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## Under the State's Thumb: Results from an Empirical Survey of Civic Organizations in Vietnam

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# Under the State's Thumb: Results from an Empirical Survey of Civic Organizations in Vietnam

## Abstract

Civic organizations (COs) are neither a good nor a bad thing. They are not inherently fighters for democracy or supporters of authoritarian rule. The way they develop depends on the impact that various forms of state power have on them *and* on their influence on the state. Vietnamese COs appear to be no exception. When we examine just one direction of these interdependent and reciprocal relations, it becomes clear that under the constraints of the Vietnamese state's infrastructural power many Vietnamese COs develop features of intra-organizational authoritarianism; that they help to embed the state and the Communist Party more deeply within Vietnamese society; and, finally, that they contribute to bringing the society further under the control of the state and the party. However, this occurs to a very different degree depending on the type of CO. NGOs and faith-based organizations in particular, at least in the field of gender norms and practices, seem to resist the state's discursive power. This could imply challenges to the state's and the party's control of politics and society and leads the authors to draw far-reaching conclusions as far as developmental cooperation with and potential support for various types of Vietnamese COs is concerned.

Keywords: civic organizations, authoritarianism, authoritarian state, Vietnam

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- 2 Theoretical Framework
- 3 Methodological Considerations
- 4 Empirical Findings and Discussion
- 5 Conclusion

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List of Interviews and Interview Dates

**1 Introduction**

Associationalism is not necessarily a good thing.<sup>1</sup> This is true even if in political science, as in area studies, the dominant opinion has been and still is that civic organizations (COs) are good per se.<sup>2</sup> It is thought that their development should be supported, especially in countries

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1 This paper stems from a larger, cross-regional project based at the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies and funded by the German Research Council (KO 3513/5-1). For further information see online: <[www.giga-hamburg.de/de/projekt/civil-society-organizations-as-supporters-of-authoritarian-rule-a-cross-regional-comparison](http://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/projekt/civil-society-organizations-as-supporters-of-authoritarian-rule-a-cross-regional-comparison)> (22 April 2015).

2 In this paper we use the term “civic organizations” generically for the whole range of societal organizations found in Vietnam and elsewhere: mass organizations, professionals’ organizations, business organizations, NGOs, and faith-based organizations.

under authoritarian rule, because COs are viewed as “schools of democracy,” as Tocqueville once called them, or “bulwarks of democracy” (Hyden 2010: 253). However, since the end of the “transition paradigm” (Carothers) – and even before that – many political scientists, as well as scholars in the field of regional research, have viewed COs with a critical eye. Early on, the so-called “dark sides” of COs were referred to and their rather more negative role in supporting democratization pointed out. Edwards and Foley (1996), Chambers and Kopstein (2001), Lauth (2003), and Roth (2004), for example, carried out critical studies focusing on the tendency towards violence, corruption, intolerance, and other deficits of “civil ethos” within civil societies and COs (Kern et al. 2010: 3).

Wischermann (2013a, b) has analyzed COs in Vietnam and described the widespread development of intra-organizational authoritarianism in all types of organizations in the country – something that makes those organizations, at least in principle, supporters of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and the state it rules. Hai Hong Nguyen (2014) asserts that there are “limited governance mechanisms within Vietnamese CSOs to make their activities accountable” and questions whether these organizations follow “the fundamental principles of democracy, in this case transparency and accountability” (154). In a seminal article, Thayer (2009) goes one step further and portrays what he calls Vietnamese nongovernmental organizations as service-delivery institutions, closely related to if not be friended with the state and in a sense even apolitical organizations. The only organizations interested and engaged in the democratization of state–society relations in Thayer’s view are “political movements” such as the now dissolved “Bloc 8406,” oppositional political parties, independent unions, etc. Hai Hong Nguyen’s (2014) most recent contribution on political parties, civil society, and citizen movements in Vietnam could be read as supporting Thayer’s view. By contrast, Bui Hai Thiem (2013) sees Vietnamese COs and what he calls civil society actions as contesting power and representing ideas and values in governance about democratic freedoms, transparency, accountability, and meaningful participation that reveal “increasingly complex aspects of struggles of ideas and values in state–civil society relations. They serve as fundamental platforms for the changing dynamics of governance in Vietnam” (93).

This leads us to the questions guiding this paper: Why do civic organizations, especially those under authoritarian rule, act as agents of democratic change and/or as forces of preservation for existing power relations? Why do COs develop either democratic or nondemocratic features? More precisely, what is the impact of the state, especially the authoritarian one, on these developments? Which forms of authoritarian state power might precipitate, for example, forms of intra-organizational authoritarianism? And what are the mechanisms linking the authoritarian state and the various forms and resources of state power with developments inside COs? How can we describe the processes that lead to the development of authoritarian propensities inside various types of COs?

Answering the very first question, which is predominant in political science–related research on authoritarian regimes, seems to involve exploring the “conditions” that impact

COs. Here a variety of “factors” are enumerated and their impact on the internal make-up, the goals, and the activities COs pursue are named and/or explored in detail. These factors include historical and sociocultural influences, the strongly service-centered role many COs play, the family centeredness and the “kinship ethos” of COs, clientelism, neopatrimonialism, and so on. Many of these studies, which are barely comparable, study developments in the Middle East (Jamal 2007), North Africa (Liverani 2008), and southern Africa (Vidal and Chabal 2009). For the region of Asia and in a rather general sense, the role of the state in the economic, political, and social development process and its impact on the development of COs has also been explored (Alagappa 2004).

Recently, the research on COs has taken an interesting turn. Maneuvering out of the schism between those who see COs as fighters for democracy and those who see COs as helping to preserve authoritarian rule, Cavatorta (2013) suggests shedding the “transition paradigm” and moving towards “an understanding that liberalized authoritarian regimes [...] may be a relatively stable equilibrium” (3). Furthermore, he suggests joining Berman (2006) in her assumption that COs and “(t)he growth of civil society should not be considered an undisputed good, but a politically neutral multiplier – neither inherently ‘good’ nor ‘bad’, but dependent for its effects on the wider political environment and the values of those who control it” (Berman 2006: 266). Cavatorta (2013) then goes on to conceptualize the interdependency between (authoritarian) state/s and society/ies, which he conceives of not as separate and in opposition but as “on a sort of continuum where the two meet to cooperate or to come into conflict” (2). He finally suggests analyzing “the conditions under which such dynamics take effect” and strengthening “an emerging research agenda which focusses more on the variations of civil society activism *within* authoritarian regimes than on the extent to which they promote or thwart democratization” (3; emphasis in original).

In our view this is a fruitful, though descriptive, approach, since it opens up the opportunity to explore COs and their activities without taking a teleological perspective. Even more important is that Cavatorta suggests thinking about the impact of authoritarian constraints on COs in relational ways. A relational perspective takes into account that whatever “conditions” influence COs, these organizations are also part of those conditions *and* influence them. In examining state–CO relationships, relational thinking helps to avoid potential tautologies and supports the development of a new research agenda.

Despite this (and other) turn(s), scholars researching authoritarianism only rarely refer to

- a theoretically underpinned understanding of the role of the state;
- the actual sources of state power, beyond how it utilizes political-economic resources, and what, besides rational and calculating self-interest, nourishes the will to maintain such power;
- how power in autocratic regimes is exerted in practice on a daily basis and how it is upheld in everyday life;



- which classes and social strata either support the power structure or put up resistance to it, and how this occurs; and,
- how certain ways of exerting power, on the one hand, and acceptance or resistance, on the other, are linked.

“Bringing in a theoretically reflected understanding of the state” while also “bringing society back in” are two of the central desiderata of autocracy research (Kailitz and Köllner 2013: 25).

Even more rarely, in this same context of political science research on authoritarian (and democratic) regimes, do we find reference to critical analyses of state and power. Here an article by Göbel (2011) should be pointed out. Through the unusual combination of various discussion strains, he develops an understanding, based theoretically on Mann (1984) and Lukes (1975/2001), of the (authoritarian) state, its forms of power, sources of power, and activities, and also suggests how such an understanding can be operationalized. He differentiates between three forms of state power: “despotic power,” “infrastructural power,” and “discursive power” (Göbel 2011: 187). Gerschewski (2010) reaches similar conclusions when he identifies three “pillars” of power in authoritarian regimes: repression, co-optation, and legitimation (Gerschewski 2010: 8).<sup>3</sup>

This article takes inspiration from various schools of state and power analysis. In our differentiation between the infrastructural power and the discursive power of the authoritarian state, we have followed Göbel’s suggestion.

For the case of Vietnam, we argue that in a general sense various forms of state power (infrastructural power and discursive power) appear to be strong, but that they seem to be exercised to a varying degree: Whereas the impact of infrastructural power appears to be strong and seems to have almost the same impact on all types of COs, the discursive power of the state seems to be a bit weaker and its impact appears to vary according to the type of CO. The state’s infrastructural power leads to intra-organizational authoritarianism, but the discursive power of the state does not have a similarly strong impact. These findings might have implications for developmental cooperation with and potential support for various types of Vietnamese COs.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: After a brief outline of the theoretical framework in Section 2, Section 3 presents the methodological considerations. The empirical findings are outlined and discussed in Section 4. In our conclusion (Section 5), we reinterpret these results against the backdrop of the article’s main question (how do the various forms of authoritarian state power impact various types of COs and what does this mean for Vietnam’s state–society relationship?) and the theoretical insights from previous research on associationalism under authoritarianism, drawing two practice-oriented conclusions.

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3 Outside the framework of authoritarianism research, Giddens (1984) differentiates between authoritative, allocative, and symbolic resources of power, and Barnett and Duvall (2005), within the framework of their complex power taxonomy, differentiate between “compulsory,” “institutional,” “structural,” and “productive power” (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 48–57).

## 2 Theoretical Framework

In keeping with the primarily exploratory intention of this paper, we base our investigation on a “focused theory frame” (Rueschemeyer 2009: 1). The assumptions operating here and the frame of reference that is established lead to hypotheses, some of which also contain causalities. The former do not, however, inevitably result in a closed theoretical principle.

Our understanding of state is informed by a combination of different schools of state and power analysis. We link the findings on the genesis and the necessity of “state power” (Mann) with the traditions of hegemony-related and, in a very limited sense, governmentality-related theories (Poulantzas, Jessop, Gramsci, Lukes). We enrich both of these with the findings of gender research (Sauer). According to our understanding, the state is the institutionalized result of societal conditions and conflicts, and state institutions are part of a field of social and economic forces (Sauer 2011: 133). We thus comprehend the state as a social relationship – an institutionalization and “material condensation of the relationship of social forces” (Poulantzas) – within which certain societal forces and ideas can temporarily achieve hegemonic positions.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, we speak of an authoritarian state when the following conditions exist:

- When the state and its actions only allow political pluralism to a limited and constantly fluctuating extent, and when the state demonstrates permissive tolerance – which can be revoked at any point – for “divergent” opinions.
- When the state reacts to people who are politically, ethnically, religiously, or sexually “different” by limiting their options for action or expression.
- When a leader or a small group exercises power within boundaries that have not been formally defined but are actually quite predictable.
- When the leader or the small ruling group has largely been exempted from political accountability.
- When the authoritarian state has appropriated elements of various, differentiated concepts of consensus and communality, propagating them and promoting their dissemination through the media and societal organizations. Such concepts are meant to remedy differences among classes, social strata, ethnic groups, religious communities, and genders. They imply the precedence of an imagined society over the individual, and that the individual’s granting of consent will lead to a supposed consensus; furthermore, they

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4 As regards the definition of the state, we use the “working definition” Rueschemeyer and Evans (1985) developed. According to their definition, it should be recognized “that across a range of historical circumstances – in ways that vary substantially – the state tends to be an expression of pacts of domination, to act coherently as a corporate unit, to become an arena of social conflict, and to present itself as the guardian of universal interest. Clearly these tendencies stand in contradiction to each other and cannot all at once come into their own” (Rueschemeyer and Evans 1985: 48; emphasis in original).

Due to a lack of space we leave out a broader discussion of why we do not see differences based on principles between various forms of state power in authoritarian and democratic polities.

guarantee the privileged status of one class, social strata, ethnicity, religious community, or gender and the subordinate (or at least less powerful) status of a different one. These sorts of consensus and communality ideologies can come from a general political, nationalist, religious, ethnic, gender or other sort of basis and background, and they do not necessarily have to represent a closed worldview. Examples of such concepts include conceptualizations of "Asian values" or of women as guardians of national culture.

We refer, following Mann (1984), to the state's "despotic" and "infrastructural power" and, following Lukes (1975/2005), to its "discursive power" as the three key forms of state power. For pragmatic reasons we focus on the infrastructural and discursive power of the state.<sup>5</sup>

Infrastructural state power is essentially about political control of society. Here, institutions, social services, and procedures come into play that offer citizens incentives to act in a certain way on the one hand and make it possible for the state to react flexibly when faced with societal problems and pressure "from below" on the other. In general, infrastructural power denotes the "logistics of political control" (Mann 1984: 192). More specifically, infrastructural power signifies the "capacity of the state to penetrate and coordinate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm" (Mann 1984: 189). As Göbel (2011: 184) rightly notes, this definition refers to three approaches to infrastructural power – "namely, 'state capabilities', their 'subnational variation', and their impact on society, that is, the 'weight of the state' (Soifer 2008: 236–242)."

We term the first specific form of infrastructural power "control through the provision of services to the people." Maintaining control of a society makes necessary not only means that concern the central administration, internal security, and other similar domains, but also those in the realm of social welfare. Here the implementation of social services that help the state to mitigate social problems and counter possible political conflicts by improving the social conditions of single groups or several groups of citizens, and thus to exert control over society, are very important. The contributions of COs within the framework of state programs in the public health sector, especially those for inhabitants of urban problem areas ("socially marginalized groups"), make it possible for the state to manage these areas and their residents, are effective means of pacification, and help maintain this form of infrastructural power.

The second form of infrastructural power can be termed "control through limited participation." In order to achieve more or better control over certain groups and individuals, the state gives preference to certain societal groups and certain organizations representing them (for example, associations of businesspeople), allowing them to participate within fixed limits in policy-formation, decision-making, and implementation processes. At the same time, the state denies the participants access to the advance decision-making committees and any

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5 We have left out research on the impact the "despotic" form of state power might have because in the context of Vietnam we could not rule out negative repercussions from such research for the interviewees and the researchers.

significant influence on fundamental decisions. This kind of political integration does not involve relinquishing power. Together with Selznick (1949), we call such processes and this method of securing power “co-optation.”<sup>6</sup>

The discursive power of the state is a means with which to secure the active participation of the objects of power in their own self-restraint (Jessop 2008: 147). We understand discursive power in the sense of Lukes, and differently from Foucault, as the “power employed by agents of the state through/on discourse” (Göbel 2011: 188, FN 7), and thus as the exertion of power through the controlling of societal discourse and the shaping of understandings of societal or political issues, historical events, and so on. Our understanding of power has been informed by Lukes’s (1975/2005) “radical view of power” and its understanding of the two dimensions of state power: “power over someone” and “power to” (Lukes 1975/2005: 28). One example of coercion through discursive state power selected for this paper is the influence of such power on norms that affect both gender relationships and the understanding of gender in general, and the involvement of COs in the construction and maintenance of such narratives.

The state’s exertion of discursive power in the form of a sustained influence on gender norms and gender relationships is not at all coincidental. From the perspective of hegemony-related theoretical approaches, gender is “a central component in the field of state hegemony, since state discourses produce hegemonic masculinity and gender hierarchy. [...] Conversely, the state develops out of gender relationships. State and gender are reciprocally constitutive discursive formations with specific forms, respectively, of interaction and institutionalization” (Sauer 2001: 166–167. Authors’ translation). Civil societies and COs are pervaded by gender relationships to a similar extent as the state, the economy, families and all other spheres; however, civil societies and COs also influence the construction of gender relationships (Howell 2007: 427).

We understand COs as part of the entire societal-political complex and of societal conflicts, all of which constitute the state. This understanding acknowledges that COs are themselves the site of societal conflicts and are part of the state’s specific practices for exerting power, and thus can also contribute to the maintenance of state power. Nevertheless, COs can also change these practices, insofar as their actions are not one-sidedly and mechanistically determined by the economic base – because states are “constantly contested projects” and because a (capitalist) “state per se is characterized by compromise” (Sauer 2011: 134. Authors’ translation). For this reason, there exists at least a chance of “changing and transforming the class and gender relationships” (Sauer 2011: 134. Authors’ translation). Historically, COs have been flexible and autonomously capable of action; they have “no homogeneous goal” (Hallmann 2009: 29. Authors’ translation) and are “fundamentally ambivalent” (Hall-

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6 Selznick’s (1949) definition of co-optation says that “(c)ooptation (is) [...] the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence. [...] Cooptation may be formal or informal, depending on the specific problem to be solved” (Selznick 1949: 13).

mann 2008: 31. Authors' translation) with respect to existing systems of power. COs are "polyvalent" (Kößler 1994).

In this article, authoritarianism at the level of COs as organizations and at the level of individual or group behavior within the COs is identified, described, and evaluated according to the understanding of authoritarianism put forward by Stenner (2005). Fundamental to our understanding of authoritarianism is Stenner's assumption (2005) that authoritarianism repudiates individual self-determination and autonomy and strictly negates the supremacy of the individual over a group or a system. Authoritarianism is an ensemble of attitudes and ways of acting that link the uncompromising denial of difference and diversity with an unconditioned demand for homogeneity and uniformity. This in turn leads to coercive action towards and suppression of people who are "different" (Stenner 2005: 16–20).

### 3 Methodological Considerations

From a methodological point of view, this paper presents the results of an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units. Thus, it presents and analyzes the results of a case study.<sup>7</sup> The single unit is Vietnam, and similar units are other postsocialist countries under authoritarian rule (such as Laos, Mozambique, Angola, Algeria, and at some point also Cuba). The cases are COs, and the observations for each case are collected for a range of variables.

Such a study is especially useful if and when the research breaks new scientific ground and if and when the research pursues rather limited aims. This applies here in three ways: First, in terms of the theoretical background of this article. As mentioned above, especially in the context of political science-based research on authoritarianism, an approach based on the critical analysis of the state and state power is seldom found. Second, as a consequence thereof, there is no broad corpus of literature in which the assumption that specific forms of state power, specific resources of state power, and specific "mechanisms" and processes lead to the development of specific features within COs and in their relationships with the state. Third, in a relatively limited sense this paper aims to explore assumptions and develop hypotheses. Drawing on the results of our study, further case studies, small-N projects, and maybe even large-N projects could try, in a general sense, to validate our assumptions and hypotheses.

We have chosen the case of Vietnam for some general and some specific reasons. First, we are focusing on associationalism under the constraints of authoritarian state power and Vietnam is located in one of the three regions (Asia, the Middle East, and Africa) where most authoritarian regimes are located. It is thus a crucial case. Second, Vietnam is a postsocialist country where the Communist Party still solely rules the state, which, in turn, appears to

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7 Here we follow Gerring's (2004: 342) definition of a case study.

have effective control over the society. Under the postsocialist and authoritarian regime of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), only the party and affiliated groups occupy positions of power. We can thus observe and analyze the exertion of state power by a clearly defined group of actors belonging to a power circle with a clear membership. This constellation is a useful starting point for studying similar “units” where, for example, the former socialist party still rules but faces strong pressure from other parties and the society (Mozambique, Angola, and at some point also Cuba). A more specific and third reason for choosing Vietnam is the fact that it has a bad reputation in terms of civil liberties and that many supporters of democracy and democratization processes – for example, experts from the development cooperation sector – have pinned their hopes on various types of COs. However, if most Vietnamese COs are under the control of the VCP, this raises the question of what can be done to bring about change in social and political terms.

In this paper we pursue a variable-based explanation in combination with mechanism- and process-based explanations. We assume that various forms of authoritarian state power lead to observable processes of action that help to establish patterns of intra-organizational authoritarianism within COs, that bring COs into positions subordinate to and dependent on the state, and that let COs reproduce the gender images and norms propagated by the state.

More specifically, we assume that various mechanisms lead to traceable and observable processes of intra-organizational authoritarianism, bring COs into positions subordinate to the state (and the party), let COs reproduce ideational certainties that the state (and the party) stands for in the field of gender norms, and help to embed the Vietnamese state into Vietnamese society (though this happens to a varying degree and extent). Such mechanisms include the following:

- The “principles” of “democratic centralism” and mechanisms and practices related to this Leninist organizational principle as codified in the Vietnamese Constitution (2013)<sup>8</sup> and the By-Laws of the Vietnamese Communist Party (2007)<sup>9</sup>

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8 Article 8 of the Vietnamese Constitution (2013) says, “The State shall be organized and operate in accordance with the Constitution and law, manage society by the Constitution and law, and implement the principle of democratic centralism.”

9 Democratic centralism is a leadership principle for communist parties developed by W. I. Lenin, according to which (a) the state and party are structured in a hierarchical and centralized manner; (b) the party and state leadership is elected from the bottom up, but the selection of electoral candidates is top-down; c) decisions made by higher-level bodies for the lower levels are binding; and (d) minorities must subordinate themselves to the majority and a tight party discipline. The questioning of decisions that have already been made is seen as a sign of disloyalty. A form of authoritarian centralism has developed from the principle of democratic centralism. The decision-making mechanism “collective leadership, individual responsibility” is an integral part of democratic centralism and an intra-organizational principle of all Marxist–Leninist parties. It can be found in the statutes of almost all such parties around the world. It not only entails the rejection of pluralism and a lack of tolerance, but also implies the precedence of uniformity and homogeneity over diversity. The variance in opinions and behaviors should be kept as low as possible. It is seen as highly undesirable and a sign of disloyalty to have personal opinions, to voice these, or to go so far as to insist upon them. As a consequence, the

- The legal framework of the political-administrative system and behavioral constraints based on written and unwritten rules (an example of the latter are the “red lines” all people know)
- Various material benefits (such as salaries and pensions, office space, cars, etc.) and political incentives (such as limited participation in policy-formulation processes and the prospect of “better” policies as a result)
- Ideational belief systems and related practices (such as an essentialist understanding of gender and norms that see women as responsible for keeping the peace at home, predestined for the role of caregivers, and the like)

For our sample, we chose a random selection of 20 COs based in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (because it is only in such big cities that all types of COs are present). We selected an even distribution of organizational types: four mass organizations (two in each city), four professionals' organizations (two in each city), four business organizations (two in each city), four NGOs (two in each city), and four faith-based organizations (two in each city).

The most important criteria in choosing COs was that they should be important in maintaining the (authoritarian) state – for example, by providing services in the public health sector, by supporting the legitimacy of the state through improvements to economic and social policies, or by reinforcing norms that support the state's gender-related policies.

In-depth interviews were carried out between June and August 2014.<sup>10</sup> The Vietnamese interviewers wrote reports of these interviews, which were then translated into English. These translated reports, which total 221 pages, form the basis of the empirical analysis presented in the next section. The citations stem from these reports and have been anonymized for obvious reasons. A list of all the organizations interviewed and the interview dates is included at the end of the paper.

#### 4 Empirical Findings and Discussion

Here we differentiate between infrastructural power in general (“control of the society”) and two forms of infrastructural power in particular: “control of the society through the provision of social welfare” and “control of the society through limited participation.” We also discuss discursive power.

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individual party members are de facto subordinate to the group authority of the local parties (and the members of a CSO board that applies this principle are subordinate to the group authority of the management board) (Wischermann 2013a).

<sup>10</sup> The guidelines for the interviews are available upon request.

#### 4.1 *Infrastructural Power in General*

There were two key findings. First, we found that the interviewees from various mass organizations, professionals' organizations, and business organizations<sup>11</sup> stick to and apply various principles of "democratic centralism." This implies, for example, that prior decisions are taken by a small group of people; that the principle of "collective leadership, individual responsibility" is adhered to; and that after a vote the minority has to follow the opinion of the majority. Second, we found that these interviewees are firmly and solidly integrated into the political-administrative system of the party and the state. The Communist Party has the final say in all aspects concerning the "human resources" of the respective organizations and the activities they pursue.

All the COs whose representatives we interviewed are under the leadership of the party, either directly or indirectly. The representative of Hanoi's Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI), for example, said, "Management and administration is placed under the leadership of the party, which means VCCI organizes its party cells and the state assigns missions to VCCI through party cells. [...] It is the political task and VCCI has to do the task even when there is no financial allocation." According to the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Business Associations (HUBA), "Party and Union are the comprehensive leaders, so they determine the direction and orientation, both for HR and activities." The Hanoi-based Vietnam Economists' Association (VEA) states that it "is not an agency formed by the state and the state does not manage it, but VEA voluntarily embraces the guidelines of the party." The Ho Chi Minh City-based Businesswomen's Club is led by the local Women's Union, a mass organization, and so steered indirectly by an organization under party leadership.

Generally speaking, the hierarchy of Vietnamese COs can be described as follows:

- At the top are the mass organizations, which can be seen as pillars of the VCP's rule; they are mentioned in the Constitution of Vietnam (2013), Article 9, 2.
- Second come the "special associations" such as the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) and the Vietnam Lawyers' Association (VLA) (governed by Decree No 68/2010/QĐ-TTg).
- Third are the "socio-professional associations" such as the Vietnam Economics Association (VEA) and the Vietnam Mathematical Society. These are professionals' organizations that do not belong to the category of "special associations" and are not under the direct

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11 The interviewees included representatives from the following Hanoi-based organizations: the Vietnam Women's Union, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, the Vietnam Lawyers' Association, the Vietnam Economics Association, the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Vietnam Women Entrepreneurs Council. They also represented the following Ho Chi Minh City-based groups: the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, the Ho Chi Minh City Federation of Labor, the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Business Associations, the Vietnam Lawyers' Association, the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Ho Chi Minh City Businesswomen's Club.



leadership of the party.<sup>12</sup> The rules and regulations concerning these associations are Decree No 45/2010/QĐ-TTg and No 33/2012/QĐ-TTg.

- The final tier consists of “other associations” – for example, the NGO Life in Ho Chi Minh City or the Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender, Family, Women, and Adolescents (CSAGA), an NGO based in Hanoi. These types of organizations are governed by the same rules and regulations as professionals’ organizations (Decree No 45/2010/QĐ-TTg and No 33/2012/QĐ-TTg). Faith-based organizations, such as the Ky Quang Pagoda or the Mai Linh Shelter, both based in Ho Chi Minh City, can also be placed within this group of associations.<sup>13</sup> These “other associations” represent the majority of Vietnamese COs.

The groups within this final tier are more often than not steered by a small group of people (directors, founders, etc.), and it is this group or the founder and director alone who call(s) the shots. It was in reference to these NGOs and their internal constitution that Jan Papendieck, then representative of Bread for the World in Hanoi, coined the term “*Direktoratsverfassung*” (directorship’s constitution, a term used for the French Constitution of 1795: “*la Constitution de la Direction*”). The Hanoi-based NGO Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender, Family, Women, and Adolescents (CSAGA) is a good example of such a *Direktoratsverfassung*: “The operation of the center is based on the orientation of the board of directors. [...] The final decision on the appointment is made by the board of directors and the chief executive officer.” In a broader sense the way decisions are made within NGOs like CSAGA and the (Hanoi-based) Center for *Supporting Community Development Initiatives* (SCDI) could be seen as similar to how decisions are made within private and/or corporate firms. In both types of organizations the director and/or the board of directors is the most powerful body; these people make the most important decisions.

Nevertheless, most if not all interviewees claimed that their organization’s internal decision-making processes are at least consultative, which means that the opinions of all leadership personnel are heard. For example, the interviewee from the Hanoi-based NGO SCDI stressed that the group’s internal decision-making processes are “bottom-up”:

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12 Note, however, that despite the fact that the Vietnam Economics Association (VEA) is not a “special association” and not directly supported by the state, its leading personnel (and others) follow the party’s leadership. The citation on page 23 provides a good example of this.

13 All decrees on associations in Vietnam exclude religious institutions. At least in Hanoi, the faith-based organizations interviewed by the Vietnamese research team are not registered as independent institutions. Rather, they are considered an activity of certain churches or pagodas. In each locality where these churches or pagodas are based, the local chapter of the Vietnam Fatherland Front is responsible for controlling these groups’ activities. This is because the Law on the Fatherland Front, Article 1, paragraph 1, states that the “Vietnam Fatherland Front is a political coalition organization, a voluntary union of political organizations, socio-political organizations, social organizations and individuals representing all classes, social strata, ethnic groups, religions and overseas Vietnamese.”

The organization's decisions are made based on the discussions between the management team and staff. Depending on the nature of the decisions, the discussions may be held at three levels: among groups of staff, among groups of management, and between the leaders and the board of directors. An annual staff retreat is organized for all the organization staff to identify and make up decisions on the next year's activities. [...] The decisions on activities are made relying on the multilevel discussions (weekly board meeting and monthly staff meeting). After discussions, decisions made are ensured with transparency and agreed upon by all staff. [...] In fact, there have been decisions that the manager [...] made which did not have everyone's consent; therefore, the manager had to adjust them. The board of directors must also reconsider its decision if it is not appropriate. [...] the organization's decisions are made adhering to the bottom-up model.

However, the rest of the data suggest that the director takes the most important decisions and that it is also he or she who has the most responsibility. Such top-down decision making might be justified based on this responsibility, since ultimately no one but the director is accountable for the prospects of his or her organization. Thus, democratic management only seems to take place when the director finds it suitable; if not, he or she finds a different way to manage the organization and have things done his or her way. A statement from the founder of the Ho Chi Minh City-based NGO Life makes it abundantly clear whose words count: "Strictly speaking, no one has the right to veto the opinion of the director, but when implementing, the director will consult with the council to ensure that the decision is good for the center. Because this center is Ms. T.'s child, if I do a bad job, I will have to take the responsibility for that." The representative of SCDI said something similar: "Although being the founder, [the] primary shareholder, and the CEO, [and though she has] [...] the absolute discretion of [all] the organization's activities, [...] without the board of directors' [and] the management team's decisions [this way of decision making] would be dictatorial." In both cases we would term this mode of internal decision making "enlightened authoritarianism."

Like mass organizations, professionals' organizations, and business organizations, some but not all NGOs apply certain principles related to the state's and the Communist Party's organizing principle of democratic centralism. What makes things even more remarkable is that these organizations' representatives (at least those interviewed) seem to believe in the usefulness of such principles. However, there might be a difference in the understanding of this principle when it is applied within NGOs. In the case of SCDI, the application of this principle means that the board of directors, the management team, and the "CEO" and founder of the organization (more or less) together decide on the activities and orientation of the organization. A difference between decision making in the party and the state and in COs is not discernible when it comes to the application of another principle related to democratic centralism – that which says that the minority follows the opinion of the majority after a de-

cisive vote: "Once consensus is reached, everyone must be committed to follow. If someone is not satisfied, he/she must still 'follow the masses' [the collective strength]."<sup>14</sup>

In faith-based organizations, mechanisms related to democratic centralism cannot be identified. Here it is the founder, the abbot, the "Superiors," the "older Sister," and the like who have the final say in terms of the organization's activities and how these are carried out. The same is true with regard to who leads the respective organization.

In other words and in general terms, almost all the (interviewed) COs are hierarchically structured and their internal decision-making processes follow a top-down model. What this means in practical terms is illustrated by the representative of the VCCI: "The head of the organization holds the highest authority to decide and is responsible for the operation of the organization. Democracy sometimes just does not work!"

It is particularly the way internal decisions are made and followed that fit with Stenner's definition of (organizational and other forms of) authoritarianism. This definition has at its core that the autonomy of the individual and the individual him- or herself are subordinate to the group and its decisions. The adherence to the principle that the minority follows the opinion of the majority after a decisive vote is a good example of how authoritarianism in Stenner's sense works and is understood in practice. Based on the analysis of the interviews we carried out, we conclude that most if not all of the 20 COs are structured in quite an authoritarian manner.

Such intra-organizational authoritarianism is strongly supported by the rejection of compromise and the view of consensus as the ultimate goal of decision-making processes. We see both as closely related to the mechanisms used within the state apparatus and the VCP (which controls this apparatus) – for instance, democratic centralism.

Compromises and compromising (in the sense the questionnaire defined them) are not widely used, if at all, according to the 20 CO representatives interviewed.<sup>15</sup> Some did not even understand, or at least pretended not to understand, the term (*thỏa hiệp*) (for example, the interviewee from the faith-based organization Mai Linh Shelter).<sup>16</sup>

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14 Note that this NGO, the SCDI, terms its method of internal decision making "bottom-up" (see p. 15).

15 For clarification in the questionnaire we made the following statement, which was read out by the interviewer:

"In our view a compromise is the settlement of differences through mutual concessions; an agreement reached through the adjustment of conflicting or opposing claims, principles, etc., through the reciprocal modification of demands. This might mean giving up, at least temporarily, some or even most of one's own demands."

16 Here semantic problems seem to be important. In the Vietnamese version of the questionnaire the term "*thỏa hiệp*" was chosen (and in the course of the interview the definition and our understanding and definition of what compromise is about was read out). The use of the term "*thỏa hiệp*" is correct and precise, since it means "to compromise, compromising" and comes closest to the understanding of compromises and compromising described in our questionnaire. However, this term has a negative connotation in the Vietnamese language and might even connote negotiations between adversaries. Therefore, a softer but much more imprecise and more general term such as "*nhân nhượng*" (which means give way, give in, concede, to be lenient) could have been applied and would have led to a slightly different result. This broader term, however, does not mean

Just two interviewees seemed to know about, understand, and apply compromise (*thoa hiep*) in the sense used in the questionnaire (from Life and Anh Duong, two NGOs in Ho Chi Minh City). However, even Life's representative suggested that instead of talking about and practicing compromise, it would be better to speak of and practice "flexibility."

Those who did understand the term in the given sense rejected the usefulness and/or the appropriateness of compromise in the decision-making processes of their organization: "We do not compromise. The members of the club are aged, so everybody listens to each other," stated the representative of the Ho Chi Minh City Businesswomen's Club. The abbot of Ky Quang Pagoda, a faith-based organization in Hanoi, stated: "In my temple this word is not used."

Other interviewees understood and applied "compromise" mainly in the sense of collecting opinions; modifying opinions by making them similar to each other; gaining the acceptance of at least the majority of participants for a certain idea, activity, etc.; and, ultimately and decisively, coming to what they called a consensus. Compromise thus seems to be important only insofar as it helps avoid open dissent and conflicts and insofar as it is a suitable means to reach a consensus (*đồng thuận*). Reaching consensus seems to be the ultimate objective, and this consensus, which can also be simply the majority vote and/or the will and opinion of the most influential people in the organization, has to be followed by the minority and/or those who are not "fully" convinced.

Various formulations are thus used to describe what compromise means in this context: "Compromise is general agreement" (SCDI). "Compromise is to discuss to reach consensus" (Vietnam Lawyers' Association, a professionals' association based in Hanoi, and the faith-based organization God's Will Shelter in Hanoi). "Compromise means to convince each other" (VCCI). "Compromise is when people agree with each other" (a representative from the mass organization Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, based in Ho Chi Minh City).

There seems to be a fundamental difference between the understanding of compromise presented in the interview guidelines and the understanding the interviewees seemed to follow. The understanding of compromise *outside* of Vietnam implies the settlement of differences through mutual concessions and the reaching of an agreement through the reciprocal modification of demands. Such an understanding implies conflicts and open dissent and is based on respect (in the well-defined sense of Dillon);<sup>17</sup> however, it is not bound to reach a consensus. The settlement of differences and the reaching of an agreement that all parties can live with is the goal of such processes. While the representatives of Vietnamese COs might "respect" the other, reaching consensus is the ultimate goal in settling differences (at least as

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compromise in a literal sense, even if it implies what, in our understanding, is part and parcel of compromising. We thus decided not to use this term.

17 Respect is an attitude, in the sense of recognition of the Other, independent of his or her social standing, individual characteristics, or proven achievements or moral merits, as well as independent of one's own wishes, ideas, and interpretations (Dillon 2007).

far as internal decision-making processes within COs are concerned). And reaching this consensus implies not only concessions, but also that one does not insist on his or her position (since this would lead to conflict); that he or she is subordinate to the potential will of the group; and finally that he or she "follows the masses." Thus, the pursuit of compromise and consensus within Vietnamese COs clearly follows patterns of what could be called authoritarianism in Stenner's sense.

Finally, with regard to most if not all of the COs interviewed, we conclude that at least their internal decision-making processes are strongly influenced by the form of state power we call infrastructural power (with "control of the society" as its focus). Most if not all these COs' ways of selecting activities and electing personnel mirror the mechanisms and exercise of power used within the Communist Party and the political-administrative system under its control – namely, those of democratic centralism. The rejection of compromise and the quest for consensus can also be seen as closely related to this and other Marxist–Leninist principle(s).

One explanation for the use of mechanisms related to democratic centralism inside various types of COs that takes into account the actors' perspective could be that many of the CO leaders we interviewed have worked at least for a while within the state apparatus. There they have become familiar with such mechanisms and have experienced how they help in making and implementing (internal) decisions. Thus, a sort of transmission of modes of action from the state apparatus to the realm of COs has taken place. However, this does not explain why even those NGOs that do not have much to do with the Communist Party and the state apply these mechanisms. In particular, it does not explain why NGO leaders who have spent most of their professional career working for international NGOs (for example, CARE) behave similarly to those who have spent at least part of their career within the Vietnamese state apparatus. To date there has been no theoretically or empirically based explanation as to why actors who do not come from the state apparatus also adhere to this principle.

What seems undeniable is that mass organizations, professionals' organizations, and business organizations (at least those we interviewed) are integrated in one way or another into the specific system of rule the VCP has erected. However, this does not mean that those COs do not (at least partly) have their own agenda, especially in terms of the activities they develop; that CO staff and clientele have no "voice" (for example, there are lively debates inside the mass organizations on various, and even sensitive, topics); that COs' room to maneuver is limited; or that there are no problems in the relationships between those in power and societal organizations of various types. In fact, the situation is quite the contrary: Although decisions on activities are made mostly in a top-down and hierarchical manner, it is in these decisions regarding activities that the Communist Party's control (VCP representatives are present in mass organizations, professionals' organizations, and business organizations and are organized in cells and committees) seems to be less strict – relative to decisions concerning the selection of personnel. This implies a certain flexibility with regard to activities. In terms of personnel, the Communist Party not only has a decisive voice, but in some

cases it must also be asked before a candidate is nominated for a position or the party itself suggests candidates for certain positions within the COs. More precisely, within mass organizations, professionals' organizations, and business organizations, especially those under the direct leadership of the Communist Party, the party reviews the list of leadership candidates before each election. In these and other cases (for instance, in the case of organizations not under the direct leadership of the party) where the candidates are party members, the COs follow the party's direction and its decisions.

If many if not most COs can be described as being under the control of the state and the Communist Party, then it can be concluded that the state and the party are deeply embedded in Vietnamese society (because all of these COs are, though closely related to the state, societal organizations with roots reaching down to the lowest level of society). Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that Vietnamese society is under the control of the party and state. Limiting the state's and party's control of the society is the fact that COs have only the means of "persuasion" at their disposal (as one representative of HUBA in Ho Chi Minh City so aptly put it) and that they do not have power in the strictest sense of the word. In addition to control, the party and the state both need persuasion to achieve and maintain society's consent to their rule (that is, to have legitimacy). It is here that the results of our survey regarding the impact of the state's "discursive power" come into play. We come back to this point later (see pp. 25–26 and p. 27).

To conclude this section, we now present our findings on the constraints and opportunities within the Vietnamese state's general political-administrative structures. We are interested in these structures because they might provide strong incentives for COs to behave and act in a certain way.

#### *4.1.1 The Legal-Administrative Framework*

The majority of respondents assessed the legal-administrative framework as being "partly enabling/partly restrictive." There was a certain tendency for the interviewees from the North to view the legal-administrative framework as "enabling," while interviewees from the South were less likely to see it in this way.

The more critical position articulated by most respondents from Ho Chi Minh City did not seem to be politically motivated. Rather, it had to do with these southern COs' frustrations regarding the paperwork to be done and the bureaucracy entailed in working with the local state. However, it was not just the representatives of various types of COs in Ho Chi Minh City who referred to administrative, financial, and other bureaucratic problems as "restrictive" conditions their organizations face. Even in interviews with representatives from the Vietnam Women's Union, from the NGO SCDI, and from the business organization VCCI, all based in Hanoi, we heard criticism of the legal-administrative framework, which, in turn, suggested criticism of the implementation of laws, decrees, rules, and regulations. However, within this type of critique, no specific reference to political restrictions can be

found. Such criticism can, however, be read into the statements made by the Sisters from the Mai Linh Shelter in Ho Chi Minh City. They not only criticized the bureaucratic procedures their organization faces but also clearly stated that they are discriminated against because of their Catholic faith.

In terms of the impact of the legal-administrative framework on COs' selection of activities and clientele, the overall impression gained from the interviews is that there is no direct discouragement of certain activities or specific clienteles. The representatives of the various types of COs seem to know what they are expected to do and not do, and what they are able to do. They appear to know the "red lines." There does not seem to be a need for the open and politically motivated discouragement of certain activities. Rather, what the interviewees described, and what is somewhat discouraging, were administrative structures, processes, and procedures unfavorable to what the COs, in the words of their representatives, might want to do: the "still-in-place" lack of funding and the "ask-and-give mechanism," which were lamented by the representatives of the Vietnam Women's Union in Hanoi, and the fact that the (Christian) religion the (faith-based) CO actors belong to might cause problems. It is in the case of the latter that the administrative hurdles are politically motivated and become politically supported obstacles.

However, some interviewees also stated that the legal-administrative framework encourages COs to take on new roles. For example, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union in Ho Chi Minh City felt encouraged to undertake new activities such as "monitoring and policy criticism." The Vietnam Lawyers' Association (VLA) felt encouraged "to expand consultation services and open legal support centers reserved for different target groups (people living with HIV, the poor, young offenders, etc.). In addition, the VLA also participates in resolving complaints [...] and functions as monitoring body." Then there are organizations such as the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) in Hanoi, which have "not recognized any significant impact of administrative and legal mechanisms on the operation of the organization over the past three years."

One should keep in mind that the legal-administrative framework means different things to different types of COs. It is no accident that all the positive examples just mentioned were provided by the representatives of mass organizations, "special associations," and, most importantly, COs under the direct leadership of the party. At least within the previous three years (the period referred to in the interview guidelines), they seem to have felt encouraged to expand their roles and activities, or at least did not feel hindered in the activities they undertook and the roles they played.

#### 4.1.2 *The Roles COs Play*

The data suggest that in terms of roles, the legal-administrative framework encourages COs to play the role of an advocate first, the role of a service provider second, and the role of a

bridge between state and society third.<sup>18</sup> How strong is the legal-administrative framework's impact on COs? Our answer would be that most of them – namely, mass organizations, professionals' organizations, and business organizations – have to play a certain sociopolitical role (which is clearly defined and binding), but that the legal-administrative framework also supports some choices and discourages others. This implies that groups' roles can vary and be broadened to a certain extent. This encouragement and discouragement may be both direct and indirect. It is this backdrop of potential discouragement that helps one understand why the roles of a "watchdog" or a "lobby organization" are not chosen very often. Whereas the first role might be politically sensitive, whether they play the latter role depends on what organizations are lobbying for and how they do this. The potential subject of lobbying activities and the uncertainty as to how the party and the state might react may have caused those COs we interviewed to be hesitant to play the role of lobbying organizations.

#### ***4.2 Infrastructural Power as "Control through the Provision of Services to the People"***

Here we have applied a narrow understanding of COs providing services: only those organizations that receive support (in the broadest sense) from the state *and* whose provision of services takes place within a state-supported program. This narrow understanding was necessary because we wanted to identify direct links between the state and COs.

Of the COs interviewed, it is the mass organizations, professionals' organizations, business organizations, and one NGO that receive support from the state. None of the faith-based organizations receives state support. The former organizations participate in various state programs, and they deliver services either together with the state or alone. They are paid and/or provided with various nonmonetary benefits for these services.

In addition to paying for the services provided, the state pays for mass organizations' staff and "infrastructure" (buildings and offices, cars, etc.). The salaries, health insurance, pensions, etc. of mass organization personnel are on par with those of public servants. The state also pays for the staff and offices of "special associations" (professionals' and business organizations) and even of "normal" socio-professional organizations such as the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Business Associations (HUBA). In the latter case the state pays for the headquarters and the cars and provides funds "for party offices and the Union offices, while HUBA balances its own employees' salaries." If and when the state assigns single tasks to these organizations, they usually also receive the budget to fulfill the tasks.

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18 Note that the Vietnamese term for "advocate" does not imply a confrontational stance or conflictual processes.

It is in this context that some discussions of the problems of translating the English version of the interview guidelines into Vietnamese are in order. The terms the Vietnam researchers chose were as follows: For advocate "biện hộ (cho quyền lợi một số đối tượng phục vụ)," which, roughly translated, means serving some people as regards their rights; for lobby "vận động chính sách." The problem is that up until now there has been no suitable term in Vietnamese for "lobby"; therefore, the colleagues used a Vietnamese term that in its widest sense implies "to promote" and "to speak out for." For "watchdog" they used the term "giám sát," which literally means "to monitor." Here, again, no comparable Vietnamese term exists.



In general, those COs providing services are not subject to direct discouragement of certain activities or specific clienteles, although one could read into various statements that the representatives do bear in mind that some activities could bring about negative reactions from the state and that more often than not they do not undertake them. Based on our data, we cannot conclude that there are clear limitations and “no-go areas” in terms of activities and clienteles that come with the work of service providers inside these programs. We do assume, however, that at least within the realm of the state-supported programs there are clear indications regarding what is acceptable in this respect.

It is in this context that we present a remarkable statement made by a representative of the Vietnam Economics Association (VEA). The interviewee claimed that the association's activities are strongly influenced by party and state, even though it is not under the party's direct leadership:

The current activities of VEA are more or less influenced and affected by the state. Although the association as a sociopolitical organization does not operate under the party leadership mechanism, the majority of the members of the executive committee are party members [and] the [organization's] activities are more or less influenced by the mechanism. [...] association members [who are] party members [can] not voice opinions contrary to the guidelines of the party.

Only one NGO, Anh Duong in Ho Chi Minh City, is integrated into a state-funded program, called National Goals. Anh Duong contributes “activities against AIDS.”<sup>19</sup> The group's relationship with the state has improved through this cooperation. The representative of CSAGA said the same thing. CSAGA receives state funds only when its experts are invited by state agencies to share their expertise with them. However, these contracts are granted on an individual basis. The CSAGA representative hastened to add that the group's relationship with the state is “parallel” and that they do not rely on such support. More generally, she stated that “the ways NGOs and the state do the jobs is different.”

### ***4.3 Infrastructural Power as “Control through Limited Participation”***

Here we present answers from the representatives of three Hanoi-based COs: the Vietnam Lawyers' Association (VLA, a professionals' organization), the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI, a business organization), and the Center for Supporting Community Development Initiatives (SCDI, an NGO). They are all involved in various ways in policy-making processes and they share the opinion that these activities are useful, especially for their own organizations. Such activity helps them to “improve the [group's] quality and reputation for services it provides,” according to the representative from VCCI, and makes

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<sup>19</sup> Anh Duong is an offshoot of a mass organization, the Vietnam Women's Union, so this direct involvement in a state-funded program should not come as a surprise.

each organization's relationship with the state easier. Moreover, through such consultations the Lawyers' Association and the VCCI have been inspired to take on new tasks:

The participation in policy formulation has made the operation of the association much different from its previous operation. Previously, VLA served mainly its members. Currently, the operation has been expanded to the public. VLA undertakes not only its regular tasks but also other missions. There are also activities that the association finds itself responsible for such as the organization of the workshop on the sovereignty over the seas and islands of Vietnam. There are also activities which the state and responsible authorities have assigned to the association, such as legal dissemination and participation in the settlement of complaints and denunciations. The relations with state agencies make the work of VLA easier because there are more tasks assigned to the association. Previously, VLA had less work than now. (VLA)

In the consultation on state policies related to businesses and trade, VCCI better communicates the needs and aspirations of the businesses to the state. At the same time, its participation in the activities of government (policy consultation, trade negotiations) helps VCCI have access to and update information and policies, better serving the training courses and information provision programs that VCCI holds for businesses. The participation in the policy-making process does not encourage VCCI to perform new activities, but it helps VCCI to do its current jobs better and to improve the quality and reputation of the services it provides. Providing state policy consultation does not change the relations between VCCI and state agencies. (VCCI)

In a different way, the representative from SCDI stressed the advantages that participation in advocacy (such as policy formulation concerning drug users, prostitutes, and gays/lesbians) brings. Such activities help build confidence among the organization's target community and among policy makers, convincing them "that SCDI is not using them to make its own profits."

There is no indication, based on the interviews, that consultations on state policy formulation take place on a regular basis. Rather, the empirical evidence suggests that COs are only occasionally invited to participate in consultations with state officials and state agencies and that this takes place according to the will of those in the position to issue such invitations. No group has an official right to participate in the formulation of policies or legislation, such as a new law on marriage and family – something that would be important for COs that want to secure equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and to see same-sex marriage allowed by law. As far as we know, COs are excluded from participating in the final stages of the policy-formulation process. We assume that they are explicitly and deliberately excluded from such decision making.<sup>20</sup>

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20 In the current (second) phase of the project, mentioned in footnote 1, these conditions and their ramifications are being explored in detail. The data from the second phase of our survey, however, show that at least some specific COs are invited to participate in policy consultations on a regular basis.

#### 4.4 *Discursive Power*

The representatives of two NGOs based in Ho Chi Minh City (Anh Duong and Life), one business organization in Hanoi (Vietnam Women Entrepreneurs Council), and one faith-based organization in Ho Chi Minh City (Mai Linh Shelter) agreed that the state and their own organizations are trying to strengthen the position of women in state and society, and that most of the state's efforts in this respect are laudable.<sup>21</sup> This suggests that there is a high degree of similarity between the state's and these COs' ideas of what the state should do in terms of gender equality, if not in terms of the conception of women. However, only one representative stated that such similarity has to do with the state's impact; the others clearly rejected such an impact:

The NGO Anh Duong echoed and supported the policies the state and the Vietnam Women's Union pursue. Among other things, Anh Duong supports the "five nos" ("No poverty, no legal violation and social evils, no family violence, no third child, no malnourished children and drop-outs") and the "three cleans" ("Clean house, clean kitchen, and clean street").<sup>22</sup> The representative's understanding of the role of women was similar to the state's: Women should preserve "the happiness in their families [and] learn more knowledge in order to preserve their families." The interviewee was keen to stress that "the center always follows the directions of the government, so the point of view of our center is similar to the directions of the government."

In a similar way, the representative of the NGO Life, also based in Ho Chi Minh City, did not see differences between the organization's idea of the role(s) of women and the state's. However, Life's representative explicitly rejected any state influence:

Without the government, Life will still do its job well because Life's mission is to improve the quality of life for vulnerable people, and [...] women are the most vulnerable. So Life's projects reflect this, such as when we work on poverty reduction projects, we work more (intensively) with poor women. In the factory environment, Life works in leather footwear factories, which have more female workers. [...] Life's direction is from reality. Besides, viewing women as the vulnerable groups comes from many studies repeating this fact over and over again, and then there are Vietnam cultural and traditional issues, so Life's target course is not based on the state's idea.

The representatives of Mai Linh Shelter referred to the principle that men and women are equal in each and every respect. The Sisters did see similarities between the state's conception of women and the shelter's conception. However, one Sister clearly rejected the idea that the state has any influence on what their organization thinks and does: "(T)here are only

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21 NGOs such as CSAGA in Hanoi also see similarities between the state's idea and the idea their own organization pursues.

22 As mentioned above, in footnote 19, this closeness should not be a surprise since Anh Duong is an offshoot of the Vietnam Women's Union and is still closely related to this mass organization.

overlaps, there is no influence." Another Sister added that in her view the Vietnamese state is only echoing what Catholics have believed in for centuries:

We are nuns, very open and loving, and we respect human dignity [...]. For those who do not know, they consider acting in a way based on respect for human dignity, it seems, as if this is given by the state, as if the state gives them light. But for us, this is normal. God has taught us that the sick and the women must be respected just like everyone else, they must not be disdained. Therefore, the state's idea is nothing new to us.

Thus, it could be said that most interviewees saw similarities between their organization's position on gender equality and the state's position, but only one stated that the state exerts a direct influence on that particular group's conception of women and impacts what this CO is doing in terms of gender equality. Two interviewees' statements (one from an NGO, one from a faith-based organization) clearly and openly rejected any influence of the state on their conception of women and their understanding of women's roles in politics and society.

Thus, on this rather limited empirical basis we would argue that the state's discursive power in terms of gender norms is not as strong as its infrastructural power and that there might be a difference in the state's impact (as far as its discursive power and gender norms are concerned) on different types of COs – namely, some NGOs and faith-based organizations on the one hand and mass organizations, business organizations, and professionals' organizations on the other.<sup>23</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

The findings presented in this paper make clear that most if not all of the Vietnamese COs included in this study are strongly influenced by the Vietnamese state, the Communist Party, and the organizational principles that both make use of.<sup>24</sup> To be more precise, the impact of two forms of state power (infrastructural power and discursive power) is strong, though to a varying degree and extent: whereas the impact of infrastructural power in general is strong and appears to have almost the same impact on all types of COs, the discursive power of the state and its impact seem to be much weaker and to vary according to the subject of the discourse and the type of CO.

More specifically, the state's infrastructural power impacts the internal decision making of mass organizations, professionals' organizations, business organizations and at least some NGOs and faith-based organizations, and to a certain extent also the activities they choose. Here the influence of the party (in the sense that the groups' members follow the party's directives) and the use of mechanisms related to democratic centralism impact how decisions

<sup>23</sup> In the current phase of the research project, mentioned in footnote 1, this thesis is being explored in detail.

<sup>24</sup> In the case of faith-based organizations, the impact of religious hierarchies, societal and cultural traditions, etc. might have an impact that outweighs the influence the party and the state have on those organizations.

related to activities and personnel selection are made. Together with a specific understanding of compromise and consensus-seeking, these factors help develop and preserve a form of intra-organizational authoritarianism.

Moreover, to a varying extent and degree, the involvement of COs in state programs (and, thus, their dependency on state funding) impacts the activities these organizations undertake, as well as the selection of the social groups these COs cater to. Since the involvement of a variety of types of COs in state-funded programs has helped to improve the relationship between these COs and the state, this involvement could be thought of as helping to increase the party's and the state's influence on society and as (further) embedding the party and the state in society. Ultimately, this might help the state and the party strengthen their control over society. However, since only a few NGOs are integrated in such programs (and state funding of these organizations does not seem to be significant), COs that can be classified as NGOs are not as strongly impacted by this form of state power. This suggests that NGOs (and faith-based organizations) do not help embed the party and the state in society in this way.

The intense cooperation between the state and professionals' organizations and business organizations in the field of policy consultation and criticism seems mainly, but not exclusively, to benefit the state: the collaboration between these COs and the state again helps to improve relationships between COs and the state, which might help to embed the state further in society. This close cooperation might help alleviate potential pressure on the state from social groups closely related to such COs (professionals and businesspeople), who may favor better or even alternative policies. Whereas this is an advantage for the state, COs only benefit from the intensified cooperation in that it helps them improve their performance in terms of activities, services offered, etc. *Vis-à-vis* the state, however, participating COs are left in a relatively subordinate position: They do not appear to have access to the most important decision makers and decision-making bodies of the party and the state. We thus observe what Selznick (1949) terms co-optation.

The state's discursive power seems to impact fewer NGOs and faith-based organizations, at least as far as gender and gender-equality-related norms are concerned. These organizations stick to positions that are different from the party and the state's position(s) or at least imply a critical distance from the party and the state. These organizations have the potential to build an effective counterweight to the state and its use of discursive power, at least in terms of gender norms and practices related to those norms.

These empirical results build on and reaffirm the results of previous research on associationalism under authoritarian constraints. They do so in the following respects:

- Our results make clear that certain "conditions" impact the development of Vietnamese COs. More specifically, these "conditions" are a strong state, the Marxist-Leninist party that rules it, and the set of roles that COs play. It is in this context that Alagappa's (2004) findings, which say that in Asia the state has a strong impact on the development of COs,

are decisive. Building on this statement, we argue that it is the existence and functioning of specific mechanisms closely related to the state and the Communist Party that help to bring not only COs but also Vietnamese society (though only to a certain extent and in a limited sense) under state and party control. Thus, our research proves (once more) that the assumption that there are various “conditions” impacting COs is appropriate.

- Furthermore, functionalist and/or structural assumptions that state that COs serving as service providers and participants in exercises of limited participation are subject to the state’s dominance, if not control, which in turn might support authoritarian rule (Lewis 2013: 328–329), seem to be targeted and adequate.
- Our research once more reconfirms that COs should be seen as “neutral multipliers” (Berman 2003: 266). Research on COs should not start from the assumption that these organizations are harbingers of democracy or supporters of authoritarian rule. It is more fruitful to see them as part of the whole societal-political complex and of societal conflicts, all of which constitute the state. This includes the realization that COs are themselves the site of societal conflicts, are part of specific practices of state power exertion, and can be sites of countervailing practices. In the case of Vietnam, mass organizations, professionals’ organizations, and business organizations are more often than not part of a specific structure of domination, whereas other types of COs tend to be countervailing forces. Indeed, COs are “polyvalent,” as Kößler (1994) once aptly put it.
- Cavatorta (2013: 3) is right when he suggests analyzing authoritarian regimes as regimes in their own right. Moreover, COs working in such an environment might develop features that COs of the same type do not develop when working under different conditions. Professionals’ organizations and business organizations, at least those in Vietnam, can be seen as a case in point.
- A relational perspective, as suggested by Cavatorta (2013: 2), should be taken when analyzing dynamics between the state and COs within authoritarian regimes. How and in which direction COs develop under authoritarian constraints is dependent on the impact that various forms of state power have on COs *and* the effects these organizations have on the state and its various forms of power. The relationship between authoritarian states and COs should be conceptualized as interdependent and reciprocally influential. To date and in this paper we have analyzed the impact various forms of state power have on COs. At the time of writing we are examining the impact Vietnamese COs have on various forms of state power. Based on an initial look at these data we are confident that the final results will prove the fruitfulness and adequacy of taking a relational perspective when analyzing dynamics between the state and COs within authoritarian regimes.

Finally, the empirical results lead us to the following conclusions as far as international support for Vietnamese COs is concerned. In our view, donors should focus their engagement on both the state and COs, recognizing their mutual interdependence, if and when they want to support developments towards the democratic and more inclusive development of the ex-

isting political and social landscape in Vietnam. Here support for the development and enactment of a long-overdue law on associations that enshrines the right of the people to organize without political and bureaucratic restrictions could help to ameliorate the legally and politically volatile situation many Vietnamese COs are in. Furthermore, such a law could be a first step towards changing the hierarchical and basically Leninist order within which Vietnamese COs operate today.

Donors who want to support steps towards more democracy in Vietnam in a general way should focus on NGOs and faith-based organizations, without completely giving up or phasing out support for mass organizations and other types of COs. They should focus their activities on the former organizations' intra-organizational decision-making processes and help sensitize actors to problems related to authoritarianism. They should also assist in improving intra-organizational processes to make them more inclusive, accountable, and transparent. Furthermore, donors should further strengthen the discursive power of NGOs and faith-based organizations in terms of their critique of state- and party-supported gender norms and gender-related practices. Not only is gender a central component in the field of state hegemony, but COs can also help improve gender relationships, thus making the state and society more inclusive and equal. The latter is an important goal, especially in a country that calls itself a "Socialist Republic."

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### List of Interviews and Interview Dates

- Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, Ho Chi Minh City, 18 June 2014
- Ho Chi Minh City Federation of Labor, Ho Chi Minh City, 25 July 2014
- Ho Chi Minh City Union of Business Associations (HUBA), Ho Chi Minh City, 11 July 2014
- Vietnam Lawyers' Association, Ho Chi Minh City, 23 June 2014
- Life, Ho Chi Minh City, 4 July 2014
- Anh Duong Center, Ho Chi Minh City, 20 July 2014
- Ho Chi Minh City Businesswomen's Club, 29 August 2014
- Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI), Ho Chi Minh City, 18 June 2014

Mai Linh Shelter, Ho Chi Minh City, 17 July 2014

Ky Quang Pagoda, Ho Chi Minh City, 17 June 2014

Vietnam Women's Union, Hanoi, 12 August 2014

Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, Hanoi, 16 July 2014

Vietnam Lawyers' Association, Hanoi, 31 July 2014

Vietnam Economics Association, Hanoi, 25 June 2014

Supporting Community Development Initiatives (SCDI), Hanoi, 26 July 2014

Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender, Family, Women and Adolescents  
(CSAGA), Hanoi, 4 July 2014

Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI), Hanoi, 1 July 2014

Vietnam Women Entrepreneurs Council (VWEC), Hanoi, 15 August 2014

God's Will Shelter, Hanoi, 7 July 2014

Phap Van Pagoda, Hanoi, 24 July 2014

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