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**The State of Democratic Governance in
Vietnam**

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THE STATE OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN VIETNAM

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I. Introduction and summary

Vietnam is known as an emerging economy with a high growth rate, although the country is still considered as a less developed economy. Politically, Vietnam is still governed by a single party system, but there are numerous measures to democratize the economic, political and social lives. Recently, the Standing Committee of the National Assembly passed an Ordinance on grassroots democracy. According to this document, people have rights to discuss, make decision and recommendation on certain problems. People are confident in the process of democratization in the country. Vietnam has decided to use several indicators to assess progress towards good governance, including effective implementation of the grassroots democracy, budget transparency and legal reform (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2002). Another program is the Public Administration Administration Reform Master Plan of 2001.

This paper attempts to assess the attitude of Vietnamese people toward democracy, such as accountability of government officials to the electorate, the rule of law and responsiveness of political leaders and governmental officials to the citizens. Freedom and equality are assessed as the basic values of liberal democracy. The participation of electorate in the national elections and their interests in politics are also examined. We also bring in historical background and practices that might shape people's perception and attitudes.

II. Historical background

With the Spring Victory in 1975 terminating the Vietnamese liberation war, the whole country started implementing the 1976-1980 and then 1981-1985 five year plans. However, "the initial optimism has not been realized and in the late 1985, the economy totally fell into crisis and inflationary spiral" (General Statistics Office, 2002:15). Most people were short of food and clothing, short of accommodation, with extremely difficult transportation and inflation rate of about 800 percent.

The VI Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), held in 1986, analyzed causes of crisis and declared the "*doimoi*" (renovation) policy. The main stream of "*doimoi*" policy is to transform an economy emphasized on self-sufficient, self-supplied mechanism to commodity

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economy; from an economy based on centrally planned, bureaucratic, command, subsidized mechanisms (asking-delivering and handing delivering) to market mechanisms (according to laws of values, law of supply-demand, law of money-commodity and laws of competition). As many foreign authors called the development of Vietnamese economy under "*doimoi*" policy an economic transition to a market oriented system (Litvack & Rondinelli, 1999:1). It should be added that in documents of CPV and Vietnamese Government, the term of "free market" is not used, rather the market here is regulated by the State's plan, i.e. the State's interference, as concluded by the majority of economists including American ones in the last decade of the 20th century (Stiglitz, 1995) about the regulating role of the State. In short, the main content of the "doimoi" policy in Vietnam is to build up "a multi-sectoral commodity economy, regulated by market mechanisms with the State regulation" (CPV,1991:21). By 2001, this content was shortly called "building a socialist-oriented market economy" (CPV,2001:30). The doimoi policy was firstly focused on economic transition.

Eighteen years after (1986-2004) the policy reform, the country has changed and the lives of the people have been improved significantly. GDP per capita was \$206 US in 1990, increasing to \$423 US in 2004 and \$722 in 2006. In terms of purchasing price parity (PPP) measures, Vietnam's GDP per capita was approximately \$2745 in 2004, which represents a major advance in living conditions (General Statistics Office, 2003, 2007). The Report on "Millennium Goals: Closing the Millennium Gap" published on February 8, 2004 by the UNDP Office in Vietnam states that Vietnam has achieved impressive results in the process of implementation of the millennium development goals. Remarkably, the proportion of the public below the poverty level decreased from 70 percent in the middle of the 1980s to 60 percent in 1990, to 19.5 percent in 2004. From 1992 to 2004, more than 20 million of people escaped from famine and poverty.

Other social condition followed the upward trajectory of the economy. For instance, the Gender Development Index (GDI) for Vietnam reached 0.708, ranking 80 among 136 countries in 2004. Democratization in education has been implemented successfully in Vietnam since 1945. These multiple achievements have brought about an increase in Vietnam's Human Development Index. In 1995 Vietnam's HDI was 0.539. By 2003 Vietnam's HDI was 0.691 ranked 112th among 177 countries; 2006 Vietnam's HDI was 0.733 ranked 105th among 177 countries (UNDP, 1995, 2006, 2007).

Paralleling these developments, the literacy rate has increased from 5 percent in 1945 to 94 percent in 2000; the literacy rate among young people (aged 6-25) has increased to 96.7 percent. The universalization of primary education was completed in 2000 and compulsory education has been

extended to the secondary education level. The total number of high school students (in age cohort 12-18 years old) is 55.1 percent (Pham Minh Hac, 2001).

It can be said that the above-mentioned figures were achieved thanks to the renovation, open door policies, in which democratization and marketization play a significant role. Without market reforms, many of the economic gains of the past two decades would not have been possible, and without economic gains other government policies would not have been feasible.

Besides these achievements, Vietnam is facing challenges. For instance, the gap between the rich and the poor increased from 8 to 20 times over this same time span, as well as increasing between different provinces and cities. The inequality in expenses indicated by Gini index gradually increased from 0.33 in 1993, to 0.35 in 1998, and 0.37 in 2002 (General Statistics Office, 2002:25). The Gini index for income is 0.42 and for non-food expenses it is 0.49 (Gini 0 indicating absolute equality, 1 absolute inequality). Together with the transition to the market economy, industrialization and urbanization have increased the population in the cities; after 13 years (1989-2002), the metropolitan population increase by 7.5 million and at the same time poverty has become a serious problem in cities. The human and social capital of the poor have a tendency to decrease (Nguyen Thu Sa and Nguyen Thi Mai Huong 2001; Nguyen Huu Minh and Nguyen Huu Mai 2005).

Vietnam consistently implemented a policy on multi-lateralization, diversification of external economic relations and active integration into the world economy. The law on foreign investment has been promulgated and has undergone several amendments to make it more liberal and favorable for foreign investors. The relations with foreign countries and international organizations have been expanded. Vietnam joined Association of South East Asian Nations in July 1995 and has participated in Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation since November 1998 and now it is a member of the World Trade Organization. The relations between Vietnam and the United States were normalized in 1995 and the two countries signed Trade Agreement in July 2000. Three largest financial organizations (International Monetary Fund, World Bank and Asian Development Bank) have come back to assist Vietnam since October 1994. The value of exports has increased nearly sevenfold in twelve years (1999-2000) from \$US 2,752,000 to \$US 16,218,000 (General Statistics Office, 2003) and targeted \$US 44,626,000 in 2006 (General Statistics Office, 2007).

After two decades of transformation from a central command, subsidized economy to a market economy, Vietnam has obtained impressive achievements. The average growth rate is around 7% during the period of 1991-2000. There are positive changes in economic structure. Agricultural production as a share of the GDP declined to 19 percent in 2003; industry and construction rose to

40.5 percent of the GDP; and service accounted for 40.5 percent of the GDP. The World Bank, UNDP and other international organizations and foreign countries have broadly recognized these achievements.

David Dollar (WB):

“Vietnam’s economic transformation from 1986 to 1996 was truly remarkable” ... “Vietnam’s economy has grown rapidly...” (Litvack & Pondinelli, 1999:31); “Vietnam society is in total and positive transition toward a modern market economy. While the pace of change and reform is slow, there is a steady determination of purpose reflected in a series of liberalizing economic, financial, and social decrees and laws.” (US Department, 2002:2).

David O. Dapice (UNDP):

“Vietnam has been widely praised as a success story.” (Dapice, 2003: 2)

Vittorio Leproux and Douglas H. Brooks (ADB):

“Since Vietnam started its transition from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy, many reforms have been implemented. The Foreign Investment Law signaled an important step toward Vietnam’s integration in the regional and international economic system.” (Leproux & Brooks, 2003:2)

Jordan Ryan (UNDP in Hanoi, 2005):

“Vietnam has seen great changes after 20 years of the renovation process... The country has become more prosperous and has integrated deeper into the world economy... In addition to great achievements for the country itself, the renewal process in Vietnam has increased opportunities for every individual.”

Thanks to the economic development, the people has got greater access to education, information and above all, they have become more aware of their civil rights and there is a greater need for people participation in political and social life. Economic development also leads to the cultural change, which develops substantive democratic system in the people’s life, creates reciprocal confidence, and enhances altruism and self-expressed values. These are guarantees for the people’s participation in the policy-making process. The implementation of the Party’s renovation policy for the past years has truly reinforced democracy. However, the violation of people's right is still seen in many places. Numerous measures approved to secure people's participation in their economic, social and political lives. The Communist Party of Vietnam's Politburo’s Instruction No. 30-CT/TW dated February 18, 1998 on building and carrying out regulations on democracy at grassroots level clearly stipulates: “Expanding socialist democracy, bringing into full play the right of people as a master are

the objectives and also the driving force to ensure the success of the revolution and the cause of renovation”. The expanded democracy attracts people’s participation in the public administration and control to overcome the State apparatus’ degradation and bureaucracy. Social democratization was added to the goal of the whole society in 2001, that is, “ wealthy people, strong country, equitable, democratic and civilized society” (Resolution of the Ninth Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam). The Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has issued 3 degrees (No. 29-1998, No. 71-1998, and No. 7-1999) promulgating regulations on democracy in communes, precincts; administrative bodies, state-owned enterprises under the standards of a modern democracy which are the contestation of power, the participation of people, and the accountability of the powerful, according to the UNDP Human Development Report 2002 (p.58). Based on the effects of three degrees issued by the Government, the Standing Committee of the National Assembly has passed an ordinance on grassroots' democracy in 2007. This ordinance widens people's rights in governance at the local level. When people take part in the democratic process, their attitude and especially their value system will be changed. It is necessary and useful to conduct a research into these developments. In the long run, democracy cannot be simply achieved by institutional changes or the management of authoritative bodies, but its existence depends a great deal on values and confidence of ordinary citizens in the content of democracy.

III. Socio-Political Profile of the Country

Country Profile

	GDP per capita (PPP) in 2006	Gini Co-Efficient (latest available)	Number of effective parties (based on last national election)	Freedom House Political Right Score in 2006	Freedom House Civil Liberty Score in 2006	WBGI Rule of Law indicator in 2006	WBGI Government Effectiveness indicator in 2006	WBGI Voice and accountability Indicator in 2006	WBGI Control of corruption Indicator in 2006
Japan	31865.98	25		1	2	1.40	1.29	0.91	1.31
Hong Kong	35395.66	43		5	2	1.45	1.76	0.55	1.71
Korea	21876.57	32		1	2	0.72	1.05	0.71	0.31
China	8004.14	47		7	6	-0.40	-0.01	-1.66	-0.53
Mongolia	2321.79	33		2	2	-0.32	-0.46	0.10	-0.54
Philippines	5159.91	45		3	3	-0.48	-0.01	-0.18	-0.69
Taiwan	29243.75	35		1	1	0.77	1.11	0.79	0.53
Thailand	8876.73	42		3	3	0.03	0.29	-0.50	-0.26
Indonesia	4752.88	34		2	3	-0.82	-0.38	-0.25	-0.77
Singapore	29742.85	42		5	4	1.82	2.20	-0.07	2.30

Vietnam	3255.30	37		7	5	-0.43	-0.37	-1.45	-0.66
Cambodia	2533.71	42		3	3	-1.11	-1.01	-0.98	-1.19
Malaysia	11914.52	49		4	4	0.58	1.02	-0.34	0.38
Average of East Asia	14995.68	38.92		3.38	3.08	0.25	0.50	-0.18	0.15

In term of economic development, Vietnam is one of the countries in the region having the lowest GDP, the third place over Mongolia and Cambodia. Its GDP is less than one fourth of the average of East Asian region. Although in the last two decades the growth of GDP is stably high with the average of 7 percent, the absolute value of GDP is still low compared to other countries in the region.

Gini coefficient, which is about the average of the region, reflects the acceptable level of inequality in the country. Although the gap between the rich and the poor is widened, the governmental and international programs on poverty reduction help keeping the situation at the acceptable level and help avoiding tension between social groups.

The freedom house political right and civil liberty score is high. Within the single party system, people have limited political choices.

The index "rule of law" is less than average (-0.43) reflects the low level of law abiding. This practice shows that in order to increase the level of rule of law, it needs to establish the system of civilian controlling and monitoring over the authorities. The Ordinance 34 on grassroots democracy issued in April 2007 by the Standing Committee of National Assembly creates a space for people to undertake control over local authorities. It may help improve the situation.

The low index of effectiveness of Vietnamese government, which is -0.37, the lowest in the region except Cambodia and Mongolia, tells us that the bureaucratic machinery is still cumbersome and its mechanisms of actions are complicated. The government still controls over the activities which should have been left for self-control. The civil societies are not provided with necessary spaces for actions.

Voice and accountability index is -1.45, the lowest among nations in the region except China. Control of corruption is -0.66, the third place from the bottom in the region. This widespread corruption negatively affects economic development and destroys confidence of international investors. The government has established an anti-corruption committee at both central and provincial levels, but their role is limited and their activities are still ineffective.

IV. 2006 survey in Vietnam

a. Sampling method

Multi-stage probability is used in the allocation and selection of sample provinces, districts and spots

b. Pre-survey preparation

- 100 respondents were chosen for pre-test participation.
- After the pre-testing, 25 researchers were selected for interviewing training in 4 days and 5 staff were selected for supervision training.

c. Field work

The survey was carried out in 20 provinces across 8 regions throughout Vietnam. The provinces were chosen as follows

- *Red River Delta region*: Hanoi, Hung Yen, Ha Nam, Thai Binh;
- *North East region*: Lao Cai, Phu Tho, Bac Giang,
- *North West*: Lai Chau
- *North Central Coast region*: Thanh Hoa, Ha Tinh
- *South Central Coast region*: Quang Nam, Binh Dinh
- *Central Highlands region*: Dak Lak, Lam Dong
- *South East region*: Ho Chi Minh, Binh Phuoc;
- *Mekong Delta region*: Dong Thap, An Giang, Ben Tre, Can Tho.

The respondents of the 20 provinces are adults at voting-age. There were 630 males and 570 females responded interview. The distribution of the questionnaires to urban and rural areas is 27 % (53 urban spots) and 73% (147 rural spots). This is relatively accords with the real ratio in Viet Nam on the impetus of strong urbanization. Nowadays, the population ratio of urban to rural is about 30% and 70%. However, this stimulus of fast urbanization will make the ratio of population living in the rural increase quickly in the future. This means that the ratio of population in rural areas has been decreasing significantly.

- Supervision

At the field work, 10% of total interviews were supervised

- Preliminary data

According to preliminary data, 24 respondents were not at home (0.02%), 14 respondents refused (0.01) and 84 cases were call back (0.07%)

A. Rule of Law

The Vietnamese government has been founded as a result of long struggles against foreign occupants. As stated by the Communist Party of Vietnam, the Vietnamese Government is belonging the people by its nature. The most Vietnamese respondents (42.2 % strongly agree and 35.4 % - somewhat agree) believe that the current court always punish the guilty even if they are high-ranking officials, only 15 percent think otherwise. There is a similar perception between Vietnamese and Mongolian respondents. Regarding abiding the law, the perception of Vietnamese respondents is quite different. Majority of Vietnamese respondents (42.9 think always, 26.9 think most of the time) agree that national government officials abide the law. Officials in the Vietnamese government were used to share with ordinary people difficulties during the wars and people believe they are still do the same. With the increase of living standards, more corruption among politicians, senior government officials and civil servants. There is an issue for fulfilling the basic requirements of the rule of law is to develop an independent judicial system.

Table 1

Current court always punish the guilty even if they are high-ranking officials?		How often national government officials abide the law?	
1. Strongly agree	42.4	Always	42.9
2. Somewhat agree	35.4	Most of the time	26.9
3. Somewhat disagree	13.2	Occasionally	9.0
4. Strongly disagree	1.8	Rarely	2.6
7. Don't Understand	1.5	Don't Understand	1.1
8. Can't choose	5.1	Can't choose	16.2
9. Decline to answer	0.6	Decline to answer	1.3
Missing	--	Missing	--

Controlling Corruption

When asked about the extent of corrupt practices by local and national government officials, majority of respondents (77%) do not see corruption as a serious incident at the local level ("Hardly anyone is involved" - 32.1%, and "Not a lot of officials are corrupt" - 44.9%); only 5.3 percent of respondents perceived corruption in almost everyone (4.5%) and most (0.8%) (Table 2). According to the respondents, corruption become more serious at the level of national government. Only 9.6% considered that hardly anyone is involved in corruption, 57.9% agreed that not a lot of officials are corrupt. More respondents (11.9%) considered that most officials are corrupt and 1.9 % respondents agreed that almost everyone is corrupt.

It is interesting to compare answers of the two questions about the extent of corruption among Vietnamese officials with those in other countries in the region. Very few people agreed that "most official" (1.1%) or "almost everyone" (0.4%) is corrupt. Singaporeans and Thai respondents have more or less a similar perception with Vietnamese people. People of other nations think more negatively. For example, 48.1% Taiwanese, 40% Mongolians and 38.1% Philippino believe that "almost everyone" is corrupt.

Table 2.

How widespread do you think corruption and bride-taking are in your local/municipal government?		How widespread do you think corruption and bride-taking are in the national government?	
1. Hardly anyone is involved	32.1	1. Hardly anyone is involved	9.6
2. Not a lot of officials are corrupt	44.9	2. Not a lot of officials are corrupt	57.9
3. Most officials are corrupt	4.5	3. Most officials are corrupt	11.9
4. Almost everyone corrupt	0.8	4. Almost everyone corrupt	1.9
7. Don't understand	--	7. Don't understand	--
8. Can't choose	17.1	8. Can't choose	18.3
9. Decline to answer	0.7	9. Decline to answer	1.30
Missing	--	Missing	--

Widespread corruption linked to practices of break the rule and ignoring the legal procedures among high-ranking officials. But the reactions from the government in anti-corruption campaign may increase the thrust of people due to the success of anti-corruption activities undertaken by the government. Most Vietnamese respondents believe that the government is working to crackdown corruption and root out bribes. Among them 41% considered that the government is doing its best and 37.6% considered the government is doing something (Table 3). This figures manifest the positive attitudes of people towards the government anti-corruption campaign. This positive feelings are based on the practices that several high-ranking government officials have been punished due to taking bribe.

People in the region react differently. There is a similar attitudes of Singaporean people towards effectiveness of anti-corruption campaign of their government, while people from

Philippines and Japan considered that their governments are not doing enough to crackdown corruption.

Table 3

In your opinion, is the government working to crackdown corruption and root out bribes?

1. It is doing its best	41.0
2. It is doing something	37.6
3. It is not doing much	12.8
4. Doing nothing	0.8
7. Don't understand	0.5
8. Can't choose	7.0
9. Decline to answer	0.3
Missing	--

B. Competition

The current political system in Vietnam is a single party's one. Majority of Vietnamese people (80.8%) feel close to the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). However, there are still choices for people in the election among candidates. Majority of respondents (56.6%) think that the voters have a real choice between different candidates (Table 4a). This attitude of people is based on the reality that the political system welcome independent candidates from non CPV membership. The Vietnamese Fatherland Front is working as a political consulting organization nominating candidates for elections. People have a right to choose between candidates of CPV and non-CPV membership, although majority of candidates are from CPV.

Table 4a

How often do you think our elections offer the voters a real choice between different parties/candidates.

1. Always	56.6
2. Most of the time	19.4
3. Occasionally	9.9
4. Rarely	4.3
7. Don't understand	0.3
8. Can't choose	9.0

9. Decline to answer	0.5
	100

Candidates for elections have equal access to the mass media during the election period. All candidates including CPV membership and non-CPV membership for a region have a equal chance to discuss the plan with their voters. 78.2 % of respondents agreed that all candidates have equal access to the mass media during the election period (Table 4b). Actually, in Vietnam candidates do not access the mass media individually, they accompany a group of candidates who run for a delegate of the National Assembly, for example, in a certain area. They access voters and media together, presenting their plan of action to the voters if elected.

There is a similar attitude between Vietnamese and Mongolian people on this matter. More people from other nations (30% Taiwanese; 40% Philippino; 40% Singaporeans) disagreed with statement that all candidates have equal access to the media.

Table 4b

Political parties or candidates in our country have equal access to the mass media during the election period?.

1. Strong agree	38.0
2. Somewhat agree	40.2
3. Somewhat disagree	4.8
4. Strong disagree	1.0
7. Don't understand	2.8
8. Can't choose	12.3
9. Decline to answer	0.9
Missing	--

On the freeness and fairness of the national election, majority of Vietnamese respondents (62.4%) agreed that the election was completely free and fair, and 22.4 % considered that election was free and fair with minor problem; a very few voters (5.2%) considered that the election have major problem and was not free and fair (Table 4.c). Singapore and Indonesia have very high proportion of respondents (85.2% and 83.3% respectively) considered the election was completely fair or with minor problem (Table 4c). Taiwan and Philippines have more respondents considering the election as not free and fair or with major problem.

Table 4c

On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election?.

1. Completely free and fair	62.4
2. Free and fair, but with minor problem	22.7
3. Free and fair, but with major problem	4.2
4. Not free and fair	1.0
7. Not applicable	--
8. Can't choose	9.1
9. Decline to answer	0.7
Missing	--

C. Participation

Electoral participation

When asked about the participation in the last National Assembly election, 85.8% Vietnamese respondents said "yes". The Vietnamese people always considered participation in a election as a citizen responsibility and as a political right. Moreover, most Vietnamese people are members of several social and civil associations such as Trade Union, Youth Union, Woman Association, Veteran Association etc, which are committed to mobilizing its members to participate in the elections. Election campaigns have limited influence on the electoral behavior of people, therefore, only 53.9% of Vietnamese respondents participated in the campaign meeting or rally (see Table 5a). The situation in other nations may be different, some nations have high participation rate. For example, 82.6% Taiwanese, 83.5% Mongolians, 80.6% Pilipino, 87.5% Thai participated in the last national election, while the participation rate in Malaysia is only 59.4%. In general, electoral participation rate in the region is high.

Table 5a

In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were away from home, they were sick or they just didn't have time. How about you? Did you vote in the most recent National Assembly election?

Thinking about the National Assembly election in 2002, did you attend a campaign meeting or rally?

1. Yes	85.8	1. Yes	53.9
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2. No	13.8	2. No	37.9
7. Not applicable	0.4	7. Not applicable	7.2
8. Can't choose	--	8. Can't choose	0.9
9. Decline to answer	--	9. Decline to answer	0.1
Missing	--	Missing	--

Regarding the gender differences, males are more active in electoral participation. 90.1% of male voted in the most recent parliamentary election compared with 81.0% of female (see Table 5b). 58.7% male and only 48.7% females attended campaign meetings. The difference is significant. It is obvious because in Vietnamese political arena men still play a dominant role, although females are more active in social and political activities.

There is no clear difference of electoral participation in 5 groups of respondents with levels of education.

Table 5b

In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were away from home, they were sick or they just didn't have time. How about you? Did you vote in the most parliamentary election?

	Average	Male	Female
1. Yes	85.8	90.1	81.0
2. No	13.8	9.5	18.5
7. Not applicable	0.4	0.4	0.5
8. Can't choose	--	--	--
9. Decline to answer	--	--	--
Missing	--	--	--

In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were away from home, they were sick or they just didn't have time. How about you? Did you vote in the most parliamentary election?

	Average	No edu.	Primary edu	Lower Sec.	Secon	Higher
1. Yes	85.8	78.7	90.5	85.4	82.8	88.5
2. No	13.8	21.3	9.5	14.1	16.3	11.5
7. Not applicable	0.4	0	0	0.5	0.9	0
8. Can't choose	--					

9. Decline to answer	--					
Missing	--	--	--	--	--	--

Table 5b

Thinking about the National Assembly election in 2002, did you attend a campaign meeting or rally?

	Average	Male	Female
1. Yes	53.9	58.7	48.7
2. No	37.9	34.3	41.7
7. Not applicable	7.2	6.6	7.7
8. Can't choose	0.9	0.2	1.7
9. Decline to answer	0.1	0.2	0.2
Missing	--	--	--

Thinking about the National Assembly election in 2002, did you attend a campaign meeting or rally?

	Average	No edu.	Primary edu	Lower Sec.	Secon	Higher
1. Yes	53.9	59.6	56.9	51.9	53.2	54.6
2. No	37.9	27.6	40.7	40.9	35.2	33.9
7. Not applicable	7.2	10.6	1.6	6.2	10.8	9.9
8. Can't choose	0.9	2.2	0.8	0.7	0.8	1.6
9. Decline to answer	0.1	0	0	0.3	0	0
Missing	--	--	--	--	--	--

Political interest

When asked about the political interest, 36.6% of Vietnamese respondents mentioned that they were very interested in politics, 37.6% were somewhat interested. Responding to the question of how often people follow news about politics, majority of respondents (58.1%) informed "everyday", 22.0% say "several times a week" and the rest follow the news "less often". Vietnamese people used to live in a centrally organized society, the Government takes care everything. Politics is a matter of concern. Following the news about politics and governance is a direct way of getting to know about the factors affecting living conditions of people.

Table 6a.

How interested would you say you are in politics?		How often do you follow news about politics and government?	
1. Very interested	36.6	1. Everyday	58.1
2. Somewhat interested	37.6	2. Several times a week	22.0
3. Not very interested	18.7	3. One or twice a week	10.6
4. Not at all interested	4.8	4. Not even one a week	3.8
7. No answer	--	5. Practically never	4.2
8. Can't choose	2.1	6. No answer	--
9. Decline to answer	0.3	8. Can't choose	1.2
Missing	--	9. Decline to answer	0.3
		Missing	--

Political Efficacy

A bit more than one thirds of Vietnamese respondents agreed that they were able to participate in politics and about a haft (45%) of respondents thought that politics seems so complicated that they can't understand what is going on (Table 6b). According to Vietnamese traditional values, occupying a high political position is very proud of, but at the same time is a complicated job requiring special ethical codes. Therefore, people prefer a professional or business work instead of a political position, especially at the current innovation moment.

There are also interesting findings from other nations in the region, it seems that people dislike political participation. A significant difference is found in the two nations, Thailand and Mongolia. 75.7% Thai respondents and 58.3% of Mongolian respondents thought they were able to participate in politics, but in these two nations, 83.4% and 66.9% of respondents respectively thought that politics were so complicated, that they can't understand what is going on. This contradiction might result from narrowly understanding the concept of politics and government in these two nations.

Table 6b

I think I have the ability to participate in politics		Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that people like me can't understand what is going on	
1. Strongly agree	12.2	1. Strongly agree	10.7
2. Somewhat agree	25.5	2. Somewhat agree	34.3

3. Somewhat disagree	25.2	3. Somewhat disagree	28.0
4. Strongly disagree	21.3	4. Strongly disagree	10.7
7. Don't Understand	1.8	7. Don't Understand	6.0
8. Can't choose	10.3	8. Can't choose	9.2
9. Decline to answer	3.8	9. Decline to answer	1.2
Missing	--	Missing	--

D. Vertical Accountability

Elections are not a guarantee for voters to hold political leaders accountable. Leaders in power can have many ways of avoiding accountability. Vietnamese people are positive about their capacity to change the government they don't like, 55.6% of respondents agreed that they can change the government. 43.1% of respondents disagreed that people have no way of holding the government responsible for its actions, only 31.8% agreed with this statement. There is an evidence that people seem to have a limited mechanism to force officials in power accountable. 61.9 % of Vietnamese respondents confirmed that government officials "always" or "most of the time" withhold important information from the public view. Without transparency, people have no way to control how officials in power accountable.

Table 7

People have the power to change a government they don't like		Between elections, the people have no way of holding the government responsible for its actions		How often government officials withhold important information from the public view?	
1. Strongly agree	20.4	1. Strongly agree	10.1	1. Always	37.7
2. Somewhat agree	35.2	2. Somewhat agree	21.7	2. Most of the time	24.2
3. Somewhat disagree	17.9	3. Somewhat disagree	27.8	3. Occasionally	12.1
4. Strongly disagree	9.8	4. Strongly disagree	15.3	4. Rarely	4.3
7. Don't Understand	4.8	7. Don't Understand	7.8	7. Don't Understand	.1
8. Can't choose	9.9	8. Can't choose	15.8	8. Can't choose	19.8
9. Decline to	1.9	9. Decline to	1.6	9. Decline to	1.0

answer		answer		answer	
Missing	--	Missing	--	Missing	--

In 2007, the National Assembly issued a Ordinance on the Grassroots' level democracy which is based on three Decrees circulated earlier by the Government on the same matter. The Ordinance stipulates the kind of information authority at the grassroots' level has to open to the citizens, matters need to be discussed and make decision by the people and matters people have to make recommendations. This Ordinance opens space for people to participate in political life and get their voice heard by the higher levels of government.

E. Horizontal Accountability

Parliamentary hearing held for several positions in the government provides legislature with information on the government activities. The Standing Committee of the National Assembly hearing held recently also keeps the National Assembly informed regularly. The Vietnamese respondents are quite confident in the capability of the legal system of doing something in case of the government breaking the law; 66.2% of them disagreed that there is nothing the legal system can do when the government breaks the law. 79.8% of respondents believe that the legislature is capable of keeping the government in check.

Singaporean respondents have the same belief to the legal system in controlling the government when it breaks the law, while Mongolians are more pessimistic about the legal system capability. Indonesians have similar attitudes towards capability of the legislature in checking the government. Respondents of other nations in the region have less confidence on this matter.

Table 8

When the government breaks the law, there is nothing the legal system can do?		To what extent the legislature capable of keeping the government in check?	
1. Strongly agree	5.7	1. Very capable	37.9
2. Somewhat agree	15.4	2. Capable	41.9
3. Somewhat disagree	34.0	3. Not capable	3.2
4. Strongly disagree	26.2	4. Not at all capable	0.5
7. Don't Understand	6.8	7. Don't Understand	0.8
8. Can't choose	9.9	8. Can't choose	14.9
9. Decline to answer	2.0	9. Decline to answer	0.8
Missing	--	Missing	--

E. Freedom

The 1992 constitution recognizes the rights to freedom of opinions, expression and association for all citizens. Journalists are more often allowed to report on crime and official corruption, and such reports have become increasingly common. Access to satellite television broadcasts and the internet is growing, more than 17 percent of Vietnamese have internet access. But activities of the Press are guided by the CPV Committee of Propaganda and Education and the Ministry of Culture and Information.

Most Vietnamese (74.7%) believe that they are free to speak what they think without fear. Majority of respondents (55.2%) also believe that they can join organization they like without fear.

Table 9

People are free to speak what they think without fear?		People can join any organization they like without fear?	
1. Strongly agree	34.7	1. Strongly agree	29.4
2. Somewhat agree	40.0	2. Somewhat agree	25.8
3. Somewhat disagree	15.3	3. Somewhat disagree	19.3
4. Strongly disagree	4.7	4. Strongly disagree	6.8
7. Don't Understand	1.7	7. Don't Understand	2.8
8. Can't choose	3.3	8. Can't choose	5.2
9. Decline to answer	0.5	9. Decline to answer	0.8
Missing	--	Missing	--

G. Equality

Most Vietnamese people (78.8%) agree that everyone is treated equally by the government. The government works very hard to help the poor and disadvantaged groups. But there is a growing concern in recent years about increasing disparities in income during the doimoi period. Endemic poverty in some rural and remote areas, particularly in places where ethnic minorities predominate, stands in sharp contrast to evidence of emergent affluence in some urban areas.

People with high social status is more supportive to this statement compared to those with lower social status. Respondents with lowest social status are less supportive to this statement. It is well understood, although there are several programs on poverty reduction and assistance for disadvantaged groups, there is an increasing disparity between social groups, regions. The income

gap between the group of 20% the poorest and the group of 20% the richest in the country increases from 7.3 times in the period 1994-1996 to 8.3 times in 2004 (VASS, 2006).

Majority of respondents from Indonesia (72.7%), Singapore (68.0%), Thailand (55.6%) and Malaysia (50.8%) are satisfied with equal treatment by their government. Respondents from Japan and Korea are most disappointed with situation of equality in their countries with only 13% and 19% respondents agreeing that everyone is treated equally by the government respectively.

Table 10a

Everyone is treated equally by the government

	Social status (1- lowest, 10 - highest)										total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Entire sample	1.6	2.1	4.6	9.5	23.8	25.1	21.8	9.4	1.1	1.1	100
1. Strongly agree (%)	1.4	1.6	2.0	5.2	26.8	29.0	22.6	9.3	.6	1.4	100
2. Somewhat agree	1.9	2.1	4.3	10.5	23.8	21.9	23.5	9.3	1.7	1.2	100
3. Somewhat disagree	.7	2.8	9.1	13.3	15.4	21.7	22.4	11.9	2.1	.7	100
4. Strongly disagree	0	0	16.7	30.0	13.3	20.0	13.3	6.7	0	0	100
7. Don't Understand	4.3	0	17.4	21.7	30.4	13.0	13.0	0	0	0	100
8. Can't choose	4.1	6.1	6.1	14.3	20.4	30.6	8.2	10.2	0	0	100
9. Decline to answer	0	0	0	0	50	50	0	0	0	0	100
Missing											
	Social status (1- lowest, 10 - highest)										Entire sample
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1. Strongly agree (%)	36.8	33.3	18.9	23.6	48.0	49.3	44.1	42.2	23.1	53.8	42.6
2. Somewhat agree	42.1	37.5	34	40.0	36.1	31.5	39.0	35.8	53.8	38.5	36.2
3. Somewhat disagree	5.3	16.7	24.5	17.3	7.9	10.6	12.6	15.6	23.1	7.7	12.3
4. Strongly disagree	0	0	9.4	8.2	1.4	2.1	1.6	1.8	0	0	2.6
7. Don't Understand	5.3	0	7.5	4.5	2.5	1.0	1.2	0	0	0	2.0
8. Can't choose	10.5	12.5	5.7	6.4	3.6	5.1	1.6	4.6	0	0	4.2
9. Decline to answer	0	0	0	0	0.4	0.3	0	0	0	0	.2

total 100 100 100 100 100 100 100 100 100 100 100

Regarding to basis needs, majority of Vietnamese respondents (81.6%) agree that people have basic necessities like food, clothes and shelter. It is obvious from the National Human Development Reports (VASS, 2001, 2006) and Poverty Update (VASS, 2007) that the Vietnam's poverty rate decreased from 37.4% in 1998 to 19.5 in 2004. If accounting since 1993, the poverty rate in 2004 is only one third of the rate in 1993. It is impressive in the context that UNDP Millennium Development Goals (MDG) is to reduce a half of poverty rate in the period 1990-2015. The impressive achievement in poverty reduction has a strong impact on people's perception.

It is similar to the previous question, people with high social status is more supportive to this statement compared to those with lower social status. Respondents with lowest social status are less supportive to this statement. This attitude may reflect higher expectation of people with lower social status.

Most respondents from Thailand (87.1%), Philippines (83.1%), Singapore (82.9%), Malaysia (79.8%) Indonesia (74.2%), Japan (64.8%) and Taiwan (63.7%) agreed that people have basic necessities like food, clothes and shelter. People from Mongolia and especially Korea are very disappointed with the situation in their countries. Only 29.2% respondents from Korea and 32.8% from Mongolia agreed that people have basic necessities.

Table 10b

People have basic necessities like food, clothes, and shelter

	Social status (1- lowest, 10 - highest)										total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1. Strongly agree	1.7	.8	1.9	4.7	26.9	29.4	24.9	8.1	.4	1.3	100
2. Somewhat agree	1.9	2.3	4.2	10.3	21.1	23.4	22.2	10.5	2.6	1.4	100
3. Somewhat disagree	0	6.9	9.5	19.0	22.4	18.1	13.8	10.3	0	0	100
4. Strongly disagree	3.2	0	22.6	35.5	9.7	12.9	9.7	6.5	0	0	100
7. Don't Understand	0	0	14.3	19.0	33.3	9.5	14.3	9.5	0	0	100
8. Can't choose	2.8	5.6	8.3	11.1	19.4	25.0	13.9	13.9	0	0	100
9. Decline to answer	0	0	50	0	50	0	0	0	0	0	100

	Social status (1- lowest, 10 - highest)										Entire
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1. Strongly agree	47.4	16.7	18.9	22.7	51.6	53.4	52.0	39.4	14.4	53.8	45.4

2. Somewhat agree	42.1	41.7	34.0	40.0	32.5	34.2	37.4	41.3	84.6	46.2	36.2
3. Somewhat disagree	0	33.3	20.8	20.0	9.4	7.2	6.3	11.0	0	0	10.5
4. Strongly disagree	5.3	0	13.2	10.0	1.1	1.4	1.2	1.8	0	0	2.7
7. Don't Understand	0	0	5.7	3.6	2.5	.7	1.2	1.8	0	0	1.8
8. Can't choose	5.3	8.3	5.7	3.6	2.5	3.1	2.0	4.6	0	0	3.3
9. Decline to answer	0	0	1.9	0	.4	0	0	0	0	0	0.3
total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

H. Responsiveness

The most important problems in Vietnam as identified are related to economic development, poverty reduction, education development, health care etc. The government has focused very much on problems in these areas and how it intended to solve them. Vietnamese government seems very successful in achieving goals identified in its stated policies. People needs are met quite well. This explain why most Vietnamese respondents (85.0%) believe that the government will solve the most important problem in the next five years. Similarly, most people (86.3%) think that the government respond to what people want. In general, to majority of the Vietnamese people, their government is responsive to their mass public.

Table 11

How likely is it that the government will solve the most important problem you identified within the next five years	How well do you think the government responds to what people want				Total
	Very likely	Likely	Not very likely	Not at all likely	
Entire sample	32.2	52.8	14.4	.7	100
Very Responsive	49.2	44.4	6.5	0	100
Largely responsive	30.7	58.5	10.2	.5	100
Not very responsive	10.8	43.9	42.6	2.7	100
Not very responsive at all	0	0	100	0	100

How likely is it that the government will solve the most important problem you identified	How well do you think the government responds to what people want				Total
	Entire sample	Very likely	Likely	Not very likely	

within the next five years

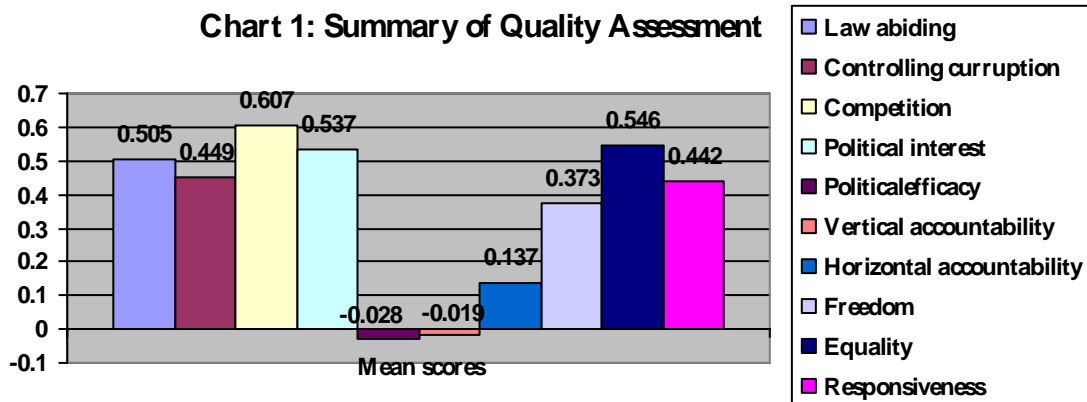
Very responsive	23.7	36.3	19.9	10.7	0
Largely responsive	61.6	58.9	68.3	44.0	42.9
Not very responsive	14.2	4.8	11.8	42.0	57.1
Not very responsive at all	.5	0	0	3.3	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100

The two perceptions on "how well the government responds to what people want" and "how likely the government will solve the most important problems within five years" reinforce each other with the correlation of .351 with $p < .05$.

Vietnamese respondents are the most optimistic about the government responsiveness. Respondents from Singapore and Malaysia also highly value the government responsiveness with 66.4% and 56.1% respectively agreeing that the government very responsive and largely responsive. Respondents from Thailand and Indonesia also fairly optimistic. Respondents from Korea, Mongolia, Japan and Taiwan are likely not to believe very much that their government are responsive to people.

I. A Summary of Quality Assessment

Mean scores of eleven composite measures are presented in Chart 1.



The Chart 1 was constructed based on standardized scale - 1.0 ~ +1.0 using raw scores. The Chart provides us with very interesting information on strength and weakness of the current government. According to people's perception, the current government is very strong in law-abiding, competition, political interest, equality.

It seems weak in terms of political efficacy and vertical accountability. As political efficacy is concerned, people feel strongly that they are not able to participate and understand the system of politics. In some extent the system of administration in Vietnam lacks transparency, people are not provided with enough information what is going on inside the system. People also found the vertical accountability weak. In the absence of a strong legislative system, it is difficult to hold government officials accountable.

The other items such as controlling corruption, horizontal accountability, freedom, responsiveness are assessed as average.

J. Quality of Governance and Regime Legitimacy

- As shown in the Table 12, there is a clear one proportional relation between the index of law abiding, controlling corruption, competition, political interest, horizontal accountability, freedom, equality and responsiveness and index of satisfaction with democracy. The relationship between index of satisfaction with democracy and index of overall country economic condition and personal economic condition is reversal. This means that people who highly value the country economic condition and who has higher economic condition are less satisfied with democratic situation in the country.

- The relation between index of support for democracy and index of competition, political interest, horizontal accountability, freedom, equality, responsiveness and economic conditions are reversal. For example, those people who support democracy are not satisfied with offering a real choice between candidates or opportunity to access mass media. People who support democracy are not less interested in politics. Similarly, people who support democracy do not believe that people can change the government they don't like.

Table 12: Correlation coefficients between eleven summary measures and two measures of economic conditions with satisfaction with democracy, support for democracy, objection to non-democratic alternative and diffuse regime support

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
	Law abid. Gover	Contr . curru ption	Com- peti- tion	Elect. parti- tion	Polit. inter.	Polit. effi- cacy	Verti. Acco.	Horiz . Acco.	Free- dom	Equa- lity	Res- pon- sivnes s	Coun- try Econ- mic	Per- sonal Econ- mic
Sat. with Dem	.409	.372	.527		.294	no	no	.116	.271	.414	.505	-.239	-.177

Support Dem	no	no	-.161		-.113	no	no	-.090	-.59	-.111	-.083	.079	-.040
Objection to non-Dem Alter	no	no	.075		.151	-.071	-.071	-.072	no	no	no	no	-.076
Diffuse Regime Support	-.392	-.248	-.452		-.236	no	no	no	-.308	-.469	-.279	no	.066

- The relation between the index of objection to non-democratic alternative and competition and political interest is proportional but this relation is not strong. People, who have objection to non-democratic alternative, consider that elections offer the voters a real choice between different candidates and offer candidates equal access to the mass media. On the other hand, the relation between the index of objection to non-democratic alternative and political efficacy, vertical and horizontal accountability and personal economic situation is reversal, but this relation is not strong.

- The relations between diffuse regime support and law abiding government, corruption, competition, political interest, political freedom, equality and responsiveness are reversal and fairly strong. The relation between diffuse regime support and personal economic situation is proportional, but this relation is not so strong.

4. Conclusion

Current public support for democracy in Vietnam arises from several sources such as increasing educational levels, rising living standards, economic development and change in the administrative system. All of these can be seen as a results of the country renovation in the last two decades. In the short run, the course of democratization is likely depend on the strategic decision of national elites, but in the long run the public attitudes will have impacts on the democratic process. Our initial findings from this survey provide some evidence of democratization process in Vietnam and these can be seen as the first empirical sources of research on democracy undertaken in Vietnam so far. Comparative analysis to be undertaken could be useful for Vietnam in understanding democratization process happening outside Vietnam.

What we have examined shows that Vietnamese people are very optimistic about the state of democratic governance in Vietnam. Only three indexes of political, vertical and horizontal accountability are low, the other indexes are quite high. There is a need to make government's

activities transparent, that help people be sure if the government officials are accountable. Vietnam low rankings in international polls of liberal democracy can be contrasted with the high rankings that Vietnamese citizens usually give the administrative system in Vietnam. The positive impacts of the Grassroots Democracy and other enlarged spaces for citizen interaction in Vietnam can be seen as partial explanation for the high level of citizen confidence in the governance system.

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