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Political Oppositions: A Case Study of Viet Tan*

*Do Thi Chang*

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Do Thi Chang

Thammasat Institute of Area Studies, Thammasat University

99 Moo 18 Khlongnueng Sub District, Khlong Luang District,

Pathum Thani, 12121, Thailand

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For more information, please contact Academic Support Unit, Thammasat Institute of Area Studies (TIARA), Pathumthani, Thailand

Telephone: +02 696 6605

Fax: + 66 2 564-2849

Email: [academic.tiara@gmail.com](mailto:academic.tiara@gmail.com)

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Ms. Do Thi Chang, Email: *changdodph@gmail.com*  
Or Academic Support Unit (ASU), Thammasat Institute of Area Studies, Thammasat University

## Abstract

This research aims to examine how Communist Party of Vietnam has been suppressing and eliminating political oppositions. While many scholars indicate the involvements of the factors such as Penal Code, Constitution or other regulations in the repression tactic of the authority, this research looks at “indirect ways” and found that the concepts of “Ho Chi Minh’s thought”, “nationalism” or “propaganda” helped Communist Party of Vietnam to legitimize themselves successfully and create negative sentiments among people towards dissidents or “hostile forces”. This paper applies the theoretical framework of authoritarianism to analyze the methods that Communist Party of Vietnam carried out to maintain its dominant power from 1986 to 2004. Secondary data resources in both Vietnamese and English would be collected and analyzed. In addition, this study also chooses Vietnam Reform Revolution Party as a case study to describe how those “indirect ways” impact on political oppositions. In summary, this research explores that Communist Party of Vietnam does not allow any political opposition to exist and challenge its power. Besides a systematic regulation, other “indirect ways” such as spreading “Ho Chi Minh’s thought”, “nationalism” or “propaganda” become effective instruments to repress dissidents and other political organizations, including Vietnam Reform Revolution Party.

**Keywords:** authoritarian regime, political repression, communist party of Vietnam, political opposition, Viet Tan

## **1. Introduction**

The collapse of Soviet Union in the 1980s resulted in “domino effect” in socialist countries, especially East European countries. While transformation from autocracy and military dictatorship into democracy took place worldwide, Vietnam overcame political crises to maintain the dominance of the Communist Party until now.

Established by Ho Chi Minh since 1930, the Communist Party of Vietnam (henceforth called CPV for short) gained several achievements during the resistance’s history, especially defeating France in 1945 to create an independent country of Democratic Republic of Vietnam. More importantly, CPV also succeeded in reunifying country in 1975 and monopolizing its leading role nationwide in Vietnam since then.

As an unavoidable consequence of the only-one party system, CPV has been challenged by many political oppositions, who asked for political pluralism in Vietnam. Many were accused of being descendants from the old regime in South Vietnam, the enemy of CPV during the Vietnam War from 1954 to 1975. This political confrontation derived from the signing of Geneva Agreement in 1954, dividing Vietnam into two parts at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. Since 1956, a prolonged war exploded between two governments: The conflict between Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North and Republic of Vietnam in the South and finally ended up with the winning of CPV on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1975.

The fall of Saigon led to a massive migration of more than 2 million people, who feared being harassed by CPV because of their involvement with South government (Miller, 2015). Hence, the Vietnamese overseas community was quickly established and believed to have a connection with current political oppositions. The Vietnam Reform Revolutionary Party or Viet Tan (henceforth

called Viet Tan) emerged in this situation. Despite its US-based headquarter, Viet Tan with the determination of reforming Vietnam's political system infiltrated into domestic society through various forms and threatened the survival of CPV.

In response, CPV took advantage of its dominance to repress Viet Tan party as well as other political oppositions, to maintain its authoritarian regime. "How does the Communist Party of Vietnam repress political oppositions?" will be the question I try to answer in this paper.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

#### 2.1.1. Qualitative with Case Study Research Method

- *Qualitative methodology*

This research will employ a qualitative methodology to answer the main question: "How does the Communist Party of Vietnam repress political opposition?" As the researcher will look at "indirect ways" that CPV has been using to repress the political opposition, qualitative methodology is suitable to explore how the factors of "Ho Chi Minh Thought", "nationalism" or "propaganda" helped CPV to gain the community's solidarity and building up anti-sentiment towards the political oppositions.

- *Combination of case study and narrative research method*

This paper uses Vietnam Reform Revolutionary Party (or Viet Tan for short) as a case study. As its grassroots from the legacy of the old regime in the South before 1975, Viet Tan is a typical example to describe how CPV uses the term of "nationalism" to call the Vietnamese for being careful from the previous enemy's plot, trying to break "the great national unity" and the

revolutionary achievement in the past. By this way, the attempt to access Vietnamese of Viet Tan has been disabled.

In addition, narrative research method will be combined with case study to examine the effectiveness of the indirect repression ways in strengthening public trust on CPV but weakening the capacity of political oppositions, especially Viet Tan party, to access domestic society and gain the massive approval.

## **2.2. Collection of Data**

### **2.2.1. Secondary data**

Because CPV conducted these indirect ways within Vietnam, secondary data in both English and Vietnamese will be used for documentary analysis.

The second data resources in Vietnamese will derive mainly from journal articles; released official documents, books; thesis research or the official channels of CPV such as Tap Chi Cong San, Cong An Nhan Dan, etc. Besides, the researcher will also approach non-governmental websites, which are usually blocked by the firewall when accessing in Vietnam such as thoibao.de; Viettan.org; Vietnam.net; Tuoi Tre or VnExpress, etc.

In addition, other English resources, including journal articles or books from international researchers, such as Zachary Abuza; Muthiah Alagappa or Carlyle A Thayer, etc and websites of Amnesty International, Human Right Watch, United Nation, The Reuters or The Guardian, will also be consulted.

The section of literature review would be mainly conducted through academic publications on Google Scholar, which were found by specific keywords such as “Repression in Vietnam”;

“Political oppositions”; “Vietnamese boat people”; “the fall of Saigon”; “nationalism”; or “Ho Chi Minh thought”. Books, journal articles and articles in Vietnamese and English were also collected to review the different arguments on this issue, especially on the rising of dissident intellectuals in 1955 and the crackdowns towards Southern people after the reunification in 1975.

### **2.3. Research Scope**

The time scope of this study is from 1986 to 2004. After reunification 1975, Vietnam, under the rule of CPV, soon fell into many economic, political and ideology crises. Public trust on CPV has seriously decreased because of the continuous failures of strains of war with Khmer Rouge and China, and neo-Stalinist system of central economic planning. Meanwhile, the collapse of the Soviet Union also resulted in an ideology crisis, threatening to the survival of CPV.

To ensure its power, Doi Moi – the economic revolution was launched in 1986 to gain public trust. By opening Vietnam’s economy, Vietnam had to follow many international regulations, including human right and democracy treaties. Besides, the nature of political opposition also became diversified, under many formats of activity on the fields of environment, human right, democracy, etc. Parallel with that transformation, Viet Tan also made its actions various and was the key organization in supporting finance for internal pro-democracy activists. Therefore, CPV seems to have some certain concessions towards those regime dissidents and organizations under the pressure of international law since 1986.

In addition, because of the breakdown of Marxist – Leninist ideology after 1986 communism crisis, CPV began to encourage “Ho Chi Minh thought” and Uncle Ho’s charismatic leadership to strengthen their legitimacy. The phrase word “great national unity”, which was used repeatedly by Ho Chi Minh, has been applied to build up public trust on CPV and became an effective instrument to prevent the intervene of political opposition from outside, especially Viet Tan.



On the other hand, the Penal Code was adopted for the first time in 1985. Then, it became the first legal instrument for CPV to sentence those against communism ideology by Article 82 for “Conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” (then amended into Article 88 since 1999 until now) and Article 73 for “Carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the people’s administration” (then amended into Article 79 since 1999 until now). Therefore, the Penal code became an effective instrument to eliminate political opposition legally.

Since 2004, Viet Tan stated to publicize its activities. Therefore, repressions through the direct ways, especially Penal Code, became more popular while other indirect ways have remained. Therefore, the author chose the period from 1986 to 2004 as time scope in this study.

### **3. Literature Review**

Thanks to their success in defeating France and creating an independent country in the North, Democratic Republic of Vietnam, in 1945, the leading role of CPV was recognized and supported by the majority of Northern citizens. By totally controlling the North, including Art and Literature activities; resulted in the emergence of Northern intellectual dissidents, known as Nhan Van Giai Pham movement on the Art and Literature in 1958. Artists in this group used their writing to criticize Hanoi authority’s dominance and call for freedom for Art and Literature. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the number of dissidents increased rapidly and created a premise for the diversity of political opposition since 1986.

In a causal response, many crackdowns were executed by CPV to disable the negative impact of these political oppositions since 1958. The suppression methods were flexibly applied in a certain period.

### 3.1. Sentencing intellectual dissident from 1958 to 1982

Many scholars such as Schütte (2003), Szalontai (2005), Thuy Khue (2012) and Dang Chi Hung (2012), for example, discovered that the emergence of Nhan Van Giai Pham, a group of artists asking for freedom on Art and Literature in 1955, stirred up the repression tactic of CPV in North Vietnam in 1958.

While Dang Chi Hung (2012), Nguyen Hung Quoc (2011) and other supporters described them as courageous intellectuals when reporting truthfully about the poverty and injustice of the North's society under the rule of CPV, a group of 83 artists (1959) in a book, called "*Bọn Nhân văn Giai phẩm trước tòa án dư luận*" (tentatively translated as *Nhan van Giai pham cliques in the court of public opinion*), named them as "subversives" or "reactionaries", who deflected from the Communist Party's guidance to exhort capitalism and imprisoned for years in 1959.

Kiernan (2017) indicated that CPV carried out a crackdown towards those members of this group in 1958 by sentencing some prominent dissidents heavily: Nguyen Huu Dang and Le Thi Yen to 15 years in jail and 5 years probation; Tran Thieu Bao to 10 and 5 years respectively; Phan Tai to 6 and 3 years respectively; and Le Nguyen Chi for 5 and 3 years respectively. Meanwhile, other writers were also treated harshly in discrimination by "expulsion from professional associations and brief terms of political rectification through hard labor" or "bureaucratic harassment, low-level surveillance and institutional discrimination". Kiernan argued that this suppression lasted until 1982 with the arrest of Hoang Cam and Hoang Hung when they were trying to bring "*Ve Kinh Bac*" abroad, a poetry collection composed by members of Nhan Van Gia Pham.

In general, this period of time observed a strong suppression of CPV, mainly through imprisoning dissidents heavily. While manifesting the conviction and physical harassment as main suppression tactic of CPV, scholars such as Thuy Khue (2012) or Dang Chi Hung (2012), who advocated these

dissent intellectuals, also indicated that CPV ordered “state-own” writers to orient public opinion through “reactionary” accusations.

### **3.2. Regenerating Southern people in “reeducation camps” for years**

A number of researchers, Hoang (2010), McGreal (2016) or Mollica (1998), pointed out that to eliminate the grassroots of the old regime in the South after totally taking control of Vietnam in 1975, CPV held many “reeducation camps” to send former military offices and government employees serving in Thieu administration, obligating them to acknowledge Marxism – Leninist political indoctrination for years. Many detainees were harshly tortured in those camps. Meanwhile, some internal researchers, Anh (2013) and Nam (2016) criticized Southern refugees as betrayers who left the country because of their own wealth without being repressed by CPV.

However, Hoang (2010) and Truc (2015) argued that the repression was so fierce that approximately 839.000 Vietnamese reluctantly fled abroad by small, unsafe and crowded fishing boats in the peak period of 1978 to mid-1980s, accordingly a statistic of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This was the second wave of migration after the reunification of 1975.

### **3.3. Diversifying the tactic of the repression since 1986**

Many scholars, Abuza (2001), Alagappa (1995), London (2014), and Vasavakul (1999) considered an economic revolution in 1986, called as Doi Moi, as a political revolution as well. The failure of “centrally planned economy” model and Soviet Union’s collapse forced Vietnam to trade with non-communist countries, which stimulated the various proliferation of political oppositions, including southern war veterans, communist intelligentsia, nonparty elites, peasants, retired senior generals, political civil society and pro-democracy activists.

Both Thayer (2010) and Nguyen Hai Hong (2016) agreed that besides aiming at its opposing political parties such as People’s Democratic Party of Vietnam, Vietnam Populist Party, Democratic Party

of Vietnam or Bloc 8406, CPV also listed many bloggers, journals, lawyers and activists fighting for human rights, environmental issue, or land confiscation as “reactionaries” in recent times.

Nguyen Hai Hong (2016) summarized the main repression tactic of CPV towards political opposition, including harassing lawyers, who defend political prisoners; using criminal charges to deflect criticism; tolerating physical attacks by non-uniform police; recruiting an army of Internet polemicist to monitor and detect online anti-government activists, bloggers or Facebook users; etc. Meanwhile, London (2014) demonstrated the procedure of CPV’s repression through three stages: monitoring and surveillance; harassment and intimidation towards involved people, including their family members and employers; finally arrest, detention, trial, imprisonment, and house arrest after releasing.

Therefore, CPV’s repression tactic has also varied, including harassing lawyers, who defend political prisoners; using criminal charges to deflect criticism; tolerating physical attacks by non-uniform police; recruiting an army of Internet polemicist to monitor and detect online anti-government activists, bloggers or Facebook users; etc. They conducted suppression through 3 stages: monitoring and surveillance; harassment and intimidation towards involved people, including their family members and employers; finally arrest, detention, trial, imprisonment, and house arrest after releasing.

In addition, London (2014) and Nguyen Hai Hong (2016) confirmed that the 1999 Penal Code and other regulations became the CPV’s main effective instruments to convict dissidents. There are more and more dissidents jailed easily but heavily recently under the charge of “Carrying out activities c (Article 79); “Conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” (Article 88) or “Abusing the rights to freedom and democracy to infringe upon the interests of the state, the rights and interests of individuals” (Article 258).

In conclusion, because of CPV's authoritarian power, CPV has been using "explicit ways" or "direct ways" such as using regulations and adopted policies to suppress legally and easily dissidents and other political organizations. While most scholars pointed out clearly those direct ways, very few scholars mentioned about "implicit ways" or "indirect ways" such as "Ho Chi Minh's thought", "nationalism" or "propaganda", which strengthened public trust on CPV and challenge political oppositions on gaining internal Vietnamese community's approval., especially during the period from 1986 to 2004. This study aims to fulfill this gap and extend the answer how CPV suppress political oppositions by finding out "indirect ways".

#### **4. Findings and Analysis**

Propaganda and Ho Chi Minh thought were the main instruments of CPV in legitimizing and ensuring its dominant power from political oppositions. Applying these tasks was flexible and alternative in certain periods from 1986 to 2004.

##### **4.1. Comprehensive propaganda system under the CPV**

Ensuring a well-organized propaganda system and its effectiveness is always a high priority of CPV to keep Vietnamese society under the control since its birth in 1930. Since the reunification in 1975, the foremost responsibility of this system to enhance the political and ideological tasks of Party as well as conduct propaganda of Marxism-Leninism, Ho Chi Minh thought and Party's policies towards the people.

In this system, Central Propaganda and Training Commission (hereinafter CPTC) is the highest and most important agency, which works directly and regularly with the top body of the CPV such as Political Bureau, Central Committee and Secretariat to conduct propaganda at all levels from

central to local of the government. Due to the sensitiveness of political task, the leaders and senior staffs of CPTC have to be members of CPV.

At central level, CPTC runs 20 affiliated agencies, including 10 Departments of Political Theory, Propaganda, Press – Publishing, Culture – Arts, Science and Technology – Environment, Education and Training, Vocational Training, Social Affairs, Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, General Affairs, Organization and Personnel; Research Institute of public opinion; Information Center for the Propaganda; Center for Scientific Research, Professional and Documentary; Journal of Propaganda; 2 Standing offices in Ho Chi Minh and Da Nang City; Office; Electronic Newspaper of the Communist Party of Vietnam; Council of Central Theory of Literature and Art; and Journal of Foreign Information. At provincial, district and commune levels, 7 boards working under CPTC's guidance are Office, Training of Political Theory, Public Opinion, Culture and Art, Science and Education, History of Party and Information Center of Propaganda Task.

In addition, Ministry of Information and Communications as well as Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism were also responsible for propaganda in accordance with the guidance of CPTC, which ensured the guidelines of party reflected in most of sectors, especially films, arts, sports, literature or media. Therefore, the propaganda activities became comprehensive in spite of the fact that there were overlaps of missions among these organs.

#### **4.2. Public mind's control through propaganda system**

Press in Vietnam, including all types of media such as print press, broadcast media, visual media and electronic magazine, was put under censorship to direct public opinion. CPTC did not directly participate in censoring, however, their officials would meet the editors of more than 100 newspapers every Tuesday, to hear their report, warn them by pointing out their mistakes in every sentence that was not suitable with party's guidance and command the coming tasks. In that

way, state censorship turned into self-censorship, which meant that each magazine of communication agency then had to self-censor their news before publishing (Bass, 2017; Mansour, 2016).

Vietnam's authority owned all press and their self-censorship was obligated if they did not want their publishing house to be closed (Cain, 2014). In 1989, Vietnam's passed law on press regulated the role of media as "the mouth piece of the Party, of the State and social organizations" and that Ministry of Culture and Information, which changed into Ministry of Information and Communications in amended law in 2016, would be the agency to control press (" Vietnam Law on Press," 1989). Since 1999, the amended law included the mission of media, which was also to protect the guidelines and policies of party ("Amended Law on Media," 1999).

Under the strict censorship and the control of CPTC, the internal newspapers and publications were only able to report the topics that CPTC allowed. The People's Daily and Communist Review, which party cells were forced to buy in accordance with the Directive 11 in 1996, are pioneer newspapers in implementing party's propaganda guidance ("Chỉ thị 11 về mua và đọc báo, tạp chí của Đảng," 1996). Criticizing party was totally banned and only spoken out by independent journalists, who were not legally recognized as a formal journalist by state.

While avoiding reporting bad news in Vietnam, such as corruption, poverty and environmental disasters, press strongly praised CPV, especially their role in anti-French resistance, reunification in 1975 and its economic achievements, which helped to legitimize itself. In addition, to regiment public opinion and encourage their positive thinking on socialism, press also focused on bad news in capitalist countries, such as the September 11 attacks in America, and good news in communist countries, especially China's economic development. These kinds of news would be

simultaneously posted by multiple press agencies to create a wave of awareness among the people.

In summary, CPV was easy to control public mind through owning and censoring all kind of the media. Preventing people from accessing the different information sources helped CPV to control public opinion and propaganda to strengthen its legitimacy.

### **4.3. The flexible application in different stages**

#### **4.3.1. Rebuild legitimacy of a one-party state post Doi Moi 1986**

Prior to 1986, Vietnam fell into economic crisis because of the failure of centrally planned economy, which broke the public trust on the leading role of CPV. To save Vietnam's economy and its survival, an economic reform, namely Doi Moi, adopting the market economy, was carried out in 1986.

Opening up country to foreign investment resulted in the proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which is risky to the dominance of CPV. Therefore, CPV started to deal with NGOs by limiting the sectors that NGOs could reach. NGOs on politics were not allowed while its activities were put under the supervision.

The main task of propaganda during this period was to gaining public trust on CPV by spreading the concept of "socialist-oriented market economy", argued as an active integration of the party and state to the world but still consistently with the ideology of socialism as what the party and party chose. Meanwhile, Ho Chi Minh thought started to be mentioned by propaganda agencies, confirming that this party's adaption derived from the word of Ho Chi Minh on innovation.



#### **4.3.2. Raising nationalism from 1991-1997**

##### **4.3.2.1. Ho Chi Minh Thought on great national unity**

Ho Chi Minh thought was simultaneously spread and adopted to become a guideline ideology, along with Marxism and Leninism, that the party and state would lean on to manage the country. The concept of “great national unity” was born in this situation to attract the mass, who spent special love on Ho Chi Minh because of his achievements in gaining national independence. Campaign of “learn and follow the moral example of Ho Chi Minh” on great national unity was triggered and strengthen nationalism in Vietnam.

##### **4.3.2.2. Preventing “Peaceful Evolution” from breaking the peace**

China’s lesson on Tiananmen Square Massacre In 1989 warned CPV’s dominant power, forcing CPV to strengthen its propaganda work. In 1991, CPV formally defined the “peaceful evolution” as the Western plot to overthrow socialism without violent attacks. To warn the citizen from being tempted by hostile forces in this peaceful evolution, many propaganda campaigns were activated and claimed that the United State, who lost the war in 1975 in Vietnam, was at the back of political oppositions in Vietnam, trying to break the peace that Vietnamese paid by blood to have for centuries. Sentiments of anti-political pluralism, anti-democracy, anti-human rights were also created in this period to protest against the dissidents, called as “reactionaries”, who advocated for human rights and democracy.

#### **4.3.3. Tightening media from 1997-2004**

Since 1997, Internet was connected in Vietnam. Besides censorship on press, CPV also implemented policies to censor on the Internet. Electronic party newspapers were early active to access to netizens while anti-state websites were blocked by firewalls. By using the selective filtering, “harmful news” was detected and eliminated, ensuring the stable public opinion online. Meanwhile, state printed newspaper was promoted and invested to open many branched abroad while private ownership of press was still not allowed. In 1996, the Directive 11 regulated that each party cell had to buy and read The People’s Daily every day.

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the author explored that CPV has been using propaganda and thought works as “indirect ways” to repress the political oppositions. These methods were not directly to sentence or arrest dissidents but to build up the strength inside the citizens, making them self-denied of the external infiltration from political oppositions.

There was a propaganda system to help CPV to legitimize themselves internally, which challenged the access of political oppositions. This system worked under the guideline of Committee Propaganda and Training Commission, in accordance with the command of Political Bureau, the highest body of CPV.

Press was put under censorship to ensure the party’s control of public opinion. State-owned media allowed party to conduct propaganda easily and systematically while preventing people from access harmful information through selective filtering.

In each certain period of time, CPV would give priority to propagate different works. In the period of 1986 and 1991, propaganda concentrated on promoting a new socialist-oriented market economy to collect public trust on CPV, which declined in the previous period because of failed economy. In the next 6 years, peaceful evolution and Ho Chi Minh thought were two main concepts to propagate nationalism. Since 1997 until 2004, censorship on the Internet was applied to monitor good news and limit the access of Vietnamese’s netizens towards harmful sources.

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