

The Politics of the Vietnamese Post-War Generation

By Long S. Le

Busy street scene in Hà Nội, Việt Nam. Hundreds of young people traveling by motorcycle to work, school, meetings and social events. Note the political billboard in the upper right hand corner. Photo courtesy of Shotaro Kotani.

“Youth is the future” is not merely an article of faith but a reality in Việt Nam.

More than sixty-five percent of the country’s eighty-six million citizens are under thirty years of age. This means about fifty-six million Vietnamese—about twenty-two million under the age of fourteen and thirty-four million from fifteen to thirty years old—came of age after the Việt Nam War in 1975. Moreover, as Việt Nam opened up to the global market beginning in the mid-1980s, it positioned this post-war generation at the cutting edge of deep social and economic change. Thus, demographics and the potential generational shift illustrate the importance of examining the politics of Việt Nam’s post-war generation. Although it may be easy to generalize that Vietnamese youth are not different, they are the first generation since French colonialism to have been raised during a time of independence and peace. Yet these young people experience a “youth culture” lifestyle that is very different from what their parents encountered. Their rural peers, two-thirds of all youth in the country, are largely unaffected by these changes. These emerging transformations are a result of globalization. Though the *Đổi mới* (renovation) economic reforms and *mo cua* open door policy to the non-socialist world were implemented to solve Việt Nam’s high unemployment and poverty, they have also served to renew the socialist state’s societal legitimacy.

Việt Nam’s “socialist-oriented market economy” has opened up not only global flows of capital, which have offered sources of employment and mobility, but also culture and information flow once prohibited by the state. As a result, there has been a rapid and growing availability of new consumer products (e.g., personal computers and cell phones), leisure activities (e.g., drinking, karaoke, music, and dancing), alternative information, and freer educational opportunities, such as international private schooling and studying abroad. All of these changes profoundly impacted the post-war generation. Consequently, for Vietnamese youth who can afford it, new consumption patterns, along with new emphasis on education, have the potential to change their self-perceptions relative to previous generations.¹ At least some youth see themselves as more individualistic, free market, and global. The question is whether there is a large enough group of young people who have viewpoints and expectations markedly incongruent with current political leaders. Also, because there is no one “youth,” which youth—those in Hà Nội or Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC), the professional middle class youth, or study-abroad youth—are likely to develop a political identity with those of the current political leadership that transcends the country’s socialist past? If Vietnamese youth are still apolitical, as some claim, what economic system—predominately a capitalist economy or a socialist system—is more likely to win their support?



Bill Gates.
Image source: <http://www.billgatesmicrosoft.com/networth.htm>.

Teenagers and young adults in one survey identified Bill Gates as a substantially more popular role model than Hồ Chí Minh.

**THE POLITICS OF REMEMBERING
AND THE ECONOMICS OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION**



Hồ Chí Minh.
Image source: <http://www.nvhtn.org.vn/album.php?id=94>.

When Việt Nam was “reunified” in 1975, the politics of remembering and legitimizing the socialist order was in full effect, especially in the south. Many of the parents of today’s Vietnamese youth were cadres of

the Communist Party whose lives were committed to “liberating” South Việt Nam from “neo-colonial poisons” such as the emergence of a materialistic consumer society, prostitution, and drug addiction.² The former southern capital, Sài Gòn, was renamed Hồ Chí Minh City to symbolically denounce Western influences and facilitate the emergence of a new socialist identity. By 1982, however, a “southern resistance” to socialist policies had arisen. HCMC’s provincial leaders began to implement *Đổi mới* in order to ward off even more social discontent because of the badly run, centrally planned economy.³ It then became apparent that HCMC, because it had long had a market-oriented economy and extensive international economic connections, would be the most practical place to “renovate” and “modernize” socialism. In fact, HCMC has taken quite well to global capitalism—it is ranked fifty-five in *Foreign Policy*’s “The 2008 Global City Index” and fourth on *Business Week*’s most recent list of ten “cities that will play an important role in helping their countries to develop.” Hà Nội soon followed the *Đổi mới* model, although not as effectively as the south because of its population’s socialist history.⁴ Despite Hà Nội’s slow start, politics is not the only consideration in Việt Nam’s two major cities. These status determinants, including self-sufficiency, independence, assets, income, and prestige are all associated with a more market-driven economy.⁵

The integration of opposites—that is, the marriage between communism and capitalism—is a good starting point in exploring the consequences of these changes for part of the Vietnamese post-war generation. For Vietnamese youth, on the surface at least, it appears that past revolutionary ideals cannot match those of the market economy. For example, in general, Vietnamese youth increasingly refuse to enroll in the Communist Party, and those who join state-run youth organizations are now refusing to “graduate” into party membership. From 1993 to 2002, only about four percent of new memberships were students.⁶ Although there was a considerable increase of new party members from 2001 to 2005, the bulk of the new members were government careerists, military officers, and workers in state-owned agencies and factories—people whose jobs largely depended upon the government. Vietnamese urban youth, especially, appear to be departing from revolutionary ideals toward economic individualism and pragmatism.

Some evidence of these trends include a survey conducted in 2000 by a state-run magazine, *Tuoi Tre* (*The Young in Age*) that polled 200 HCMC youth ages fifteen to twenty-eight, regarding their “role models.” Bill Gates was the most popular at ninety percent, Hồ Chí Minh at thirty-nine percent, and the then Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, who was only half as popular as Bill Clinton (three percent and six percent, respectively). Even though the survey is almost a decade old, the trend it represents has continued. In Hà Nội, it has been observed that the audience of high-profile socialist events (i.e., Hồ Chí Minh’s birthday and top-party leaders’ funerals) is increasingly made up only of party faithful.⁷

There is little doubt that the focus of Vietnamese urban youth is on the future. That future includes trying to improve themselves because of new opportunities created by economic reform. For example, university enrollment jumped from 200,000 in 1990 to more than 1.4 million in 2005, and the number of US-issued visas to Vietnamese students was more than 8,000 in 2007, an increase of 359 percent since 2005. However, as was the case with one-party communist regimes in the past, young people whose families are connected to the party elite or of the “Red” capitalist group are better positioned to benefit from, and to be transformed by, the deep social and economic changes. A recent *Euromonitor International*’s “Consumer Lifestyles in Việt Nam” report found that the children of this class increasingly eat Western food, dine out after work, favor foreign brands, use mobile phones and the Internet, enroll at international K-12 schools and higher education institutions, and study abroad.⁸

Still, earlier studies indicate most Vietnamese urban youth widely support more income differences and lower taxes if they create incentives for people to work hard and create new ideas. In particular, by the mid 1990s, it was clear to young people that “one needs money to study, to purchase work equipment, to be apprenticed, to set up a shop or market stall, to obtain licenses, and to pay off assorted intermediaries.”⁹ Today, Vietnamese youth overwhelmingly equate money with happiness.¹⁰

But are market reforms and more liberal educational opportunities creating new political identities? To be sure, new consumer trends and practices have contributed to a “yawning gap,” making communication difficult between urban young people and their parents or elders, who demand respect for the sacrifices they endured and who expect their children to feel an obligation to the state.¹¹ It also appears that Vietnamese urban youth are becoming more independent than ever, making independent economic, moral, and behavior choices. In fact, there are new vocabularies to match such trends, such as *di quay*: to go wild, to get drunk, to stir up trouble; *song voi*: to live fast, to hurry life and spend it away; and *dua doi*: to be competitive, to be greedy, to keep up with the Joneses. At the same time, however, many youth still seek the approval of their parents and elders. For example, it is typical for young rebels to wear a nose ring, but often the nose ring is a clip-on so that it can be taken off at home. Given the sacrifices Vietnamese youth are constantly being told their elder generations made, many are sensitive enough not to offend, and some may even want to renew past traditions. One young urban female stated:

*For example, I don't want to talk politics – but the way young people live, they're free to live on their own, to have relationships that they choose, sexual freedom. But actually, there should be limits. When you have too much freedom it can lead to problems.*¹²

Vietnamese youth in HCMC today are more likely to see themselves as modern, international, and rational economic actors, in contrast to the country's socialist, and more traditional, past. Meanwhile, those in Hà Nội are also modern, but still see themselves as traditional and more likely to be politically conscious. Việt Nam's recent economic growth notwithstanding, per capital national GDP for HCMC was about \$2,400 in 2006, or three times the official national figure of \$720. Many urban youth did not find the idea or practice of democracy appealing. A young urban female told a foreign journalist: “We are hard-working. . . You don't need a strike or a demonstration. Why should we spend our time demonstrating for democracy when we have so much more to worry about?”¹³

In many ways, an outlook such as this may be associated with this country's particular economic liberalization. The children of many of the pre-Đổi mới middle class may feel gratitude to parents for the advantages their families provided for them to succeed in the new, more privatized economy.¹⁴ In fact, a recent empirical study finds middle class affinity in general for globalization. There is little evidence of urban professional youth developing a political identity separate from the state.¹⁵

What are the prospects that young Vietnamese now studying abroad will return home to democratize their country? First, typical academic interests of Vietnamese students studying in the US are in the hard sciences and businesses, not in the social sciences.¹⁶ Also, those students who become conscious or “internalize” some aspects of democratic norms and values are usually most likely to either “extend” their stay or stay in the US permanently. Moreover, many international students tend not to be very critical of the one-party system because they are the beneficiaries of the system, or they don't want to cause trouble for their families and relatives in Việt Nam. Many students who intend to return to Việt Nam have indicated that they will enter the private sector to work for themselves or work in Western foreign companies where salaries are much higher than government jobs.

More recently, there appears to be an effort by the state to “re-educate” individuals with an international education, specifically those who are perceived to advocate change within the system (e.g., the recent arrests of Le Quoc Quan who held a fellowship from the National Endowment for Democracy and Le Cong Dinh who graduated from Tulane University's law school). However, such “re-education,” where jail time would be long if one were not willing to admit guilt and to reform, would seem not only to further deepen the country's brain drain but also impede internal calls for greater democratic space.

PARTY MANAGEMENT OF YOUTH

Although Việt Nam's one-party regime no longer claims to be the only force in society, state institutions allow little space for political expression or free association. For the one-party state, going global must be guided in a way that reinforces existing socialist rule and supports traditions, yet facilitates globalization, e.g., workforce modernization and effective political leadership. It is here that Vietnamese youth are implicated in party debates on acquiring modernity without losing the socialist past. This is because party leaders view young people as most susceptible to Western “social evils” such as prostitution, drug abuse, and the country's emerging Aids epidemic. There is also concern about possible Western attempts to ideologically topple the regime, which might happen if Vietnamese youth lack revolutionary morals and merits. Thus, the government considers it imperative to mold the outlooks and manage the behavior of

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young people.¹⁷ For example, in 1994, the government established the Social Evils Prevention Department, recognizing that “when we open the doors of our society, the water flows in, the clean along with the dirty” so that the task “is to screen it, and to help people recognize and protect themselves from bad influences.”¹⁸

Today, the party remains vigilant of the perceived dangers of going global. Party General Secretary Nong Duc Manh publicly commented upon the growing number of students neglecting their studies, lacking political consciousness, and indulging in excessive materialism, as well as the need to eliminate these shortcomings quickly. One strategy encourages the revival of party youth to teach young people about Hồ Chí Minh’s ideas, to update students on the latest government policies, encourage student beliefs in traditional virtues, and discourage dissidents. Party leaders also attempt to promote student participation in political activities such as protests of the United States Human Rights Act.¹⁹ The government employs innovative methods to do this, such as using “Hollywood” formulas in television and film. If it “is not appealing enough, your propaganda efforts will fail,” according to one of the directors of the state-sanctioned cinema.²⁰ Similarly, state-owned media have narrated widespread concern over corruption, crime, and

social upheaval in a way that appears it is for the protection of the public.

Mostly, party management of youth has kept at bay radical or politicized student movements that have occurred in South Korea, Indonesia, or Malaysia. Even what has occurred in China, where young intellectuals express some dissatisfaction with their government, as well as nationalistic attitudes toward foreign governments’ policies, has yet to happen in Việt Nam. Such management is further aided by strict government control over newspapers, television, and radio stations.

Recently, the government expanded Internet monitoring. According to a study by the OpenNet Initiative, the government has been able to block internet access to “a significant fraction, in some cases a great majority, of politically or religiously sensitive material.”²¹ State online information control will likely deepen and grow. The government recently announced regulations to tighten state control of Internet blogs. Blogs that oppose the state or undermine national security, including posting links to sites banned in Việt Nam, face sanctions.²² According to the Ministry of Information and Communication, Việt Nam-based blog service providers are required to monitor content, delete offending posts, and provide the government with information on users. The ministry is also said to have asked Google and Yahoo to help “regulate” the blogosphere.

In such an environment, most Vietnamese youth know the harsh penalties of not following the rules of the country’s one-party politics. To date, the few grievances or displeasures among young people center on government attempts to curb youth’s passion for modernity; but public grievances threaten the legitimacy of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). The party’s unwavering position is that government officials ought to be “faithful representatives of the rights and interests of the working class, the toiling people, and the whole nation,” as declared in the country’s constitution. Thus, for youth, protests are articulated in ways that do not directly threaten the system. For instance, in reacting to a decree forbidding all dancing after midnight to good governance, a young female writer pens:

*The main issue here is one of application of the current legislation, there being no need for the above regulation if the current laws are being strictly implemented and closely monitored. In Viet Nam it seems that things that are unmanageable get forbidden. That is why the list of banned activities is an endless one. This is a very minor issue but it clearly points to the lack of the ability of the VCP. And the people, I believe, in such cases have no choice but to show their unhappiness by asking such incapable leaders to move themselves from the scene so that the common people can elect their own, more deserving leaders.*²³

Authors of fiction who want to criticize the state more directly use multiple endings and narrative voices that allow readers to “select the one which he or she feels is most suitable.”²⁴ This literary method has allowed some writers to escape censorship and to get confrontational works into print. Examples of this approach include Nguyen Huy Thiep’s *The Retired General*, Duong Thu Huong’s *Paradise of the Blind*, and Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War*. Nevertheless, censors usually win at the end of the day. For example, 120,000 copies of the *Tuoi Tre*’s survey, showing that Bill Gates was more popular than Hồ Chí Minh, were destroyed, and its three editors endured harsh sanctions. Moreover, few “dissidents” are of the post-war generation. Until recently, the majority of the dissidents were lifelong party members with irreproachable revolutionary records (mostly men and southerners). These individuals had the resources and forums to

dissent, and the Party took cautious, and sometimes sensible, measures to discipline this group.

According to some scholars, however, there are now signs of independence and diversity of views among Vietnamese citizenry and civic organizations calling for democracy and for government to curb corruption. Although such pronouncements are from the state-directed grass roots democracy campaign, they might nevertheless facilitate a movement in favor of democra-

tization. For example, a state-conducted survey found nearly ninety percent of members of the Central Communist Youth Union desire more democracy and less corruption in the political system.²⁵ Recent empirical studies have found a distinct level of support for democracy—over three-quarters of Vietnamese youth believe that democracy is the best form of government.²⁶ Yet, evidence also shows that more than ninety-five percent of Vietnamese youth support democracy within the state's development plan.²⁷ Furthermore, Vietnamese youth show great confidence in state-run institutions—more than ninety percent have confidence in government, parliament, military, TV, police, and political groups, while confidence in churches and private companies was the lowest (twenty-three percent and fifty percent, respectively).²⁸

These findings suggest that most Vietnamese youth, while indeed receptive of democratic norms and values, for now place their trust and confidence in state institutions to implement democratic reforms. Such trust and confidence are not necessarily surprising given that the young's present optimism has been tied with the state's ability to integrate capitalism into the current political system. However, there is little evidence that state-directed, mobilized organizations may provide fertile ground in developing democratic values and skills. Empirical studies indicate that greater membership and participation in Việt Nam's mass organizations do not correlate with the development of values and skills that encourage democracy. Instead, those who are "hyperactive" in state organizations have the lowest level of social trust, the lowest level of support for democracy, and the highest level of support for democracy only within the state's development plan.²⁹

CONCLUSION: A GENTLER REVOLUTION?

Although democratization or a civil society separate from the state is not on the horizon, the one-party system is expected to proceed with and to be successful in implementing modernization and industrialization. Reversal of one-party rule is not a viable option, since most youth believe economic reform is necessary and probably think that the country needs to reform even more strongly. For Vietnamese youth, it appears that as long as the party's modernity program can create more quality higher educational institutions and absorb the 1.5 million young job seekers that enter the labor market each year, they can live with the one-party state leading society. Until recently, the Communist Party has been able to satisfy the aspirations of its youth. For example, Việt Nam's economy has grown an average of 7.5 percent annually over the past decade with GDP per capita increasing to \$833 in 2007 from \$100 in 1990; and its education spending as a percent of GDP ranks higher than South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and China. But what will happen if the party is unable to continue to provide sustained, improved living standards?

In fact, Việt Nam's economy is currently in trouble. The country's average inflation rate soared to twenty-three percent in 2008, from a rate of eight percent in 2007, the highest since 1991, when inflation hit sixty-seven percent.³⁰ Although the current global slowdown will ease the country's inflation, Việt Nam is vulnerable to a demand-contraction of the Western economies, so that unemployment rates and monthly wage incomes likely will be affected for some time to come. Moreover, by many accounts, Việt Nam's education system is in crisis. For example, most new universities and colleges are considered to be no more than "universities on paper," do not have their own facilities, and many of their faculty with PhDs are unqualified or fraudulent. The *World Economic Forum's* Global Competitiveness Report 2008–2009 ranked Việt Nam ninety-eight out of 134 surveyed countries in terms of higher education and training; this was a considerable drop from the previous year in which Việt Nam ranked seventy-nine out of 129 countries.

Underlying the above-mentioned problems is politics. According to a recent report by the Harvard Việt Nam Program, the "organs of the Vietnamese state, political, administrative, and academic are increasingly co-opted by interest groups who use them for self-enrichment and aggrandizement," so that "the greatest threat to the state is its own failings."³¹ The country's current economic woes may be forcing young people to become active spectators in the everyday politics of the country. They are perhaps more inclined to support critical calls for party leadership to undertake political reforms in order for a vibrant civil society to emerge and to develop.³² To date, it seems more likely that rural Vietnamese youth might be more inclined to develop a new political identity, given their exclusion from the advantages of the global econ-

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omy, and that their relatives are more likely to have participated in the recent and growing labor and land protests.³³ Young professionals in Hà Nội are more likely to sympathize with rural hardships, particularly those who are less defensive about their privilege. Although the focus of this article has been Vietnamese urban youth, it remains to be seen how Việt Nam's government might change if rural youth—most of whom have missed the benefits of globalization—become politicized for whatever reason. ■

NOTES

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