

Book Review

Speaking Out in Vietnam: Public Political Criticism in a Communist Party-Ruled Nation, by Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet. Ithaca, NY and London, UK: Cornell University Press, 2019. Pp. 246. ISBN 1501736396, 9781501736391.

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The end of the Cold War and the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party's (VCP) adoption of a *doi moi* (renovation) policy afforded observers a closer look into the dynamics of the country's state-society relationship. Thus did reunified Vietnam in the 21st century appear to the World Bank and the World Economic Forum to be a model for other "emergent economies" in search of pragmatic solutions to underdevelopment. In fact, certain alarmists in the Manila media still harp on the growing threat posed by Vietnam to the Philippines' advantage of having a head start in the race to be the next "little dragons."

Speaking Out in Vietnam reviews the two decades (1999–2015) when Vietnam was well into the phase of "winning the peace," subsequent to that of "winning the war." To a fair-minded non-Vietnamese, this book seems to be a faithful rendering of the half-full, half-empty condition of democratization of the society ravaged by successive wars and still uncomfortable about its relations with a former communist ally. This reviewer's modest claim to pass judgment on Benedict Kerkvliet's work is based on impressions and talks with members and non-members of the VCP during a limited number of short stays in both North and South Vietnam before and during that period.

On the matter of the citizenry's public protests against, or criticism of the Vietnamese party-state, four problem areas draw Kerkvliet's attention: labor (specifically, conflicts with management in the context of *doi moi*); land ownership and appropriation issues, mostly involving the peasantry; the awkwardly identified "nation" (actually, the problem is the Chinese violation of Vietnamese sovereignty); and last but not least the democratization process, which effectively binds all these topics together in the sense, apparently shared by considerable numbers of Vietnamese, that a more democratic ideologico-political system than the existing one could provide the best solution to their country's problems.

In each of these loci of struggle, Kerkvliet identifies the forms of critical action taken: strikes, production slowdowns, marches, demonstrations, petitions, open letters, boycotts of Chinese goods, et cetera. Dissidents solicit assistance from journalists, lawyers, and nongovernmental organizations; texting and email campaigns are widely utilized. Even ranking members of the Communist Party freely voice their own grievances. The list is exhaustive, and Kerkvliet is nothing if not thorough. A historian clearly sympathetic to the Left, he tries to present the attitudes of the Vietnamese state and ruling party in a favorable light—but cites or interviews more dissidents than he does official authorities. After all, this study is about "speaking out" in a country with little practice (as compared to, let's say, the Philippines) in the dynamics of civil society.

Quite naturally, certain discursive prejudices still hold sway. In Vietnam, as in China, the very concept of "bourgeois democracy" and the looser political space it entails (free media and free elections, alternation of competing parties in power, etc.) remains politically incorrect. Indeed, with its promise of extended economic freedoms, *doi moi* may have opened a Pandora's box, attempting to close which might very well sign the death warrant of Vietnam's official ideology. Mikhail Gorbachev tried and lost his wager to humanize the post-Stalinist system (and more permanently, caused the erasure of the Soviet Union from the map). In comparison, the Vietnamese party-state's compact with the citizenry seems to proceed satisfactorily enough along the lines of alternating doses of clemency and repression (the problem is determining to what extent they neutralize each other). Concluding his study, Kerkvliet ventures to predict that there will not

be another revolution in Vietnam, one that might replace hardline communism with a multiparty, election-based “democratic system” on the condition that the present regime continues to effectively wield the carrot and the stick as it sees fit. That is how most Southeast Asian states (who may or may not deserve the adjective “illiberal”) have functioned since the post-Cold War era, and the author seems to understand why liberal democracy remains a pipe dream in Vietnam and China.

The nominal ally, China, precisely remains problematic where the national interests of its smaller southern neighbor are concerned. *Speaking Out* poses the embarrassing question as to why the Hanoi leadership is accused by its domestic critics of seeming acquiescence to Chinese incursions into Vietnamese territory (mostly maritime in recent times), not to mention the unfair, if not downright illegal, Chinese business practices initiated therein. This is a situation with which Filipinos are all too familiar, but then theirs is not a communist state. Beijing was allied to Hanoi during the successive Indochina Wars, to be sure, but—for more essentially geopolitical than ideological reasons—Moscow and the Soviet bloc were considered less dangerous partners than Beijing. Unfortunately, there are no privileged Soviet-Vietnamese ties that can help out Hanoi any longer (not that Hanoi is in dire need of succor today). That there are corruptible sectors of the Communist Party’s leadership and bureaucracy who tend to ignore or downplay China’s unwarranted moves vis-à-vis Vietnam is hinted at by Kerkvliet’s study (quoting knowledgeable sources), but, understandably enough, he refrains from presenting incontrovertible proofs of the alleged corruption. A bureaucracy’s lack of independent safeguards is, in the first place, the reason why certain public servants exploit all opportunities available: in Vietnam, that weakness is compounded by mostly muzzled local media.

But then, if even the Philippine state and its (imported) Ombudsman and its vaunted Western-style free press and civil society in general still cannot eliminate its endemic corruption, why should the Vietnamese be blamed for perceived failure in that regard? That is why *Speaking Out* perhaps unintentionally, may force the reader to revisit and eventually reject the premise of “democracy” as a universal and/or historically inevitable ideal. Reading it in the era of Donald

Trump, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, not to mention the current fate of the “world’s greatest democracy” that is India under Narendra Modi’s reign, or the contrarian example of Singapore’s ruling party since independence (and the roll call goes on and on, with Rodrigo Duterte, Jair Bolsonaro, Benjamin Netanyahu, et al.) one cannot fail to notice the diminished self-importance of liberal-democratic discourse in the early 21st century. Why should we be surprised that Vietnam, with its—at the very least—non-Western cultural and historical heritage, be different from most of its neighbors?

To be sure, Kerkvliet offers “only” a snapshot of the gains and losses chalked up by the Vietnamese postwar society. The coming decades, which threaten to bring more turmoil as a consequence of global warming, intensified trade wars, and the widening gaps between rich and poor on both a national and international scale cannot but affect the manifold relationships between the party-state and the citizenry it governs. If *Speaking Out* does not evoke these external factors, it at least gives a coherent justification for the leadership role of the VCP even in, or especially during, troubled times. For now, the majority of the Vietnamese are reasonably calm and generally contented with the comforts afforded by modern technology, a booming economy, and a democratization process that has *at least* taken off in a nominally communist society. Ideologues may debate about the virtues of such a social compact, but not about the empirical veracity of the results of Vietnam’s experiment with Marxism-Leninism in the 21st century. *Speaking Out* helps to see these results in a scholarly, but jargon-free manner.

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