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Civic Organizations in Vietnam's One-Party State:  
Supporters of Authoritarian Rule?

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# **Civic Organizations in Vietnam's One-Party State: Supporters of Authoritarian Rule?**

## **Abstract**

Associationalism under authoritarian rule is not automatically a good thing. The empirical findings laid out in this article indicate that authoritarian dispositions and practices are prevalent in all types of Vietnamese civic organizations, at least as far as internal decision-making processes are concerned. As is the case in most countries of Southeast Asia, old as well as new ideas of the state and state traditions have a strong impact on the patterns of authoritarianism found in Vietnamese civic organizations. From the empirical findings, it might be concluded that Vietnamese civic organizations support authoritarian rule – though the extent of such support varies; this has generally been an underresearched question. This pioneering article seeks to stimulate further research by offering new insights into how authoritarian power is exercised in Vietnam by addressing how associations' activities stabilize rules, how the associated legitimizing effects can be conceptualized and understood in theoretical terms, and what would be a suitable operationalization of the aforementioned concepts.

Keywords: civil society, authoritarianism, authoritarian rule, Vietnam

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# Civic Organizations in Vietnam's One-Party State: Supporters of Authoritarian Rule?<sup>1</sup>

Jörg Wischermann

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## 1 Introduction

Based on empirical evidence, associations are assumed to be indispensable elements of the processes of democratization, helping to consolidate newly created democracies – they have formed the bedrock of various waves of democratization (see for example Diamond 1994).

However, there is also evidence that associations are not always responsible for driving the decisive steps toward democratization, if there are such steps at all. Further findings (e.g., from Asia, the Middle East and Africa) even bolster the view that there is no necessary, direct, or even teleological linkage between processes of democratization, consolidation of democracy, and associations' activities. Asia-related studies, for example, support the view that associational activism does not *necessarily* bring about democratic or liberal change and that

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1 An extended version of his paper has been published in German (see Wischermann 2013).

the development of civic virtues (such as tolerance and the willingness to compromise) only rarely results from experiences with associations (Alagappa 2004; Park 2011)

Furthermore, those associations that show signs of authoritarianism (e.g., in terms of internal decision-making processes) and are also significant parts of an authoritarian state's public welfare programs, or even substitutes for such programs, are considered by some to be *supporters* of authoritarian rule (see for example Liverani 2008). It has been noted that the mechanisms through which those associations are embedded in authoritarian regimes are patrimonial networks (Liverani 2008: 164).

However, there is a lack of research into precisely which contexts various types of associations develop authoritarian/authoritarianism-supportive, democratic/democracy-conducive properties, or mixtures of both in their internal structures, activities, and in the worldviews of their representatives.

Furthermore, since research on authoritarianism is "undertheorized" and research on associations is democracy-biased, there is a profound lack of theoretically well-founded approaches able to address:

- how associations and their activities affect the stability of rule,
- how legitimization might be conceptualized and understood in theoretical terms, and
- what would be a suitable operationalization of such concepts.

Conceptual frameworks like Goebel's (2011) are all the more welcome since the arguments that associations serve the perseverance of authoritarian rule are primarily functional in nature.

Thus, further research on authoritarian regimes and the role played by associations within them should address two questions:

- 1) Which context and which context factors provide for the democratic or authoritarian (or a mixture of both) structures, practices and attitudes found in different types of associations?
- 2) How do various types of associations provide for the survival of authoritarian regimes?

In this article, only the first question can and will be addressed. However, the findings and conclusions presented in this paper might help to address the second question and form the basis of a conceptual framework to guide further analysis.

A promising starting point from which to address the first question is to give up any specific normative presumptions regarding associations. Thus, this paper follows Hyden – who came to the conclusion that associations are neither good nor bad per se and should be explored with regard to what they do and how they do it on a case-by-case basis. (Hyden 2010: 253). Furthermore, this study applies Berman's view that the growth of associations "should not be considered an undisputed good, but a politically neutral multiplier" (Berman 2003: 20) and Rossteutscher's argument that associations' activities occur in often very different political, economic and sociopolitical contexts and therefore lead to a range of very varied effects (Rossteutscher 2005: 240).

This textured and open-minded approach is appropriate for my own empirical focus on Vietnam. As a concrete step toward the exploration of the conditions under which Vietnamese associations may or may not reveal authoritarian characteristics and association representatives may or may not exhibit the associated (authoritarian) regime-supporting values, attitudes and practices, I explore Vietnamese associations' internal decision-making processes, analyze elements of their leaders' worldviews, and describe in which sense and to which extent these observed patterns of internal processes and leaders' worldviews may be seen as authoritarian. Focusing on these aspects makes sense given that the theory and practice of international development cooperation usually (if not always) sees associations and the engagement with them as essential – which leads to financial and other forms of support. Moreover, the engagement with associations is typically believed to be an engagement with a place where citizens acquire civic virtues – that is, they learn how democracy works.

In this article, I will present empirical evidence showing that authoritarianism is prevalent in Vietnam's civic organizations' (although this is normal) internal decision-making processes, albeit to varying extents.<sup>2</sup> Taken as whole, however, the worldviews of association leaders do not indicate unambiguous widespread authoritarianism. Rather, there is a clear split between authoritarian and libertarian views. In addition, there is support for the idea that the following three closely interrelated factors have an impact on the development of those practices and attitudes: region (both the geographic and wider political environment); the type of civic organization; and ideas of the state, state traditions, and statism.

Thus, my empirical findings suggest that Vietnamese civic organizations should not generally be thought of as those “large free schools where all members of the community go and learn the general theory of association” and develop civic and other virtues (Tocqueville 1840/2004: 639).

It would, however, be premature to conclude that Vietnamese civic organizations have been unequivocally shown to support authoritarian rule – which is a view that cannot be substantiated in this article.

## 2 Associations in a Polity under Authoritarian Rule

Qualifying whether Vietnam is under authoritarian rule and exploring potential authoritarianism in Vietnamese civic organizations calls for:

- a definition of an “authoritarian system,”
- the identification of those elements of such a system that characterize the political system of Vietnam as far as associations are concerned, and

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2 I use the term civic organizations as a generic term for the ensemble of associations found in Vietnam: mass organizations, professionals' organizations, NGOs and other issue-oriented organizations (hereinafter referred to as NGOs) and business organizations. For an exact definition and empirical details, see section IV below.

- an understanding of authoritarianism. (For the latter, see the subsequent section of this article.)

The most widely accepted definition of “authoritarian systems” is that of Linz (2000: 159), who stated that such systems are those

“with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive or intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power, within formally ill-defined limits but quite predictable ones.”

Generally speaking, the present Vietnamese polity can be classified as an authoritarian system.

Despite the justified criticisms of Linz's distinctions, there are good theoretical and methodological reasons to accept his definition of authoritarian systems and edge “limited pluralism” to the center of such a polity's definition. For the specific purpose of this analysis, it makes all the more sense since limited pluralism is also at the core of a microsociological and sociopsychological understanding of authoritarianism. Consequently, putting limited pluralism at the core of any definition of authoritarianism helps to bridge macro- and microsociological forms of understanding authoritarianism.

In what follows, I describe the location of civic organizations within the Vietnamese polity and the limited pluralism it allows for.

The first limitation on pluralism in terms of the activities of nonstate actors and citizens is marked by the fact that the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) claims to be the only political force entitled to lead the nation; this right is enshrined in the Vietnamese Constitution. According to Article 4, the VCP represents not only certain strata of the Vietnamese people but the whole nation (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2001). Therefore, the state it commands can be defined as a “one-party state” (Brooker 2000: 40).

The second limitation on pluralism concerns the right of people to associate. In accordance with the constitution, people do not have the right to associate as such, but only the right to associate under certain limited conditions set by the state (Sidel 2008).

Based on this principle, negotiations on the status of associations, the role of nonstate actors and a “Law on Associations” (officially) started in 1992/1993. So far, 13 drafts have been presented – although the last one was withdrawn from the political agenda in early 2008 and no new draft has been presented since then (Sidel 2010). In lieu of such a law, a new Decree on Associations No. 45/2010/ND-CP (hereinafter referred to as Decree 45) was issued on 21 April 2010 and came into effect on 1 July 2010 (Government of Vietnam 2010).<sup>3</sup> This decree

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3 Decree 45 on Associations addresses the organization, operation, and state management of (what it calls) associations, and constitutes the legal basis for the registration and operation of most Vietnamese civic organizations. Decree 45 can be understood as a provisional result on behalf of the

mirrors the supremacy of the VCP and the state it controls in that it stipulates that the “party/state,” as the juxtaposition of VCP and state is called in Vietnamese, “allows” (*cho phep*) people to associate and certain civic organizations to be established under specific conditions. This is the third limitation on pluralism.

Within this polity dominated by the VCP, Decree 45 and other legal documents make it clear that civic organizations are positioned in an obvious ranking order:

- Mass organizations come first. Due to their specific position, the regulations stated in Decree 45 and other legal documents do not apply to them.
- Specific associations (i.e., professionals’ organizations selected by the prime minister only) come second.
- “Normal” professionals’ organizations, NGOs and other issue-oriented organizations, and business organizations come third.<sup>4</sup>

Based on such limited pluralism, Vietnamese civic organizations play an important role in this polity – though their significance varies. Mass organizations are part and parcel of the governance architecture laid out in the VCP’s 1991 manifesto, which remains largely unchanged. When invited to do so, mass organizations help to prepare and implement – inter alia – government decisions, laws and programs. Mass organizations are no longer “transmission belts” that exclusively and submissively help to implement the authority’s decisions; enlighten, convince and mobilize the masses; and keep up the support level (legitimacy) for the VCP’s rule. They may still perform many or even most of those tasks, enshrined in a Marxist Leninist understanding of the role mass organizations have to play – although to a varying degree. Moreover, mass organizations have accrued greater independence and diversified, adding new roles to their existing ones. This development has resulted in an increase of conflicts between mass organizations and governmental organizations (for this see Wischermann 2010: 28–33). By and large, mass organizations are still fundamental to the VCP’s exercise of power; when in doubt, the organizations’ leaders follow VCP orders.

Professionals’ organizations represent professional interests and provide expertise to the government (when requested) with regard to the preparation of decisions and laws, among other things. Professionals’ organizations have always been and continue to be important elements of the VCP’s exercise of power. These organizations’ leaders also follow VCP order when in doubt. Umbrella organizations like the “Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations” (VUSTA) have, at least informally, a special position. Potentially, at least some

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party/state in the long process of formulating a comprehensive legal and regulatory framework to deal with the associational sector.

4 Consistently not mentioned in the decree are civic organizations, which Thayer (2009) calls organizations of a “political civil society” such as the network “Block 8406” and independent parties and trade unions that were loosely affiliated with it. Those organizations were initially ignored. Since 2007, many of their proponents and representatives have been arrested and sentenced to many years in prison.



or one of them (presumably VUSTA) will be elevated, according to Decrees 45's stipulations, to the rank of a "special association," which offers special rights and duties.

NGOs are first and foremost meant to fill the gap that privatization (*xa hoi hoa* or "socialization" as those policies are deceptively called) of the health and education sectors leaves. They address societal and other problems that need expertise and help from professionals, trained social workers and other experts. Those experts are welcomed to support the government improve legislation, carry out pilot projects, assist in implementing policies in various fields, among other things (for examples of such an intense, however strictly limited, cooperation, see Wischermann 2011.) The government's benevolent attitude toward NGOs lasts as long as those organizations and their representatives do not develop or pursue a political agenda that aims to change the existing political system. The legal status of those organizations remains highly volatile and many of them are tolerated at best (Sidel 2010).

Business organizations are deemed to represent the interests of the business sector and to give advice on economic policies and their implementation. The interests and expertise of businesspeople were not sufficiently represented in Vietnam's polity until recently, when those in power became well aware of the necessity to draw these interests and expertise into the political realm as a result of economic realities and political imperatives. This change in approach started in the South and occurred some years later in Hanoi and the North. Because this development was initiated from "above" in the North, representatives of the business organizations in Hanoi are mostly from the state and state-owned enterprises. In Ho Chi Minh City, representatives come from all sectors of the metropolis's vibrant economy and have founded their organizations with and without the state's encouragement. These organizations' legal status is similar to that enjoyed by NGOs, even though party/state and government acknowledge that the importance of businesspeople to the political realm.

The relationships between civic organizations and the Vietnamese state vary, ranging from close cooperation to "normal" relations (i.e., "from time to time there are problems") to "problematic" relations (i.e., they exhibit serious conflicts). Empirical data reveal a trend of increasing conflict between civic and governmental organizations, which – within the boundaries of a polity characterized by limited pluralism – can be seen as a process of "normalization" (for details on that development, see Wischermann 2010: 28–33).

In sum, this rough delineation of the roles and functions of various types of civic organizations suggests the following:

- There is a variety of civic organizations acknowledged or at least tolerated by the party/state, although certain organizations remain excluded.
- Civic organizations offer varying levels of support to the authoritarian regime. In general, mass organizations are the most supportive; professionals' organizations are more supportive than ambivalent; business organizations are ambivalent in their support; NGOs are the most ambivalent in terms of their support for the authoritarian system.

- The limits on civic organizations' activities are not clearly defined. To a certain extent, these restrictions are flexible and depend on political circumstances. Such uncertainty secures the supreme ruler's domination. The only rule that is clear is that no civic organization is allowed to question the supremacy of the VCP.

Under such circumstances, it is a plausible assumption that authoritarianism is prevalent in civic organizations. The democratic effects – if there are any – precipitated by the associations are likely to vary.

### 3 Authoritarianism

Although locating civic organizations within the polity of Vietnam is necessary, it does not explain what authoritarianism is in practical terms – for example, where it comes from, what it does and when it does it. Here, Stenner's (2005) seminal analysis of "authoritarian dynamics" is of exceptional value.

Stenner's (2005) definition of authoritarianism stresses a lack of tolerance of diverging views and pluralism as well as a rejection of difference and the insistence on "sameness" and "groupiness" as core elements.<sup>5</sup> Authoritarianism is based on predispositions, the development of which may be influenced by a variety of factors.

The suppression of difference and achievement of uniformity necessitate autocratic social arrangements in which individual autonomy yields to group authority (Stenner 2005: 15). Ultimately, authoritarianism is a normative worldview that induces personal coercion of and bias against different others (such as racial and ethnic out-groups, political dissidents and moral deviants); political demands for legal discrimination against minorities as well as limitations of free speech, assembly, and association; and the regulation of moral behaviour (Stenner 2005: 16 f.). Defined this way, however, authoritarianism does not necessarily affect how citizens think about race, the protection of free speech and assembly, sexuality, or crime and punishment. Stenner specifies the conditions under which authoritarianism is activated, which she calls the authoritarian dynamic. However, the authoritarian dynamic will not be analyzed in this paper.

The aims of this article are as follows:

- 1) To describe the various practices and ways of thinking that can be detected in both Vietnamese civic organizations' decision-making processes and these organizations' leaders' worldviews
- 2) To compare the patterns of such practices and ways of thinking with clearly defined patterns of what constitutes authoritarianism

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5 Groupiness "generally comes from wanting to be part of *some* collective, not from identification with a particular group; that originates in wanting self and others to conform to *some* system, not in commitment to a specific normative order" (Stenner 2005:18; emphasis in original).

Figure 1 below provides a description of the four patterns of authoritarianism.

**Figure 1: The Four Patterns of Authoritarianism**

- A lack of tolerance of diverging views and pluralism
- A rejection of difference and insistence on sameness and groupiness
- Both personal coercion of and bias against different others (racial and ethnic out-groups, political dissidents, moral deviants) as well as political demands for authoritative constraints on their behaviour
- Social arrangements in which individual autonomy yields to group authority, which are either accepted willy-nilly (since they help to achieve uniformity) or supported because they are thought of as prudent principles for society politics

In the next section, I will describe the data used for this analysis and how these data were generated.

#### 4 Data and Methods

The data on authoritarian attitudes and practices within civic organizations presented below stem from a German Vietnamese research project on civil society action and governance in Vietnam carried out between April 2008 and September 2010.<sup>6</sup>

The research team carried out standardized interviews with 300 randomly chosen representatives of civic organizations in Hanoi (150) and Ho Chi Minh City (150) between April and July 2009. For this purpose we draw random samples out of all subgroups in both cities.<sup>7</sup>

As of 15 April 2009,<sup>8</sup> a total of 1,453 societal organizations were included in the documentation of civic organizations based in Hanoi (926) and Ho Chi Minh City (527).

The label civic organizations is used as a general term for a heterogeneous ensemble of formal and semiformal, nonstate (in the broadest sense), volunteer, nonprofit-oriented societal organizations (Wischermann, and Nguyen Quang Vinh 2003: 186, 187). Within this ensemble of organizations, I differentiate between mass organizations (such as the Women's Union, the Trade Union, the Youth Union, the Peasants' Union, the Veterans' Union, and the Fatherland Front), professionals' associations, NGOs and other issue-oriented organizations

6 The head of the research team in Vietnam was Prof. Dr. Bui The Cuong (Southern Institute of Sustainable Development, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, Ho Chi Minh City). The head of the German research team was Prof. Dr. P. Koellner (German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies, Hamburg). The author was one of the two German researchers.

7 Details of the drawing of the sample are to be found in Wischermann 2010: 40.

8 The distribution of those various organizations within the total is presented in Wischermann, 2010:40. The ways and means applied in identifying the organizations in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi is described in detail in Wischermann 2010: 14, FN 14.

(hereinafter referred to as “NGOs”), and business organizations.<sup>9</sup> These organizations are concerned with public rather than private ends and focus on articulating societal interests and affecting policy. This understanding and classification of societal organizations in Vietnam is based on a taxonomy reached using empirical and inductive methods as well as on the research team's own results and those of others.

These organizations form a continuum that ranges from highly formalized to semiformalized. Semiformalized organizations (e.g., soup kitchens run by Buddhist monks) were included since they are typical for grassroots organizations that address social problems in Ho Chi Minh City.

“Pattern matching” is the method used here to demonstrate the link between authoritarianism and authoritarian attitudes and practices prevalent in Vietnamese civic organizations (Gerring 2004: 348). This consists of exploring the sense in which and the extent to which various types of internal decision-making processes, the standards used therein, and the stance leaders of civic organizations articulate vis-à-vis various out-groups match the most important patterns of authoritarianism.

In what follows, I will present an analysis of selected data from those 300 standardized interviews with randomly chosen representatives of civic organizations in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

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9 Professionals' organizations are, for example, the Hanoi-based “Vietnam Association of Psychology and Pedagogy” and the “Ho Chi Minh City Association of Lawyers.” Hanoi-based “centers” such as the “Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender – Family - Women and Adolescents” (CSAGA) or “institutes” such as the “Institute for Social Development Studies” (ISDS) can be classified as “NGOs and other issue-oriented organizations” (hereinafter referred to as NGOs). In Ho Chi Minh City, many of the NGOs work in the field of social work. There, for example, the “Social Development and Research Consultancy” (SDRC), or “LIN Center for Community Development” can be called NGOs. Business organizations are, for example, the “Hanoi Association of Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises” (HASME), whereas in Ho Cho Minh City, the “Club 2030” and the “Saigon Businesswomen's Club” can be classified as business organizations. The term “NGOs and other issue-oriented organizations” is used in order to classify a specific subtype of civic organization that in various organizational forms addresses subjects such as those of education and information, social welfare, charity work and counselling, applied research (e.g., concerning rural and urban development), training and consulting, community development, environmental protection, improving the political system and making it more accountable and democratic, and the like. In Vietnam, the term NGOs has become common to indicate organizations those I refer to as “NGOs and other issue-oriented organizations.”

## 5 Authoritarian Practices and Attitudes in Vietnamese Civic Organizations - Empirical Findings

### Mechanisms Used Most Frequently in Internal Decision-Making Processes

The mechanisms applied in internal decision-making processes in Vietnamese civic organizations vary. From 24 case studies that preceded the standardized interviews and were examined by the research team, it can be concluded that there are four mechanisms in use:

- 1) The principle of "collective leadership, individual responsibility" (mechanism 1)
- 2) Small company-styled decision making, whereby board members decide after discussions among key leaders and the inclusion of appropriate staff member initiatives (mechanism 2)
- 3) Family-styled decision making, whereby the director/leader is like a parent who has the final decision (mechanism 3)
- 4) Informal modes (personal communication, persuasion) of decision making on which all board members can agree (mechanism 4)

The overall results from the standardized interviews with 300 representatives from civic organizations in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City show that the principle of "collective leadership, individual responsibility" (mechanism 1) is the decision-making mechanism primarily used for 80 percent of mass organizations and 78 percent of professionals' organizations. It is hardly surprising that these two types of organization apply this mechanism, which is intrinsically linked to democratic centralism and enshrined in the VCP's bylaws (as is the case in almost all communist parties). As I have shown above, these organizations are at the core of the present governance architecture and remain pillars of the existing authoritarian system. It is notable, however, that these organizations are not forced to apply this mechanism.

What seems remarkable is the fact that almost two-thirds (68 percent) of the business organizations and at least half (50 percent) the NGOs also use the principle of "collective leadership, individual responsibility" for making decisions. Just a quarter of the business organizations (23 percent) and a fifth (20 percent) of NGOs apply mechanisms used in small companies (mechanism 2). Meanwhile, a quarter (25 percent) of NGOs apply informal modes (mechanism 4).

However, by adding the regional context in which those organizations are embedded, some differences that affect business organizations and NGOs become apparent:

- All Hanoi-based business organizations follow the principle of "collective leadership, individual responsibility" (100 percent), whereas just half of business organizations (53 percent) do so in the South. A third (33 percent) use ways common in small companies (mechanism 2), while more than a tenth (13 percent) indicated that they use informal ways (mechanism 4) to come to decisions.

- Even more interesting is that almost two-thirds (61 percent) of the Hanoi-based NGOs use the mechanism of “collective leadership, individual responsibility,” whereas just a third (35 percent) of NGOs’ representatives in Ho Chi Minh City indicated that this mechanism is used most of the time in their organization.

The principle of democratic centralism – to which the mechanism “collective leadership, individual responsibility” is intrinsically linked – is a principle of Marxist Leninist parties’ internal decision-making processes and can be found in almost all of these parties’ bylaws. This implies a strict hierarchical order in which individual party members are subordinate to party organizations, the minority is subordinate to the majority, the lower party organizations are subordinate to the higher party organizations, and all the constituent organizations and members of the party are subordinate to the central committee of the party and the party congress. Decision-making processes imply that party committees decide on major issues after discussions and that members of the party committees perform their duties according to the decisions of the committees and the division of labor. This, in turn, implies that the minority not only accepts the majority’s decision. The minority, like all the others, is expected to implement all decisions without objection. Critique articulated once a decision has been made is considered disloyal and grounds for expulsion, according to Articles 9–14 of the VCP bylaws (VCP 2007).

Both the principle of “collective leadership, individual responsibility” and the respective mechanism exemplify authoritarianism in a rather unique and canonized form. They reveal a preference for uniformity and sameness over diversity of beliefs and behavior; holding and expressing personal views are strongly discouraged. Individuals are subordinated to group authority.

However, authoritarianism in terms of decision-making processes does not stop with the use of “collective leadership, individual responsibility.” Mechanisms 2 (small company) and 4 (informal modes) do not offer individual staff or other members of the respective organization incomparably more space. In fact, both mechanisms similarly put individuals under pressure and make them yield to group authority. In this respect, neither of these mechanisms seems to fundamentally differ to the mechanism of collective decision making and individual responsibility. This congruence was illustrated by the director of an NGO in Ho Chi Minh City who told the research team that if a staff member could not be “convinced” by use of informal means to follow one of the board’s and/or his decisions, the staff member should and would leave the organization.

However, to put these findings into context, it is important to stress that leaders and members of civic organizations seem to apply these mechanisms simply because they are used to them and see them as proven and secure means to come to decisions. Moreover, most do not appear to be aware of the authoritarian nature of these mechanisms. As I will show in the discussion on the role of bylaws, such indifference toward internal processes and mechanisms is common and widespread among all types of Vietnamese civic organizations.

Those findings concerning the relative consistency, uniformity and widespread use of authoritarian decision-making mechanisms in Vietnamese civic organizations might suggest that the type of civic organization and the region they are embedded in do not seem to make much difference as far as the most frequently used mechanism (1) of internal decision-making processes is concerned.

Note, however, that there are at least two types of civic organization (NGOs and business organizations) that prefer other mechanisms (2 and 4), both of which are based in southern Vietnam. These findings might indicate a first hairline crack in the phalanx of the authoritarianism prevalent in Vietnamese civic organizations.

In sum, a strongly developed and rather consistently applied authoritarianism prevails in terms of the mechanisms applied to civic organizations' internal decision-making processes. Slight observable differences in this uniform use of mechanisms may be attributable to the type of civic organization and the region in which it is embedded.

### **Consensus Seeking – the Sacred Cow**

Reaching a mutual consensus is the sacred cow of Vietnamese civic organizations in terms of their internal decision-making processes. Out of 300 interviewees, only one representative (from an NGO in Hanoi) said that reaching such an agreement is "not important."

Reaching a mutual consensus is "very important" and "important" to 99 percent of civic organization representatives in Ho Chi Minh City and 98 percent in Hanoi. However, it could be significant that Ho Chi Minh City-based representatives seem to place slightly less importance on reaching a mutual consensus. There, 29 percent find reaching a mutual consensus to be only "important" (and not "very important"), whereas just 14 percent of representatives in Hanoi find mutual consensus to be only "important." Among the representatives from NGOs and business organizations in Ho Chi Minh City, the proportion of those who hold the view that reaching a mutual consensus is "important" (and not "very important") is relatively large – 39 percent and 53 percent, respectively.

In sum, consensus seeking – more than any other mechanism applied in internal decision-making processes – signifies the insistence on sameness and groupiness and how strongly developed and consistent authoritarianism is in Vietnamese civic organizations. Furthermore, the almost unanimous support for this autocratic arrangement suggests that this principle is supported because it is thought of as a prudent principle for society politics.

### **Disagreements, Controversies and Conflicts**

The empirical facts are clear:

- Of the 300 representatives, 87 percent are of the view that disagreements and controversies are normal but conflicts within one's own organization should be avoided. Disaggregated by organization type, this statement is endorsed by over 75 percent of

representatives of mass organizations, professionals' organizations and NGOs in both cities. Business organization representatives from Ho Chi Minh City support this statement wholeheartedly (100 percent), whereas their colleagues from Hanoi show less (strong) support (71 percent) for this statement than all other civic organization representatives.

- Of the 300 representatives, 87 percent think a plurality of views on organization topics is desirable. We found no differences between representatives of various types of civic organizations or regions.
- Of the 300 representatives, 65 percent believe it is inappropriate to express personal views, and that insisting on personal viewpoints and getting tense is bad behavior. Remarkably, representatives from NGOs (68 percent) and professionals' organizations (65 percent) agree with this view more than those from mass organizations (57 percent) and business organizations (60 percent).

The overall impression suggests that the existence of internal diversity is seen as desirable, but this acceptance of diversity is confined by the fact that almost all actors refer to a strong aversion to internal conflict.

Consequently, there is a strong lack of tolerance of diverging views that are seen to disturb the feeling of sameness and groupiness. Individuals (voluntarily or by coercion) yield to group authority and give up diverging views if and when they disturb group harmony. Conflicts are seen to disturb harmonious cooperation.

However, there are slight regional variations in the application of this strongly developed authoritarianism. For instance, insisting on personal views and getting tense is more acceptable in the South than it is in the North. In the South, almost half the representatives from business organizations (47 percent), professionals' organizations (45 percent) and mass organizations (43 percent) reject the suppression of an individual's views and viewpoints. In the North, none of the representatives of the business organizations, just a fifth (19 percent) of the representatives of the professionals' organizations and a quarter (25 percent) of the mass organizations' representatives are of this opinion. Thus, it might be said that business organizations, professionals' organizations and to a certain extent even mass organizations in the South show patterns of what could be called a softened stance in terms of authoritarianism. This softened stance could constitute another crack in the phalanx of the authoritarianism prevalent in Vietnamese civic organizations.

Nevertheless, the near-unanimous aversion to conflict and the rejection of internal pluralism of views – the latter of which is seen to lead to internal conflict – once again shows how strongly developed authoritarianism is in Vietnamese civic organizations.

### **Role of Internal Rules (Bylaws)**

The aforementioned paradox (a general aversion toward conflict and the simultaneous support for a multiplicity of views) is once again present with 83 percent of the 300 representa-



tives indicating that "internal rules should help to avoid disagreements, controversies and conflicts." However, a similar proportion of representatives stated that an organization's internal rules should facilitate a multiplicity of views that are effectively presented.

Internal rules are seen as pivotal for ensuring that conflicts do not disturb harmonious cooperation within civic organizations and the desired representation of a multiplicity of views. The interviewed representatives do not appear to recognize a potential conflict of objectives – at least not publicly. Rather, three-quarters favor a situation in which "internal rules should help to channel conflicting views and help to come to a decision that reflects *all or most of those views*" (emphasis added, JW). Such decisions imply that individuals accept whatever view the group authority deems most appropriate for "all or most of those" group members.

Thus, without any significant difference between the types of civic organizations and the regions they are embedded in, internal rules are essential in order to secure sameness and groupiness. In this respect, the phalanx of authoritarian attitudes and practices does not show any cracks.

Therefore, bylaws are part of a rather uniform ensemble of autocratic arrangements. Instead of helping to develop a culture of conflict and to support the development of various individuals' civic capacities, those rules help to level – if not to suppress – differences between individuals and opposing views.

Furthermore, the strong support for bylaws playing such a role suggests that autocratic arrangements are thought of as prudent principles for society politics.

However, to put those findings into context, it should be mentioned that most Vietnamese civic organizations' bylaws are formulated in rather vague terms. The regulation of conflict does not appear to be an issue of specific concern, if at all. According to interviewees, bylaws and rules in general are not seen as being very important, let alone those that aim to regulate conflict. Similarly, the internal procedures and standards of Vietnamese civic organizations were not viewed as matters of great importance by the interviewees.

Given the prevalence of authoritarian attitudes and practices in the procedures and standards that regulate internal decision making, it might come as a surprise that those attitudes and practices do not automatically lead to discrimination of out-groups or political/other demands for authoritative constraints on out-group behavior. As will be seen, representatives of various civic organizations have varying stances vis-à-vis people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHIV) and drug addicts, which implies that those representatives' worldviews are neither uniform nor consistent in terms of authoritarianism.

## Respect<sup>10</sup>

### *... Vis-à-Vis People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHIV)*<sup>11</sup>

A large majority of civic organization representatives (62 percent) in both cities favor the equal treatment of PLWHIV, while others tend toward potential implicit discrimination (21 percent) or open discrimination (15 percent). Thus, there is a rather widespread libertarian position prevalent in all types civic organizations.

Neither the regional location nor the type of civic organization seems to affect support for this rather dominant libertarian worldview.

However, an exception does become apparent when analyzing the empirical findings broken down into type and region: NGOs – irrespective of region – strongly support libertarian views and reject authoritarian views vis-à-vis PLWHIV, while all other types of civic organizations are split – typically along regional lines – between libertarian and authoritarian views. For example, mass organizations in the North adopt markedly authoritarian positions compared to those in the South, which are distinctly libertarian.

Thus, even in the case of widespread support for libertarian views, as is the case in the authoritarian positions, some cracks become apparent when scrutinizing the ensemble of civic organizations by type and by region.

However, those cracks do not greatly detract from the overall assessment that libertarian views prevail in Vietnamese civic organizations vis-à-vis PLWHIV.

### *... Vis-à-Vis Drug Addicts*<sup>12</sup>

Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of representatives hold discriminatory views of drug addicts and are in favor of discriminatory practices against them, whereas only just over a third of representatives supported nondiscriminatory views and practices.

This finding suggests that, with regard to drug addicts, there is a strong demand for authoritative constraints on their behavior among the majority of leaders from mass organizations, professionals' organizations and business organizations.

Although there is a rather consistent authoritarian stance vis-à-vis drug addicts within the ensemble of civic organizations, there is once again a crack in the phalanx of authoritarianism when differentiating between organization type and region. Overall, NGOs reveal a

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10 I define respect as an attitude – that is, a complex “way-of-being-toward-something” (Dillon) – in the sense of a recognition of the other in virtue of shared humanity (Fraser 2004: 49, FN 32) independent of his/her social standing, individual characteristics, proven achievements or moral merits, and one's own wishes, ideas and interpretations (Dillon 2007)

11 Note that an authoritarian worldview at least intends to induce both personal coercion of and bias against different others as well as political demands for authoritative constraints on their behavior.

12 See footnote 11.

more libertarian position (44 percent) toward drug addicts – although this percentage is far greater among the NGOs in Ho Chi Minh City.

In sum, the findings suggest that civic organizations' leaders' worldviews are neither uniform nor consistent in terms of authoritarianism. This discrepancy can be seen by comparing leaders' worldviews toward organizational standards, which bespeak patterns of authoritarianism, and toward individuals – which are to some degree influenced by libertarian attitudes.

This section has shown that, all in all, authoritarianism in Vietnamese civic organizations is strongly developed. Three out of four of the analyzed procedures and standards applied to internal decision-making processes are subject to authoritarian attitudes, as are one out of two views toward so-called out-groups. Differences, where they appear, correlate with the region in which a specific type of civic organization is embedded. Thus, region and type of civic organization seem to be of significance.

## 6 Conclusion

The findings presented in this article make it very clear that authoritarianism is prevalent in almost all Vietnamese civic organizations.

Notwithstanding the type of civic organization, authoritarianism – understood as an insistence on sameness and groupiness combined with a lack of tolerance for diverging views and pluralism (measured in terms of internal decision-making practices and standards and their leaders' worldviews) – is more strongly developed in northern than in southern civic organizations.

In general, authoritarian arrangements – where strongly favored – seem to be thought of as normative principles for Vietnamese society and politics and involve a stress on sameness and groupiness.

However, authoritarianism is much more strongly developed in terms of inner-organizational practices and standards than in terms of organizations' leaders' worldviews. The latter are a somewhat contradictory group, revealing both authoritarian and libertarian (i.e., tolerance of diversity and individuality as well as respect for individuals' rights) characteristics. The authoritarianism found in Vietnamese civic organizations does not automatically transform into bias against out-groups or political demands for authoritative constraints on out-groups' behavior. It is not yet clear what activates an "authoritarian dynamic" regarding drug addicts and why such an effect does not appear in the case of PLWHIV.

The conclusions above support Rossteutscher's view that "context matters" and, more specifically, Berman's thesis that the "wider political environment and the values of those who control it" (Berman 2003: 20) have an impact on the properties of associations.

More specifically, the findings suggest that – in the case of Vietnam – the context of region (both geographical and the wider political environment) and deeply embedded ideas of the state, state-traditions and statism have a strong impact on the inner workings of organi-

zations, the standards regulating internal decision-making processes and organizations' leaders' worldviews.

It is significant that authoritarianism is most strongly developed in northern Vietnam and in those northern civic organizations affiliated with the communist state, which enjoy an elevated position within the governance architecture of this authoritarian polity. Furthermore, there is still the pervasive idea in the North of a strong, centralized and unitary state that has a leading role in the economy and society; that is formed along the lines of orthodox Marxism-Leninism with its standards of uniformity, alleged unanimity, absence of conflict, insistence on sameness and rejection of plurality; and that sees civic organizations and citizens as subordinates who provide necessary services and support the state politically as well as in its efforts to maintain order. It is significant that such socialist elements in a postsocialist present are less developed in civic organizations based in southern Vietnam, where state-related traditions have had very different histories.

The use of Marxist-Leninist mechanisms in two-thirds of Vietnamese civic organizations (mainly the principle of "collective leadership, individual responsibility" applied in the VCP and consistently in the Vietnamese state apparatus, as a basis for internal decision making) indicates how widely civic organizations' internal processes are formed along patterns of the party/state, how deeply the party/state has permeated most Vietnamese civic organizations, and how strongly it dominates them.

Moreover, such state dominance shows that power is exercised in Vietnam not only by using coercion ("power *over*") but also by leading subjects "to acquire beliefs and form desires that result in their consenting or adapting to being dominated" ("power *to*") (Lukes 1975/2005: 13). This latter form of power inflicts internal constraints on subjects and leads the Vietnamese population – for example – to assume that the use of decision-making mechanisms intrinsically linked to Democratic Centralism are "politically neutral," to presume that consensus-seeking and conflict-aversion attitudes are a "natural" part of their "sociocultural heritage," and to value practices that lead them to disregard the internal pluralism they allegedly cherish. Such power colors people's judgements and limits the extent to which they can engage with alternative accounts of the sources and consequences of their attitudes, beliefs and practices.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, Vietnamese civic organizations may be thought of as *subordinate* to important characteristics of the extant political regime and politically neutral multipliers that are *supportive* of authoritarianism and potentially authoritarian rule. My research shows very little sign that these civic organizations challenge or question basic political authoritarian assumptions. However, the research shows that the extent to which they can be seen to support existing patterns of rule varies:

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13 Note that none of those organizations are forced to use the mechanism "collective leadership, individual responsibility."

- Mass organizations, professionals' organizations and business organizations in the North are likely to support authoritarianism and potentially authoritarian rule most strongly.
- Mass organizations and professionals' organizations from the South, but also NGOs based in the North, are likely to support authoritarianism and potentially authoritarian rule to a comparably lesser extent.
- NGOs and business organizations based in the South are likely to be the most ambivalent in their support, but can be seen as nevertheless supportive of authoritarianism and potentially authoritarian rule.

I am deliberately careful with language here. Conclusions derived from practices of authoritarianism and authoritarian worldviews found at the micro- and meso- (i.e., organizational) levels, neither necessarily nor easily lead to or support conclusions about the roles those organizations might play on the macropolitical level.

In this respect, there is a need for further research that is guided by conceptual frameworks or focused theory frames that are able to gather the empirical evidence needed to investigate the relations between the micro-/meso- and macrolevels.

Work on such a framework, addressing the question in which respect and in which ways which types of associations provide for the perseverance of authoritarian regimes, could start from the observations noted above and move on to consider how state power is exercised in Vietnam. This draws on a sense that state power and governing, even in the case of an authoritarian state, is not only about coercion and control – it is also about the use of power to make people want what you want them to want. This kind of state power can be referred to as discursive power. It is, as Goebel (2011: 183) rightly notes, best conceptualised in Lukes (1975/2005) "radical view of power." To understand the idea of discursive power, it might be helpful to cite Lukes' (1975/2005: 28) rhetorical question: "Is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances, shaping their perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?"

Thus, discursive power has certain parallels with the aspect of hegemonic power as developed by and used in various ways in the analyses of Gramsci, Poulantzas and Jessop. Furthermore, this idea can be merged with elements of "state power" analysis and Michael Mann's (1975) idea of three dimensions of states' "infrastructural power." It is in this context that once again Goebel's recent article is inspiring. He suggests focusing on the triad of a state's various dimensions of infrastructural power, its coercive power and its discursive power (Goebel 2011: 187).<sup>14</sup>

It is high time to develop at least a focused theory frame based on such suggestions and to explore if and how Vietnamese civic organizations might help to strengthen or weaken forms of state power.

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<sup>14</sup> In Goebel's understanding, discursive power can be described "as power employed by agents of the state through/on discourse" (Goebel 2011: 188, FN 7). Note the difference of this understanding of discursive power from the concept elaborated by Foucault.

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