built by the Taiwanese corporation Formosa Plastics. At best, the government was guilty of slow response and irresponsibility; at worst, it was accused of taking bribe to hide the trust from the public. Given that background, it is understandable that the top priorities of Vietnamese at the time were government's transparency and receptivity. Furthermore, in the wake of the crisis, protests were organized in major cities of Vietnam and overseas. The government's efforts to crack down on peaceful protests had incited further disbelief, which, perhaps, had prompted more people to emphasize the importance of human rights, in particular freedom of gathering and freedom of expression. Some respondents linked their answers to the aforementioned Formosa disaster. Time-wise, due to the close proximity of the survey to the election, it is understandable that the majority of respondents stressed the role of fair and free elections in a democracy. More than half of the respondents said that they think equal opportunity, protection against poverty, and reduction of income inequality were a part of a functional democracy. However, voters' view on check and balance of power and a multiple political system was divisive and unexpected. In both cases, more than half of the respondents believed that they are not of vital importance for a country to be considered democratic while the rest believe that they are inseparable from a



functional pluralistic democracy. Some respondents who thought that check and balance of power and a multiple political system are not crucial to democracy also added that they believe that a multiparty system often entails cumbersome political machinery and that a transparent and strong central government controlled by a single party would be more efficient and beneficial. Three respondents pointed out that the Communist Party holds absolutely control over the police apparatus and the People's Army of Vietnam and argued that democracy cannot be realized without transferring the control over law enforcement and military forces back to the people. Using the American electoral system as an example, some respondents believe that people should be able to directly elect the head of the states or the prime minister. Five people argued that without the intellectual level of the people reaching a certain level, true democracy would be impossible to materialize. Only ten respondents chose to admit that they lack the sufficient knowledge to answer this question.

**Fourth Question:** Please grade the current democracy in Vietnam on the scale of one to ten, with one being a perfect pluralistic democracy and 1 being an absolute totalitarian regime

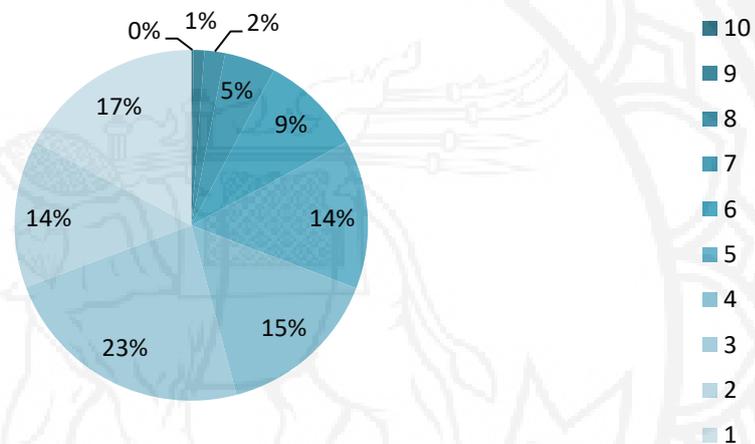


Figure 5 Vietnamese democracy on the scale of 10

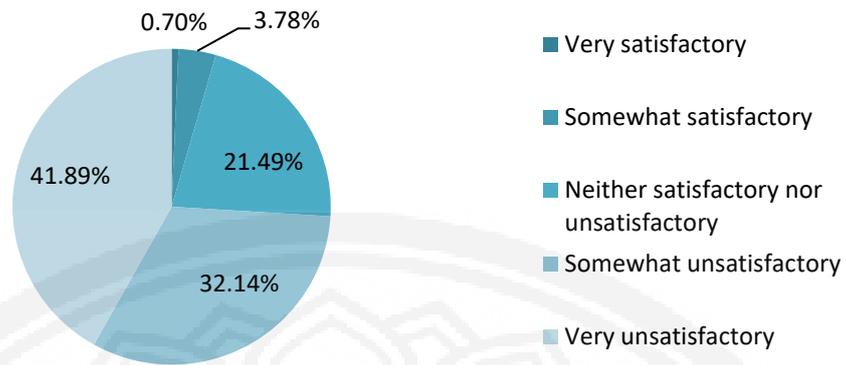
Respondents' answers when asked the question how much they would grade democracy in contemporary Vietnam were rather divisive. On the scale of one to ten, with ten being the ideal democratic system where citizens are allowed to execute the power of the state directly and indirectly through the national assembly to the fullest extent. In contrast, one represents a totalitarian society where ordinary citizens have no meaningful way to express their opinions or practice state power. Few people highly regarded the current situation of democracy in Vietnam, with the people gave from eight to ten points only totaled three percent. The vast majority of the respondents gave from one to five points. The average score given by the 1005 respondents was 3.58 which was very close to the score given by The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (The Economist, n.d.), 3.38. Similarities between the perception of Vietnamese and evaluation of an independent agency showed that despite the Communist Party's restless efforts to use propaganda to enhance their legitimacy, the effect was minimal at least among the younger generations and in general Vietnamese had very pessimistic perception of the political situation in their country. This question only aimed to evaluate respondents' attitude towards the current political situation in Vietnam, the answers on whether they are in favor of democracy or not will be unfolded in the following questions.

**Fifth Question: Do you think that democracy is needed for a country to be economically successful?****Figure 6** Democracy and economic development

Few respondents outright rejected the positive impact of democracy over economic development of a country. Most people who rejected the importance of democracy on economic development took Singapore as their example and argued that the country was able to accumulate enormous financial wealth and distribute it fairly among its citizens without a functional democracy. However, the number of respondents who thought otherwise was overwhelming as almost two in every three respondents thought that a democratic and stable political environment is crucial to economic development and international influence. This result came as a mild surprise to the author as until the 2016 national assembly election, Vietnam has been undergoing almost three decades of remarkable economic development under very poor condition of democracy. It was expected that respondents, most of who were born during this period of rapid development would look more favorably at the dictatorship of the Communist Party. After the start of Doi Moi in 1986, Vietnam saw economic successes being ushered in, and despite the seismic impacts from the Asian financial crisis and the financial crisis of 2007–2008, the country has been one of the fastest growing economies in the 21st Century (Babones, 2017) and forecasted to become one of the top twenty economies in the world by 2050 (PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), 2017b). Despite ongoing economic successes, the respondents clearly expressed their cynicism towards the influence of the current political regime on economic growth. They cited corruption scandals surfaced during the first half of the 2010s and the Communist Party's lack of transparency in dealing with those scandals as the reasons for their pessimism. Although in more than one occasion, top leaders of the Communist Party had admitted that widespread corruption were still prevalent (Voice of Vietnam (VoV), 2017; Cường, 2017), reports by the Government Inspectorate of Vietnam maintained that corruption only persisted in local-level authorities while disclosed corruption cases at central-level corruption was minimum (Tâm, 2017). This consistent denial attitude has severely eroded public trust. Thirty three percent replied that in their opinion a democracy will be more facilitative to economic development than a dictatorship; however, democracy is not the most crucial condition for economic gain. When further enquired about their answer, these respondents used China and Singapore as examples of successful economies without proper democracy. Some added authoritarian developmental states in East and South East Asia such as South Korea under Park Chung-Hee or Malaysia under Mahathir and further argue that following these countries' models would be better to Vietnam than to blindly copy Western democracy. Only fifteen people admitted that they had no knowledge about the relationship between democracy and economic development.



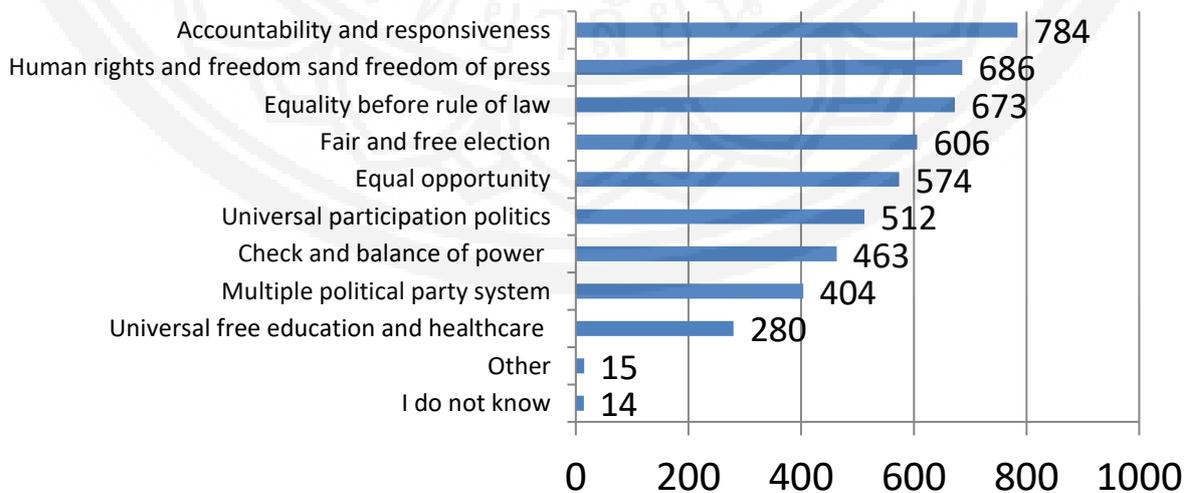
**Sixth Question: How do you feel about the current political system of Vietnam?**



**Figure 7** Vietnamese satisfaction with the current ruling regime

The second-to-last question directly engages the respondents in regard to their satisfaction about the current political system of Vietnam. Although in the leading up questions, respondents were asked about their opinion on the same topic, they were not asked whether they like the system or not. In this question, respondents’ subjective feeling was the main focus and thus the question is different from the previous ones. As expected from the results of the previous questions, a substantial majority of the respondents expressed their dissatisfaction towards the current state of affairs of Vietnamese politics. Three in every five respondents chose either very unsatisfactory or unsatisfactory as their answer. Combine with twenty one percent who chose neither satisfactory nor unsatisfactory, a neutral answer, this left only five percent of respondents who were happy with the Communist regime. The answers to this question echo the results of the previous question in which the huge majority of respondents openly criticize the Communist Party for the lack of democracy in the country and its consequences in economic growth. Most of the people who are happy with the current political situation in Vietnam worked for the government or in state-owned companies. Five among seven people who chose very satisfactory answered that democracy is not needed for economic growth in the fifth question.

**Seventh Question: What improvement do you think Vietnam needs?**



**Figure 8** Improvements that the Communist Party of Vietnam needs according to respondents



To finalize the survey, the last question sought to confirm the response made by respondents in the previous question by asking dissatisfied respondents about the improvement that the current ruling regime needs. This question differs from the first question in the sense that if one thinks Vietnam lacks, for example, a multiparty system but does not think a multiparty system is needed for the betterment of the current political situation, or could even worsen it, they could reflect his opinion here. At first glance, the answers to this question and the first question seemed to be identical, however, after close examination, subtle differences could be identified. The most noticeable difference was people's perspective on fair and free elections. Although in the first question, almost eight in ten people said that they believe that Vietnam lacks fair and free elections, only six in ten responded that free and fair elections should be considered a needed improvement. Further emphasizing that point of view, only 509 people thought that universal participation in election and political discussion should be considered a prioritized improvement in the current political situation. Universal free education and health care are considered luxuries by most of the respondents and as such remained at the bottom of the hierarchy of needed improvements, followed by a multiparty political system. Only four in ten Vietnamese thought that a multiparty political system would enhance the current political situation in Vietnam. The majority of respondents, 686 in 1005 and 673 in 1005 respectively, agreed that Vietnam was lacking protection of human rights and freedom and equality before the rule of law, which they considered a much needed improvement. Those numbers were consistent with answers provided in the first question. Also consistent with the results of the first question was the perception of Vietnamese on the importance of balance of power. Vietnam has been lacking a functional mechanism of separation and balance of power with legislative, executive and judicial power entirely monopolized by the Communist Party. However, only 492 respondents believed that separation and balance of power were absent and only 463 responded that improvements in that regard are needed. Other responses mentioned were better state management and rule of law, better and more transparent governmental recruitment process so that worthy people could be put in charge instead of widespread nepotism. Two respondents also suggested that the Communist Party should admit their flaws and honestly look for ways to remedy them. Fourteen respondents said that they have no idea about which political improvement should be considered to be needed.

### Conclusion

From its foundation in 1930 until now, the Communist Party of Vietnam has based its legitimacy on nationalism and socialism as a state building ideology. These ideologies are attractive to Vietnamese as the country has a long history of fighting against foreign oppressors with a majority of the population being poor farmers. In combination with charismatic legitimacy under the form of the cult of personality of Ho Chi Minh, these ideologies helped the Communists mobilize a vast base of popular support which turned into a formidable force rivaled the most modern armies in the world at that time. Not only that legitimacy sustained the Communist Party of Vietnam throughout the bloody First and Second Indochina Wars until the Communists' ultimate victory in 1975, it was one of the main reasons the Communist Party of Vietnam managed to survive the decline and consequently, the collapse of the Soviet Union during the 1980s and early 1990s. Nevertheless, the collapse of communism as a state building ideology heavily damaged the legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam. From the late 1980s, in addition to nationalism and socialism ideology, the Communist Party of Vietnam has been directing its propaganda towards economic development as another source of legitimacy. This subdued civil unrest and temporarily suppressed the threats to the Communist Party of Vietnam. However, two decades after the initiation of Doi Moi



saw the decline in the legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam as the results of the negative impacts of corruption and nepotism on economic development, people's disillusion of Communism, and pressure from the West. The Communist Party of Vietnam had to shift their focus to emphasize the so-called democratic nature of the regime. Article 6 of the constitution of the socialist republic of Viet Nam (Wikisource, 2017) and many official documents and statements have been devoted to capitalize the argument that Vietnamese can "exercise the State power under the forms of direct democracy and of representative democracy through the National Assembly, the People's Councils and other State agencies".

This survey, however, challenged the extent to which the Communist Party of Vietnam is considered to be obedient-worthy by the Vietnamese people through the claim to be democratic. Despite the fact that the methodology used in the survey, namely convenience sampling, left much to be desired, in particular the disproportion between the survived Vietnamese population and the actual composition of the respondents, the answers were clear. The vast majority of the respondents consistently maintained that the current ruling lacks the most basic requirements to be considered democratic. Notably, the regime is found lacking on transparency and accountability, basic human rights and freedom, functional rule of law, and fair and free elections. Surprisingly enough, although the overwhelming majority of respondents answered that democracy is crucial for economic development, a significant proportion did not prioritize a functional multi-party system. With the argument that a number of non-democratic regimes are doing well in economic development and betterment of people's standards of living, those respondents stated that they think the Communist Party's first priority should be to ensure a transparent and corruption-free government which guarantees basic human rights to its citizens. Hopefully, in the following-up studies on this subject, the author can provide readers with a deeper insight on Vietnamese people's perception on democracy and their tolerance, and in some case even preference of a Singaporean-style non-democratic government which can deliver both effective functionality and transparency at the same time. It is hoped that this paper will prove informative to the readers and that future researches can be carried out on this subject to further the knowledge about contemporary Vietnamese democracy from insiders' perspective to contribute to a complete account of modern Vietnamese democracy.

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