

ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION, POLITICAL SPACE AND THE ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS IN VIETNAM

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Ph.D. (HUMAN RIGHTS AND PEACE STUDIES)

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to assess, through the lens of trade unions operating under the umbrella of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor (VGCL), the extent to which economic liberalisation in Vietnam has resulted in political spaces being opened. The thesis addresses three questions namely, if and to what extent has economic liberalization, under Doi Moi since 1986, driven the transformation of Vietnam's Trade Union system into an agent capable of acting independently of government rather than being a mere 'transmission belt' for government policy to workers; if and to what extent has 'political space' within the Trade Union system shifted to a more democratic form; and to what extent have workers' demands, manifest in frequent illegal strikes, influenced the internal struggle within the Trade Union system.

The thesis takes an institutional perspective on political change that assumes the primacy of the institutions of state in producing 'openings in political space'. The thesis uses primary data from one-on-one interviews with union officials and factory workers together with focus groups comprising workers in industrial areas in different parts of Vietnam. Desk study, including review of regulatory documents and analysis of text and guidelines on trade unions, as well as academic documentary research, has been also conducted intensively.

The research reveals that although political space is still limited in Vietnam - the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) still tightly controls politics and trade unions are not considered to be fully independent - expansion of political space was identified.. Despite being an arm of the CPV and the State, unions are no longer simply 'transmission belts' for government policy to workers; they are being encouraged by the State to respond to workers' interests and demands at all levels of the union system. Moreover, the VGCL has been rather effective in lobbying for changes to laws that expand the role of unions. In addition, within the union system itself democratic processes have been implemented, notably in that in enterprise-level unions workers can elect their leaders and union leaders no longer need to be CPV members. It was also found that although illegal strikes cannot be interpreted, on available evidence, as being based in an organized 'labor movement', strikes have generally been tolerated by government, thus signifying the inadequacy of trade unions in representing workers' rights and interests. The findings suggest that the union system now behaves more as an element of 'semi-civil society' rather than simply as an arm of government. The thesis concludes that it is possible to identify the widening of political space in a localized and incremental sense although it is still a small space and thus may not lead to political change at national level. The many and significant legal and institutional changes that have expanded the role of trade unions can also be read as pragmatic responses by the State to enable trade unions to mimic the behavior of unions in democratic states without the State giving up ultimate control. The Vietnamese State has in fact opted to widen the space for the participation of trade unions whilst ensuring on-going control at arms length.

KEY WORDS: VIETNAM/TRADE UNIONS/POLITICAL SPACE/SEMI-CIVIL SOCIETY/ LABOR RIGHTS

245 pages